

# A Digital Task Force for Planning: Renewing the Skill Base

## *The Need for a Taskforce*

We currently appear to be standing at a threshold, defined to an extent by the pandemic. In our terms, this is a tipping point focussed on how the planning profession and planning in society can best embrace a future increasingly based on the digital revolution. Ever since computers emerged over 70 years ago, planning as a movement has embraced the use of new technologies in devising better physical plans for addressing the social and economic needs of contemporary society. The first applications were in local government in the 1950s, and since then, a wide variety of new tools and methods have emerged that have the potential to renew the way we make plans and make them relevant to our wider constituency. But during this process, cities have become ever more complex and new professions dealing with many traditional aspects of planning have emerged. Our skill sets in planning have eroded as much due to the sheer scale of new activities that planners have had to absorb as to any conscious effort to move planning away from its knowledge base.

The time thus seems right to begin to think about how we might embrace the digital revolution in a much more thorough way, providing planners with new skills to tackle the grand challenges of our times: climate change, social inequities, economic polarisation, mobility, segregation, and a host of issues pertaining to environmentalism, wrapped up in our goals for sustainability. All these challenges require better data, new digital and non-digital tools for their understanding, and new methods for designing plans and policies that will meet the needs of the post-pandemic future.

We consider that a new focus on the digital revolution is needed within planning by forming a task force to address these concerns. Such a taskforce would commission short papers on different aspects of the planning task which would require different digital approaches. The task force would first establish its mission, define its goals, establish its working practices, and identify different aspects of planning affected by digital issues. It would deliver a roadmap for the future of planning in the digital domain, supported by various expert papers, and it would achieve this within one year. It would presuppose that such a mission would be longer lived than simply one year, but one measure of its success would be how it might establish a focus that would be continued into the medium-term future, having an impact not only on practice but on education and training in all its many facets.

## *The Composition and Organisation of the Taskforce*

We envisage that the taskforce should be small and interact with other influential thought leaders in a broad spectrum relating to planning. The taskforce will meet regularly according to a fixed workplan which will last one year. It will commission a handful of short papers – probably no more than a dozen – on different aspects of the planning task as it pertains to the digital world. The taskforce would operate *pro bono*.

The Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis which is within the Bartlett School at UCL would act as a base for the taskforce providing administrative support where necessary and it would be led by Professor Michael Batty (CASA, UCL). Dr. Wei Yang, the RTPi President for 2021 has joined the Task Force. Wei will lead the Task Force together with Professor Michael Batty. The

remit of the Task Force would be complementary to other initiatives in the digital domain within planning, particularly **PLANTECH** which is the focus established by the RTPI with the Connected Places Catapult to push digital tools into the practice and business of planning. It would relate to other initiatives such as those involving 'smart cities', the **Scottish Digital Taskforce** for planning, the work of the Alan Turing Institute in its **Urban Analytics Programme**, various initiatives in Big Data, the digital twins focus of the Centre for Digital Built Britain and so on. Part of the early work of the taskforce would be to discover and relate it to complementary initiatives<sup>1</sup>.

### *Distinct Domains of Digital Development within Planning:*

To give some sense of the range of what the taskforce might commission but without anticipating the precise form of expert papers that are needed, it is worth noting key domains in physical planning that throw up different aspects of the digital world such as

- Urban Design
- Strategic Planning
- Land Development
- Economic Development
- Housing
- Regeneration
- Mobility and Transport
- Regional Development
- Retail Planning
- Community Action
- Infrastructure Planning
- Health and Social Issues
- Rural Planning
- Participation
- Waste and Pollution
- Environmental Systems

Cutting across these subject area domains are digital technologies that are diverse but involve data and information, methods and tools, technology platforms, visualisation and media, and in terms of cities and regions, the whole question of the economic development of new information technologies is part and parcel of the focus. Education and training is a potentially enormous area. It is the source of the lifeblood of the profession for only in education and training can planners be immersed in the tools and applications that the digital world now offers. Last but not least, there is practice and to an extent all of the above foci are targeted on how we can renew practice by providing an effective skill base that acknowledges that planning has to deal with complex problems in an informed and relevant way.

### *How the Initiative will Engage with the RTPI*

The RTPI President Dr. Wei Yang will act as the RTPI's Ambassador. The RTPI will be closely engaged with this initiative and will help us to publicise it, making suggestions as to how it might be made most effective. We would like to coordinate with PLANTECH without competing in any sense with this initiative and we would reach out to government who also have an important investment in this initiative.

9 February 2021

---

<sup>1</sup> Janice Morphet and Robin Morphet (2020) **New Urban Agenda: New Urban Analytics** | A Report Prepared for the MacArthur Foundation, CASA, The Bartlett, UCL, London,  
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/casa/publications/2020/mar/new-urban-agenda-new-urban-analytics>