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Inauguration speech

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Planning is Great!

A Call for a Revival of Spirit and for a Modernised Planning Profession

I send my greetings to all of you, and welcome everyone watching this in the UK and internationally. Today, you are attending the 107th Presidential Inauguration of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). I am encouraged by the many generous best wishes and warm congratulations.

How inspiring!

As I stand before you, on behalf of the planning profession wearing this very special chain of office, I feel the weight. I rise to the great honour of joining the pioneers, the champions of our profession.

I have lived in the UK for 21 years. I came here from Beijing in 1999 to study my Master's degree. In 2010, my involvement with the RTPI started as an Associate Member, in 2012, I became a Chartered Member and in 2018, I became only the 16th woman Fellow of the RTPI. I was conferred as a Fellow of Academy of Social Sciences in 2017.

21st Century Garden Cities are my abiding passion. Throughout my career, I have been researching, promoting and implementing innovative Garden Cities.

Whilst researching Garden Cities and New Towns, I became very familiar with the lives of our pioneers. In some sense I know them as real people, as friends, and I am deeply touched by their spirit and determination.

However, I have also realised how little the public knows about planning. How many misunderstandings there are about Garden Cities and planning in general.

So, Town Planners - Who were we? Who are we today? Who do we want to be tomorrow?

Our past

For the answer, I delved deep into our past, I examine our present, and I envision our future. In the past, more than 100 years ago, our pioneers took the initiative to change their world into a better place.

The Spirit of Planning

Last year, during the coronavirus lockdown, I wrote a book for the public about how we should plan, and how we could plan our cities and towns to address our current challenges in the 21st Century. I also told the stories of the origins of Garden Cities and the life of Ebenezer Howard, the first Honorary Member of the RTPI. Ebenezer Howard's book, *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, is essential reading for all planners. Ten years in the writing, the book was published in 1898 when Howard was 48 years old.

He talked about human nature, public health, the environment, the beauty of nature, the marriage of town and country, communities, social capital, locally produced food, walkable neighbourhoods, local jobs, advanced technologies, charities, social enterprise, land value capture, freedom and co-operation.

Daily watching the tragic news about the ravages of COVID-19, I was constantly thinking - Howard's vision is as relevant for us today as it was in his day, 120 years ago.

During 2021, my Presidential year, my first priority is to readdress the name of Town Planners, to inform and update people the real purpose of planning.

- Planning is about people.
- Planning is about health.
- Planning is about the wellbeing of our immediate environment.

The spirit of the planning profession is focused, at its heart, on service to the community. I believe compassion and selflessness are the moral foundations of our profession.

During my Presidential year, in all that I do, I will further these qualities.

Will you assist me?

Formation of the Town Planning Institute

The term 'Town Planning' was first used in Great Britain in 1906, then embodied in the 1909 Housing and Town Planning Act. In 1914, our Institute was founded. The first professional (planning) body in the world to advance the study of Town Planning and Civic Design.

Thomas Adams was 43 when he became our first President. He was also the first Manager of Letchworth Garden City. The first Garden City in the world created by Ebenezer Howard. In Thomas Adams' view, our Institute is a forum for all environmental professions, a sponsor of planning research.

He knew planning must show commitment to 'social reconstruction' and not settle for being a bureaucratic exercise. He also had great interest in rural planning and strategic development. He produced the first regional plan for New York.

In 1919, Thomas Adams founded The Town Planning Institute of Canada. He was also a Founding Member of The American Institute of Planners. Later, he became the 5th President of the Landscape Institute in the UK, founded in 1929.

For him, there was no arbitrary professional boundaries.

How inspiring for us today!

Town Planning as an Art

The RTPI's second President, Sir Raymond Unwin, was the Master Planner of Letchworth Garden City. As a master planner and an architect, he also held strong interests in social issues. He related The Arts and Crafts Movement to everyday working people. He insisted - Beauty be an essential quality of planning for communities.

In the 1930's He became President of The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and later he received the RIBA Royal Gold Medal for Architecture.

Sylvia Law OBE

You will be very pleased to know I am not going to go through every President one by one. It would be fascinating for another occasion.

However, I do wish to mention Sylvia Law, the first woman President of the RTPI. She too was 43 years old, when she took office in 1974. It was regarded as an extraordinary feat, because at the time there were only 243 women of 4,500 Chartered Planners.

That is 5%!

Sylvia was a teacher by profession. Later, she became increasingly interested in urban planning and decided to become a town planner in her late 20's. She had developed strong socialist beliefs. Later, she dedicated her effort on the planning for the recreational and open space needs of communities.

Now, in 2021, 39% of our members are women.

I am the 8th woman President and the first British-Chinese President of the RTPI.

