



Building cities without young urban planners?

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The National Collective of Young Urban Planners (CNJU) is sounding the alarm bell about the discrimination that university degree-holding urban planners have faced in accessing the competitive examination for local-level civil service engineers since 2009.

The regulations for local-level civil service urban planners were never clearly defined after decentralization. Announced preliminarily in 1984, their category was combined with the one for local-level civil service engineers in 1990 through the option of an access competitive exam. A series of decrees in 2002 and 2007 progressively excluded urban planners from the list of potential applicants for prospective local-level civil service engineers, although the competitive examination still contains a reference to “urban planning, development, and landscape.” According to a dubious bias in favor of “scientific or technical” training, the competencies of engineers, architects, and surveyors have been declared as the only pertinent ones. Urban planners instead must justify their credentials before an equivalency board, which in 2009 abruptly decided not to validate their applications anymore. The message since then has been clear: urban planners are not qualified to do urban planning.

Indignation over this iniquity and the belief to have been the victims of professional discrimination led a series of associations of students and graduates of urban planning schools to form the National Collective of Young Urban Planners (CNJU) in February 2010. An open letter addressed to the Minister of Higher Education, the Minister of Civil Service, and the Secretary of Local Authorities bears more than 5,500 signatures, including those of numerous members of parliament, mayors, presidents of inter-municipal associations, and presidents of associations of elected officials. Each one of them has recognized the expertise of urban planners who have worked for them on projects.

Recognition has also come from numerous local authorities who entrust studies to urban planning institutes in the larger context of research projects and workshops integrated into the master’s curriculum. They recruit their graduates heavily. Using key concepts such as transdisciplinarity and professionalization, the planning institutes have built a constantly adapting expertise through the formation of teaching teams composed of academics and professional urban planners. The pay-off for these efforts is the successful professional placement of their graduates, especially within local authorities (approximately a third of the

openings), as well as recognition by the Agency for the Evaluation of Upper Education and Research (AERES), expressed in the form of very positive evaluations of the training provided by urban planning institutes.

So, above and beyond the contested, surface arguments, what are the real reasons for this exclusion?

First of all, there is the almost automatic appropriation of civil service job positions by the various corps of engineers. Lobbying at the highest levels of government resulted in the transposition of the European directive that protects the title of engineer so as to create an amalgam between the job category of “local engineer” and the profession of engineer.

Then there is the lack of pugnacity on the part of the professional representation for urban planners. There is no structure for defending a profession that remains poorly understood, and which proved incapable of defending local-level urban planning when there was still time to do so.

Lastly, there is growing competition for access to local-level engineer competitive exams as the consequence of the growth in the power of local authorities over urban planning issues, as well as deep cuts in government administration, and an economic crisis which has resulted in a reevaluation of government jobs. Between 1991 and 2006, while the number of jobs and people admitted increased only slightly, the number of candidates exploded. In such a rush for jobs, no holds are barred. As a result of the administrative exclusion of planners, the number of people competing has fallen, as has the admission grade (from 12 in 2008 to 9.5 out of 20 in 2009). Did the technical selection work too well?

Are we going to make the same dogmatic mistakes as in the technically minded vision of cities of the last few decades, the effects of which we continue to feel today? “A city is planned and designed, but it is not decreed,” Julien Gracq wrote. Without a multidisciplinary approach, the coherence and urban quality of our country cannot be guaranteed, as Benoist Apparu, the Secretary for Housing and Development, fortunately noted during the sixth colloquium on development held in Bordeaux on March 25 and 26, 2010. The implementation and modification of urban planning public policy in terms of our ambitions of sustainable development cannot be achieved without urban planners.

Despite the organized roadblocks, local authorities continue to recruit urban planners. They resort to the competitive examination for local-level attaché, which does not recognize the high level of study (it only requires an undergraduate degree, whereas planners hold a master’s degree), or the technical expertise (a competitive examination through administrative channels) of candidates who resign themselves to this. In more numerous cases, they resort to contractual employment that is prohibited and normally used only in exceptional, limited cases over time. Above and beyond this phenomenon of endangering the status of the public employee and establishing a two-tiered civil service, the contractualization raises a problem of adequacy in terms of the formation and implementation of a coherent urban planning strategy.

For this reason, the CNJU has asked for a moratorium to be put into place on the exclusionary measures in the local-level engineer competitive examination. In taking a longer view, the CNJU has formulated a demand supported by its members to create a commission on a statutory tier for local-level urban planners with different levels of access and which is open to both city and regional area planning professionals.

No one profession can claim a monopoly over the city and other territories, truly complex systems if there ever were. Their ability to create society can only be built through collaboration.

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