2006 Chester Rapkin Award for the Best Article in Volume 25
“New Urbanism and Sprawl: A Toronto Case Study”

The Chasm

I want to thank Lew Hopkins and the Rapkin committee for their perseverance in reading through the papers in volume 25. I also thank Karen Christensen for her care in steering the paper through to its publication. Both as a research worker and as one of the editors of Urban Studies, I have seen the really valuable contributions that are made by thoughtful referees, and now I have a particularly large number of referees to thank.

After presenting the paper at our joint ACSP-AESOP conference in Leuven, editors from two journals expressed a strong interest in having it submitted. I was encouraged but wanted the paper in an American planning journal, and sent it to the most prestigious professional journal I could think of, where it was soundly rejected. However, the referees offered many good suggestions, and several showed an interest through the thoughtfulness of their contributions—one review was almost as long as the paper itself. I revised the paper, justified the method some more, reiterated the qualifications strongly, and sent it back. It was rejected again despite three out of the four referees giving it a qualified green light.1

So how is it that this twice-rejected paper could be selected for the Rapkin award? After all, we are the population from which referees, editors, and awards committees are drawn. So, why the difference: why would some feel that a paper should not be published, while others give it a prize?

Thinking back to the ten years I spent outside the university running a small consulting firm, I recognize the very different needs of professionals and academics. I worked mostly with what I had learned while a student. Knowledge of practice was developed through practice, and information was picked up at conferences and through quick scans of journals. When the demands of a project exceeded my capacity, academics would be consulted or subcontracted. Billable hours could not be spent reading, and unbillable hours were mostly spent looking for billable hours. Back then, I would have wanted a journal to offer concise articles that almost guaranteed “useful” conclusions.

A research article may not develop usable generalizations but still be important in building the evidence that will eventually inform practice. Research articles may be hard to read and offer only highly qualified conclusions whose subtlety may not be appreciated in a quick read. Cities are complex, and their study through empirical methods may require sophisticated techniques that are beyond people unfamiliar with this type of analysis. Our topics may be esoteric, philosophical even, but help build the foundations of future practice.

Academics have good reasons for reading articles that professionals would avoid. Moreover, academic journals are not just records of research, they do not just provide information, and they are not just vehicles facilitating communication among professors dispersed across many small university departments; the quest to publish in leading research journals challenges us as researchers to help us and our discipline evolve. The refereeing process not only assures quality but also stimulates exploration, points to nuances in arguments, and forces us to go deeper, learn more, and address issues we may have wanted to avoid. This is particularly important in planning, where we often use a number of methods and we can’t be expert in them all. Academic journals help build the human capital that molds the discipline and eventually the profession. They help maintain the community whose members teach the students who become the professionals, present at conferences for practitioners, write the professional journals’ articles, and consult with planners on difficult problems.

The editors of the major professional journals, mostly academics, help develop the profession by building bridges to academia and by ensuring that scholarship is disseminated. They have to recognize the needs of readers when selecting papers. Editors of academic planning journals have fewer constraints and consider primarily the scholarship, but also ask the “So what?” question. The differences in the journals may explain why this paper was rejected and then awarded.

I am grateful that the founders of ACSP created the JPER as the journal of record for research in planning. Moreover, the positive attitude that referees for JPER adopt when helping authors develop their papers contributes to the growth and development of our discipline. Having two peaks in the mountain range means that neither journal has to compromise on...
the final pitch, but our separation should be at a col well above a common base rather than at the bottom of the chasm separating distinct mountains.

—Andrejs Skaburskis
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**Note**

1. The main problem, as I remember it, had to do with developing conclusions from a case study. My revised text stressed the qualifications that accompany the conclusions: New Urbanist principles, as they were applied in this case, would not do much to reduce sprawl. The generalizations were developed by showing the mismatch between the housing the residents say they would eventually move to and the housing mix offered in the New Urbanist community: 89 percent say they would eventually move to a detached house, while only 37 percent of Cornell’s stock was in detached houses. I expressed the hope that this “case study can become a part of the meta-analysis that evaluates the various aspects of development” (Nasar 2003, 66).

**Reference**