With her permission, I can reveal that both RTPI's Chief Executive, Victoria Hills, and I were born in 1974. Little did we know at the time, that Sylvia Law was pioneering our future pathway!

My Role Model - Octavia Hill

In the last 25 years, I have been actively promoting joined-up thinking between different professionals and stakeholders. I founded my own practice in London in 2011. We support and foster knowledge transfer between research and practice.

My role model is Octavia Hill. She lived between 1838 to 1912, before women had the vote. Yet, she was one of the most influential English social reformers. With no formal schooling, she worked from the age of 14 for the welfare of working people. She was one of the three Founders of the National Trust. She set the foundation for modern social work and social housing. She campaigned for the availability of open spaces for poor people. Through her support, London's Hampstead Heath and Parliament Hill Fields were protected.

It is remarkable!



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At a time when women were invisible in public life, Octavia Hill could make such an immense difference to society.

She inspires me enormously.

Through reading her story, I realise that there is no age and gender difference in our spirit, no race difference in our soul. If we believe in ourselves, our vision and our effort, we can all make a lasting difference for good.

Today, facing so many crises around the world and in the UK, we would do well to remember people like Octavia Hill, Ebenezer Howard, Thomas Adams and many more.

In remembering their vision and their determination to fight for the welfare of ordinary people, we have a debt of gratitude to their legacy. We are grateful for the pioneers' dedication and spirit.

Our Present

Now, the RTPI has grown to be one of the largest professional planning bodies in the world. We have more than 26,000 members in over 80 countries worldwide.

Global Challenges & UN Sustainable Development Goals

Earlier last year, 2020, the United Nations declared the beginning of a 'Decade of Action'. Currently, there is a global vacuum to be filled by a profession to take the lead and enable the built environment to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. I believe that role must be taken by Town Planners.

Why?

Because the 21st Century is an urban century.

Urbanisation ≠ Pollution, Traffic Jam, Slums & Unhealthy Places

In the past decade, the urban population in the developing world has grown by an average 1.2 million per week. In the last 100 years, we have already learned that ignorance of social integration, disconnection with Nature, undefined public realms, poor quality in design and maintenance,

and segregated professional disciplines have profound negative implications on people's lives across generations.

The saddest thing is that those mistakes are still being repeated time and time again.

There is an enormous deficit of adequate planning capacity in both developed and developing countries. I often have a strong sensation that 'as a town planner, I come here too late'.

When I see wide roads built for cars, cultural heritage destroyed, fertile agriculture land built up, rivers and soil polluted, I wish I had started earlier to prevent these mistakes happening in the first place.

60% of the places that will be urbanised by 2030, are yet to be built.

So, we still have the chance to get them right, and we must!

The Climate & Biodiversity Emergency

This decade, the 2020's, is a crucial time to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergency. 80% of people in the world believe we are 'heading for environmental disaster unless we change our habits quickly'. Action is being taken, change has started to occur but, in my opinion, certainly not at the speed required.

According to The State of the Profession Report 2020, Architecture & Planning has been listed as second of the top 10 occupations for sustainability.

It is high time for the planning profession to flourish and grow.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was a shock to all of us. We need to learn from the dark coronavirus days.

It revealed the unwanted truths of inequality and bias.

It also unlocked new ways of working and educating, created new forms of social enterprise, and stimulated renewed priorities in our life.



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The strong request from the public for an inclusive & green recovery from COVID-19 is loud and clear.

Urban & Rural

Global urbanisation is being seen as a key driver for economic growth. We must remember, urbanisation and economic growth are restricted by the ecological limits of our planet.

These limits have fundamental implication for our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life throughout the world. Also, despite fast growing urban population, rural population will remain approximately 3.2 billion worldwide. Of course, rural communities and their wellbeing are not to be ignored.

Children & Nature

Are we giving enough thought to the welfare of our children?

We all know that spending time in green spaces benefits both mental and physical wellbeing. However, there is plenty of evidence showing that children have become disconnected from Nature. If our children do not understand nor feel connected to Nature, how can we expect them to look after it as they mature?

Our Future

I cannot emphasis enough the importance of our profession. Because it is about the future, our future, our future generations' future. The world deserves a modernised planning profession!

As the 107th President of the RTPI, I want to call for a revival of spirit and for a modernised planning profession to proactively address the current challenges in the 21st Century.

I want to lead a Planning Institute to carry out our mission.

What is our mission?

Our mission is to advance the study of Town Planning and Civic Design for the benefit of the public.

Changing Attitudes & Opinions in the World

'Technology has changed the fabric of our world, but it has not changed the structure of it', Global Trends 2020 Report states that one of the biggest challenges we face now is the 'loss' of the future.

