

Robert Marshall

Robert Marshall, who sadly died on 21st April 2020, was a planning practitioner and academic, whose understated manner tended to conceal the extent of his influence on planning education and thought. Bob, as he was known by most, was one of the two founding members of the Department of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Sheffield. He held a variety of administrative roles including Head of Department, but also Sub-Dean, Deputy Dean and Dean of the Faculty of Architectural Studies. He retired from the University in 2004.

Bob studied Geography at the University of Cambridge, and was part of a new generation of 1960s planners, educated in the social sciences, rather than architecture or civil engineering. He was born in Bromley, and having experienced the post-war redevelopment and council housing of London was certain it was possible to achieve outcomes that better benefitted all communities. He worked first as a planner at the London County Council (LCC), taking evening classes to complete his professional planning qualification at the Regent Street College, followed by a couple of years at Oxford City Council, before turning his attention to planning education and scholarship.

Several planning schools were founded in the UK during the 1960s following the publication of the Schuster Committee Report on the Qualifications of Planners in 1950. The mission of these planning schools was to harness the critical insights and new analytical technologies emerging from the social sciences to better address the failings of post-war master planning. The Department of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Sheffield was one of those new schools, and Bob the second academic appointment in 1966.

My own time at Sheffield overlapped with Bob's for the best part of twenty years, arriving as a masters student in 1985, I became colleague in 1989, and from the mid-1990s we developed a fruitful writing partnership. He was a man of decency, vision and wisdom. A scholar in the true sense of the word, so rarely found these days in an academic world driven to value what can be counted, and to count the trivial. Let me elaborate on these observations.

For four decades Bob was the back-bone of the Department of Town and Regional. He was never self-promoting, one might even say he was stoical to a fault, but scratch the surface and you would find Bob's incisive mind at work, be that in relation to planning education and thought or departmental strategy and administration. His commitment to the Department, as to planning, was guided by the value he placed in the collective good, not in a paternalistic sense, but an understanding that our shared endeavour is greater than any one of us.

Despite the 'publish or perish' priorities of universities, for all but a handful of academics our greatest impact is through our students; and that impact magnified by those who design curricula. Furthermore, for a professional field such as planning, education shapes the profession of tomorrow. It was the urgent need, as Bob saw it first hand in practice in the early 1960s, to reshape planning education that motivated him to apply for the Sheffield position. The new Department's departure from the Beaux-Arts / Civic Design tradition of planning education to an avowedly social science led approach was a reflection of Bob's influence and vision. No studio classes in Sheffield! Even today the current masters bears Bob's fingerprints, key as he was to the redesign which took place in the early 2000s following the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) shift to accredit one-year rather than only two-year

programmes. It is a tribute to his foresight that much of the Department's current statement of educational philosophy was written by Bob.

Bob's educational vision extended beyond accredited planning programmes, with the radicalness of his ideas most evident in the inter-faculty undergraduate degree in Urban Studies he was responsible for designing and leading from the late 1970s. The degree was truly interdisciplinary with students taught by disciplinary specialists from across the university, but who shared a focus on urban concerns. It attracted highly motivated students, including many with unconventional educational backgrounds, for which the degree, and its highly dedicated leadership, provided a spring-board to new opportunities. Urban Studies was not the only context in which Bob taught mature students. I recall him telling me that he found a somewhat less enthusiastic audience, when as a new lecturer he was dispatched to Scunthorpe, as no-one else was available (!), to teach a Workers' Education Association (WEA) evening class on 'regional planning'.

All student communities, undergraduate, masters and doctoral, valued Bob's commitment to their education and learning. He was courteous and considered in his approach to students, and took time to provide insightful feedback. In the words of a former Urban Studies student from the 1980s: "Bob was unfailingly generous with his time, kind, patient and considerate. To me he epitomised the ideal academic and personal tutor, who saw supporting students as equally important to his academic work". A Marshall lecture, as with so much that Bob did, was disarming in its cogency and simplicity. In the words of another Urban Studies student "every word pure gold". There was nothing flashy, just a commitment to clarity and student learning. Such care, supported by a formidable intellect, came together in his supervision of PhD students, many of which I latterly co-supervised.

This takes me to research, more especially Bob's contribution to planning thought and our collaboration.

Our writing partnership came at a formative time in my career. I had completed the initial few years as a lecturer and was searching to evolve my intellectual focus. I was awarded some funding to explore the ethical values of planning practitioners and I asked Bob if he might be interested in working with me on the project. I remember him saying "well if you think I have something to offer". I did, and as we wrote together over the coming decade, my respect for his intellectual clarity and the fluency of his writing only grew.

We wrote about unfashionable topics and ideas, often through a conceptual rather than empirical lens: the public interest, the collective good, ethical values and social justice. But that should not suggest a lack of concern with practice, quite the reverse. Bob understood theoretical insight as necessary to open up the possibilities for transformative change, and vice versa. The publication process was rarely straightforward, but the longevity, significance and continued relevance of that work speaks for itself. Possibly our most recognised paper, 'Utilitarianism's bad breadth? A re-evaluation of the public interest justification for planning' is a function not only of the paper's argument, but of its title. The title was, of course, Bob's. A title that at once reflected his knowledge, but also his sense of humour, for Bob possessed a subtle, wry wit.

It will be clear from the positions that Bob held within the University that, at a time when leadership positions were conferred through consensus amongst colleagues, he was a trusted and respected leader. He was a quietly effective academic leader, also prepared to undertake

the unglamorous but vital tasks on which all departments depend. I hate to imagine how many accreditation and quality assurance reports he drafted. But, above and beyond anything else the quality that stands out for me was the clarity of his judgement. As a new lecturer sitting in staff meetings and exam boards, I became increasingly aware that there would become a point in our unresolved discussions of departmental strategy, academic procedure or student progression, when Bob would quietly outline the sensible course. It seemed so obvious, once he said it.

Bob continued to be professionally active in retirement, for example, he agreed to be the RTPI representative on Sheffield City Council's Conservation Advisory Group (CAG). As the Chair of the Committee and former colleague, Philip Booth observes of Bob's professional contributions, they were "characteristically understated but decisive, puncturing the pretensions and obfuscations of developers".

Universities are packed with people that know a lot about very little, but there a few who are wise. Bob possessed a clarity of thought that cut through the complexities and cul-de-sacs of a problem to identify what, after he said it, seemed the obvious course. That most fundamental of planning capacities, the capacity of practical wisdom.

I was asked just last week by a colleague, how I had managed to circumnavigate the 'pile 'em high' approach to publication. It follows from those years of listening, talking and writing with Bob. I am eternally grateful for being shown a different way to lead an academic life. Bob was a true scholar, wise and hugely decent, whose contribution to planning education and thought has been significant, and endures through his writing, students and colleagues. It was a privilege to be his colleague and friend.

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