A Man for All Regions

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A Man for All Regions

Nohad Toulan looks backward and forward at the metroscape’s planning
An interview by Sumner Sharpe

A native of Egypt, Nohad Toulan has been a faculty member at Portland State University since 1972 when he founded the Urban Studies Program at Portland State University. Under his leadership the program evolved from modest beginnings as an undergraduate certificate program into a Ph.D. granting school and in 2000 it became the College of Urban and Public Affairs. The college has maintained its stature as one of the leading urban studies programs in the nation. Dr. Toulan also founded the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies in 1993. Trained as an engineer and planner, Dr. Toulan has been an internationally recognized leader both in higher education and in the planning of the Portland region.

Dean Toulan’s interviewer, Sumner Sharpe, was his colleague as a Professor of Urban Studies and Planning (1968-1985). He is currently a planning consultant, associated with Parametrix, Inc., a Portland firm.

Pharpe: You’ve had a long and distinguished career in planning practice and academia here in Oregon and elsewhere. I have to assume that you will continue to contribute as you take the next steps in your career. Let me ask you to look ahead as you’ve always done. I’m interested in what you see as some of the challenges and opportunities facing planners and academicians during the next 20 years – nationally, in Oregon, and in the metropolitan area.

Toulan: As professionals, extensions of state and local governments, yes, as planners, we do work with the federal government but all issues that we deal with are local in nature. What troubles me is what is happening to the financial health of the States and local government. The debt amount, basically, destroyed much of the infrastructure support that makes planning resume. State governments, cities, are all in serious trouble. We as planners deal with an essential culture. We do not deal with life or death. Yes, we are from a profession that protects the future for our children, determines the livability of our country, and ensures the passage of healthy, economically viable, sustainable policies. Unfortunately, however, we are confronted with city people who cannot find medical treatment. We are confronted with elderly people who cannot find anybody to take care of them. Resources are limited. Are you going to put those limited resources in planning houses? Or are you going to put them in to social services? So, the challenge facing planners today, on the outside, is “what to do?” We find ourselves competing for very, very scarce resources at the local and state levels. On the one side, planners are capable of recognizing this fact and presenting what we are doing so that the public can understand how essential what we are doing is. The challenge is how we can continue to present the nature of our mission – and it is a noble mission. In reality we are dealing with life and death issues for cities and future generations.

Pharpe: There was a time when planners were fascinated with health planning and social planning and moved into these areas. Do you think planning ought to broaden its scope and engage in non-physical planning given the realities that are out there?

Toulan: I am not sure that we are as prepared as social workers to deal with these issues. I am not saying that urban planners who specialize in planning for health services are not legitimate functions. But if you begin to come very close to the issues that I was referring to earlier – issues including providing treatment for the indigent and protecting society from crime – you move away from it. Planning can deal with many issues. How can we make a region both safer and a work of art? Planned communities result in safer neighborhoods. That’s what I have in mind by saying that planners have to project to the public that we are experts. We have expertise. You need that expertise for the welfare of your cities, the future of your children, and the health of the economy. The public must think that we just prepare zoning and make life difficult by refusing to give people their permits or by zoning properties out of what at the time seems a legitimate use. This may be the only image that the public has about us, that we are regulators. But I think we are more. At the time of financial crisis, you are not going to find too many people who are regulators.

Pharpe: Good point. Just to follow up on that, recently you chaired the Oregon American Planning Association (APA) chapter’s committee on the Oregon Planning Experience (COPE). I appreciate your effort. Actually, it has had some payoff. That committee raised some very important questions about the future of the statewide program and has focused on a number of discussions including a grant received by the Chapter, and discussion with the Commission and staff in Salem. I think it
Do we want to be more like Germany . . . where urban sprawl is not an issue, where communities . . . grow very, very compact[ly] . . . ?

has raised some important questions. Which one or two of the points raised in the COPE report would you select as most important to address?

Oulan: The most controversial element was the vision. And there is no way you can ask me to ask this question not expecting I will rant that we need to develop a vision so that the public can understand and focus on it as a high priority. A few months ago I wrote a half-page article on urban planning that I addressed to the government. When I visit the city, I think of this state as not developing a vision of what we are going to look like as a state when our population doubles. I am not going to envision the controversy at the state and local government levels 30 years, or 40 years, or 50 years – is that long enough? – when we double our population, and I absolutely know that Oregon will double its population sometime during this century. So, it's irrelevant whether that happens in 30 years or 50 years. What will we look like when we double? Is the Portland area, which is slightly more than two million, going to be four, four-and-a-half million? Or, should we push for developments in other areas of the state? Where do we want to see development? And what kind of communities do we want? In essence, do we want to have Oregon become another region like Washington-New York, a series of disconnected communities that in reality represent continuous urban sprawl all the way from Washington to New York? Portland is the . . . [primary] place where growth is occurring and we keep expanding the urban growth boundaries. We are expanding them in the directions where Salem expands north and Portland expands south. Maybe that corridor will not be fully built simply by doubling the population of the state, but if the population continues to grow beyond doubling, in reality we would have a new emerging Oregon megalopolis between Eugene and Portland. Is that what we want? If that's what we want, fine, then we go. If that is not what we want, then the question becomes, do we want to be more like Germany or do we want to be more like France, where urban sprawl is not an issue, where communities grow as very, very compact communities. That is one of the issues that we need to define. I am not going to spin out for Oregonians what vision they want, but there needs to be a dialogue as to what we want to look like.

Harpe: What lessons would you take from Germany or France that might apply here? What experiences and what approaches to plan would make a difference or have made a difference?

