



*Use technology.
Don't let it use
you, says George
Janes, AICP, the
Executive
Director of the
Environmental
Simulation
Center in New
York.*

When I moved into my first, tiny Manhattan apartment, I had to give up a lot of things, including my Midwestern-sized toolbox. A hammer, a pair of pliers, and couple of screwdrivers were about all that would fit in the junk drawer. When I tried to use a screwdriver as a crowbar and snapped the handle off, I cursed the screwdriver, but it was my fault, of course. It was a fine screwdriver. I had just used it incorrectly.

Over the past few years, many new computer-based planning tools have hit the market. Computer-based tools aren't new, of course, but these "decision-support systems" have affected planning far more than the urban models that preceded them.

As a result, there's been a lot of discussion—including a recent essay on this page [December 2003]—about the role such tools should play in planning and design. Now I'm biased. I've used computer-based planning tools for most of my career; I've also developed some. But that also means that I've seen how they work—and how they don't.

I believe that planners who criticize these tools often do so because they've seen them used incorrectly. When they're used incorrectly, they don't just break harmlessly like my screwdriver. They can do damage.

As their name suggests, decision-support systems should be used to support decisions, not to make them. Be very suspicious of tools that claim to know what is "good" planning or design and what is "bad" planning or design. Its version of good and bad might not match your own, or that of your community. No one thinks that CAD tools replace the architect, yet planners using these same tools often abdicate their professional responsibility of critical judgment, thinking and, yes, good planning.

Decision-support systems are best when they are value-neutral, when they rely on the planner to judge what is "good" and what is "bad." When used properly, they allow planners to explore their ideas more fully than ever before; to create future scenarios so they can develop and test their assumptions; to evaluate impacts; and to examine the potential for change. Planners can use these systems to support decisions with current month, small area population, and employment estimates, and not to rely on outdated Census numbers.

These systems can keep track of hundreds of place-based variables and assumptions and help to communicate complex planning concepts to elected officials and the public. But ultimately it is up to the planner to provide the qualitative context, look at results critically, and evaluate assumptions and inputs.

The less computer-savvy members of our profession are often those who step back the farthest from these tools. Uncomfortable with their lack of technical expertise, they may be hesitant about offering opinions or critiquing the results. The proper use of these tools often includes developing a more collaborative planning process, which captures input from all stakeholders.

There is one complaint concerning the current class of decision-support systems that is very reasonable: that they need to be better. That's true, although they will never be perfect. Planning is both an inexact and an evolving field. Tools developed for it will always be one step behind where we want them to be.

But just because these tools need to be better doesn't mean they can't help us work smarter. When I was a young planner in my first job, I was told by my department head, "Always remember, the perfect is the enemy of the good." While we wish these tools could do more, we can acknowledge that they help us to do things that we once only imagined doing. Ultimately, they help us do our job better. They are good, not perfect, which, for now, should be good enough.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George Janes".