It would be a shame if Allan Jacobs’s call to arms for North American planning departments, and city planning schools, in the Summer 2006 issue of Places ("The State of City Planning Today and its Relationship to City Planning Education," Vol.18, No.2), went unnoticed across planning and design circles. Having worked both as a municipal planning leader and private consultant across Canada, I found his comments remarkably candid, controversial, and absolutely correct. This article could represent a key punctuation point in a discussion (and debate) on the future of how we plan and build cities, and educate our future city-builders on either side of the border.

I, for one, am trying to ensure the article is noticed here in Canada. First, I’ve put it on the agenda to discuss at our annual “Big Cities Planning Directors Meeting.” Second, we’re making it a key piece in the national dialogue among Canada’s leading urbanists in the city planning, architecture, and landscape architecture professions. This dialogue has recently led to the creation of the new Council for Canadian Urbanism, or CanU. Formed by prominent design-emphasizing practitioners from across the country—and in particular, influential municipal design voices from planning departments of all scales—CanU has been working to address many of the challenges Jacobs describes. Perhaps it’s the rare candor of Jacobs’s piece that makes it so useful to this discussion.

It’s true that here in Canada, we think of ourselves as having a strong tradition of municipal city planning relative to the United States (based largely on stronger planning tools at our disposal, and a tradition from our constitution of “peace, order and good government,” as opposed to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” with its connection to individual property rights). As a result, we have many good planning departments, with many passionate and talented professionals. Here in Vancouver we’ve had a particularly strong tradition, over several generations of planning directors, of a strong public voice in shaping a “city by design.” As a result, the planning department has enjoyed a very high profile and has received a share of the credit (along with our many city-building partners).
A Renewed Emphasis in Canada

The growth over the past few years of urban design programs in Canada is both exciting and unnerving, as it may suggest to planning schools that they are off the hook. This would be an unfortunate assumption, as a key to achieving many of the city planning priorities of the future lies in a solid grounding in the physical patterns we plan, design, negotiate or approve. Among other things, the CanU leadership (drawn from the three design disciplines) is working to promote a return to a greater civic design awareness at all scales. This is not seen as an end, but as a means of better achieving the important goals of urban sustainability, healthy and complete communities, civic beautification, social and economic integration, and so on. Rather than fighting over turf, we’re coming together as partner-disciplines, as urbanists, with a common goal of better urban environments and a stronger and clearer urban agenda. We’re still in the baby-step stages, but we have some of the highest-profile voices in the country among our ranks, and we’re gaining momentum. As a city planner, though, like Jacobs, my own call to arms is for my discipline. The city planner of now and the future has to be a design-savvy urbanist, a generalist who never stops learning; a renaissance person for cities, who understands how the physical relates to the social, the ecological, the economic, the cultural, the marketing/"branding," the story-telling, and so on, and who can bring it all together in a physical sense; a practitioner able to channel his or her inner artist as well as inner scientist, to apply both rational and intuitive thinking, and know when these are most important; a creative, open-minded lover of the complexity of cities.

Are any planning schools producing this kind of practitioner? Some educators I know suggest it’s overly ambitious to try, as their students should learn all that “on the job.” I disagree. It needs to be the spirit of how and what they learn right from the start. Maybe it’s overly ambitious, but I’d be happy if schools were trying.

The discussion that Jacobs’s article spurs is long overdue. The lack of constructive candor on these issues may be one of the reasons we find ourselves where we are. Although I do think things are starting to move in the right directions in Canada, in order for planning departments and planning schools on either side of the border to maintain, or regain, their relevancy, city planners and urbanists from all disciplines must become clearer and more persuasive voices in shaping our cities, able and willing to work with, but also challenge, the obstacles of short-term politics, the profit imperative, and NIMBY.

I have tremendous faith in the three design professions. We can be the leaders our cities need now more than ever.

Opposite: Vancouver’s new era of “eco-density” will build on past downtown densification to encourage well-designed new residential developments at various densities citywide. Yet continued success depends on teaching a new generation of planners the importance of city design. Images of downtown seawall and Arbutus neighborhood courtesy of Vancouver Planning Department.