People today recognise that we all have our own roles to play in creating a world we all want to live in. We need to grasp these changing attitudes and opinions of the people of our shared planet.

In order to build a zero-carbon future for all communities and civilisations, we need much stronger, more powerful voices debating and defining strategies. Then, professionals produce a valid range of practical tactics that effectively underpin measurable actions.

For Whom Do We Plan?

Our populations are ageing rapidly. By 2050, the world is predicted to have reached 2 billion people aged over 60.

That is 1 in 5 people globally.

Our town and country planning needs to respond to this trend as quickly as possible. Women, children, the elderly, disabled and other disadvantaged groups, count for more than 70% of the population.

Should their needs be prioritised for consideration?

Reimagine Planning

In a fast-changing technological and profit driven world, it is easy to get confused. Constantly, we need to ask and remind ourselves, for whom do we plan? What is our relationship with Nature and Society? And how can we, human beings, survive?

Answering these questions will require a 'reimagining of planning', thinking beyond professional boundaries and beyond the present day.

At times, even when we fear we might be in the gutter, if we are the right way up, nobody can stop us looking at the stars.

Sometimes the hardest thing is to change another person's mind.

Sometimes it is our own mindset that needs to adjust.

In the last 10 years, I have delivered over 300 speeches and lectures to Mayors, politicians, planners, and other professionals. I am a critical friend of many Mayors and Ministers.

So, I know this 'mindset change' can happen, as long as we are passionate, determined and persistent.

It is the time to reimagine planning!

Remembering my presidency

In another 100 years' time, when our future members look back on the efforts of my presidency, it is my deepest wish that I could be remembered in this way:

- I believe the fundamental objective of the planning profession is to create a balanced system for People, Nature and Society to co-exist in harmony.
- The Planning Profession plays a crucial role in making the connections between plan-making and place-making.

Re-Connect with NATURE

- Ultimate Truths are always simple. Nature has to be our first priority.
- People long to re-connect with Nature.
- We need a long-term, strategic, urban-rural integrated approach which considers the whole territory as one ecological entity.

Re-Think Urban PROSPERITY

- To build an inclusive society, we need to re-think urban prosperity.
- As emphasised by the work of UN-Habitat, urban prosperity requires more than the narrowness of immediate economic growth.
- Respectful prosperity derives also from fulfilling the nonmaterial needs and aspirations of others.
- We need effective planning functions which tackle place-based inequality and enable a green-industrial revolution.



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Re-Define BEAUTY

- Can we agree to re-define and re-invite beauty?
- The scope of beauty is not only physical, it is also spiritual.
- Planners can be highly effective facilitators to enable communities to shape beautiful places and become artists of their own cities, towns, and villages.

Re-Engage with TECHNOLOGY

Planners can also play a key role in providing efficient spatial and systematic carbon reduction solutions, as well as facilitating low carbon lifestyles. We need to re-engage with technology. Planners need to have a much more immersive and proactive role to engage with technology and infrastructure planning. The decision-making process of planning needs to be evidence-based utilising the big data for community benefit.

Reimagining planning

Let's be objective and courageous in reimagining our planning profession. We need a revival of spirit; a genuine modernisation of our profession and its education to serve the world now and in the future!

Challenges and responsibility

Facing our current challenges and the journey of this century, now it is our generation's responsibility and pleasure to rekindle the founding spirit. We can work towards a new professional standard for planning, to be a global force for good.

I believe a modernised planning profession necessarily will have the following attributes: Global vision, Skills, Trust, Leadership, Professional Integrity.

- Being able to evaluate local issues in a global context, see the bigger picture, and have a long-term vision.
- Interdisciplinary and digital skills to make connections between plan-making and place-making.
- Ability to create innovative mechanisms to resolve complex socio-economic issues. State-of-the-art knowledge to contribute to immediate actions on the climate and biodiversity emergency.

- Be a beacon of diversity in a representative profession within our communities.
- Build connections with the wider public through listening and two-way communications.
- Be an effective facilitator enabling communities to shape places where they live, work and enjoy their lives.
- Proactive, informed, strong leadership to shape smart, resilient and beautiful places for the common good.
- Professional integrity empowered by professional bodies to protect public interests, to champion social equality and to honour our mother earth.

All in all, a modernised planning profession is a profession for Hope and for the Future.

It is faith in our ability to act together. Planning is Great!

Now, it is the time to lay the foundation for the future of our profession.

The future of our profession must also harness the innovative ideas from our young planners.

As our first Honorary Member Ebenezer Howard wrote - the greatest need of man and of society, is to have a worthy aim and the opportunity to realise it. Let's remember why we started, and rejoice, that together our mission can be accomplished!

I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible in 2021 and realising our mission together! Now, I send my thanks and warmest best wishes to you and your families.