Oulan: I think the issue is that a high quality of life is not a function of industry. As a matter of fact, the kind of quality of life that you enjoy in German cities – or, as a matter of fact, in German
villages -- is the fact that these dense communities are very clearly defined within their environment. It is not that they are like cancer cells that are spreading all over the fatherland and the forests. Not really. The fact is that the former West Germany has literally 25 times the population of Oregon while inhabiting the same size as Oregon. This didn't result in people going to Germany and saying, "what's that ugly place?" The life is good there. So, we as planners need to help the public understand that there are other visions than communities that are expanding day after day by single-family homes. Yes, we are increasing density. Our version of increasing density is putting a 4,000 square foot home on a 700 square foot lot. Very small lots. Large houses are sitting ten feet apart from each other, I am not sure that they are meeting the kind of aesthetics and amenities that people expect from single-family homes, but we fail to project to the public that there are other alternatives to this kind of growth. And I think that somehow we have a perfect example that we really should be publicizing. I wish I could afford to live in the Pearl District -- there are examples of high quality, elegant living that already we have succeeded in doing in Portland. I have to give thanks to the urban growth boundary.

I think the greatest contribution is that we are still a Portland, Oregon area and not a Portland-Salem metropolitan area.

Pharpe: What do you see as planning's greatest contribution to this unique place, the quality of life in this region that people point to around the country, around the world? Planning in Oregon is the example, the model. They might not know it too well, but they come to us.

Oulan: I think the greatest contribution is that we are still a Portland, Oregon area and not a Portland-Salem metropolitan area. We managed to prevent urban sprawl as much as possible under the circumstances. You have to keep in mind that we operate in a realistic world. So, I must admit that whatever sprawl that you find outside the urban growth boundary is not necessarily the failure of the concept of urban growth boundaries. But it is the failure of several of us including myself. I sat on the committee that drafted the growth boundary. I don't recall that any of us were really concerned what would happen outside the urban growth boundary, we were so much concerned with what would happen on the inside. Are land values going to soar and it becomes unaffordable for the poor? We focused on what was going to happen on the inside and we failed to realize that we also need to deal with happened with zoning outside the urban growth boundary. So, we did learn after the fact. But if you want to know what the boundary has done, just visit Atlanta or visit Oakland and come back to Portland. We are a very, very compact community. Maybe we are still developing. Maybe we did something to the sustainability of our environment but we did create a healthy network in the Portland area. I think we are coming to the crossroads at this point. When we started the urban growth boundaries back in the early 80's, we started at a time of very severe economic recession. As a result, many of us believed that we put in place the magic urban growth that would never need expan-
We need a vision, or at least a jurisdiction of Metro, but it is growing along the boundary. I was right up to that point. Of course, in 1991 I didn't see the boom years of the 1990s.

And we have reached the point now, where the state mandates that we must have enough land for X number of years every time we expand the boundary is going to begin to defeat the purpose for which the urban growth boundary was created because the expansions are going to be so large. And that's what brings me to my earlier points. We need a vision, or at least a coordinated answer for us to decide which other communities in this state or which other towns we would like to start in eastern Oregon or on the coast that actually can absorb population, population that doesn't need to come Portland. Additionally, the Portland region is not synonymous with the Metro region. The Metro area for which Metro is responsible for planning, no wonder, represents all the growing urban areas in the region. Just to give an example, the third fastest growing city in the Portland Metropolitan area is not under the jurisdiction of Metro. The first is Hillsboro; the second is Wilsonville; and the third is McMinnville. Ten years ago, very few of us would have actually even contemplated that this area would become classified as a rapidly growing city. Well, it is today. Is this bad? It's not under the jurisdiction of Metro, but it is growing along the corridor, a southwestern corridor, that takes off straight from the city of Sherwood. So, the question becomes, has the time come for the region to start addressing the fact that maybe Metro needs to be expanded to cover more than just their limited area as well? I suspect that 10 years from now, 20 years from now, we could be talking the same way about Columbia County.

But Columbia County is outside the Metro jurisdiction. So, we lost something when we established Metro. We lost the fact that Clark County was integrally, fully a member of this region. Clark County is outside our planning process today. I think we need to look for scenarios by which the six counties that the census classifies as the most populated counties of the Portland area have some way by which a unified vision for the future of urban growth is being developed, whether it is bringing them under Metro jurisdiction or finding some other organizations. It could be the Institute of Metropolitan Studies or any other organization that actually will sponsor the development of a vision.

Then you come to Newberg, in between, and we're just growing faster. We all think that the Sunset Highway or the Sunset Corridor with all the high tech is there because of planning, but that's not true. The corridor that goes all the way to Yamhill County is becoming increasingly attractive for deli's and restaurants and so on, but are cities growing in a coherent way? The city of Dundee, for example, sits in the one most scenic areas with all the vineyards, but its not being encouraged to grow as a village. It is growing as a strip along the highway. We need to take a look at the totality of these activities and bring some coordination to it.

I am a firm believer that the power of vision is in the quality of the vision itself and how it excites the imagination.

Pharpe: It's interesting because the only town that's at that level of regional discussion occurred in the early 60's when the original Regional Planning Commission in Portland asked how our region should grow. That Commission didn't have any powers, but it began a dialogue. I think it was 1963 or 1964.

Oulan: I am a firm believer that the power of vision is in the quality of the vision itself and how it excites the imagination. It is not necessarily the fact that it has the strength of the government trying to enforce or regulate it. I have always had the view that much of the support that we got in this region, in this state, in the 1970's represented active involvement or planning. And planning could be very easy attributed to the excitement of imagination that was generated by the Willamette Greenway. That was a very significant project that was sold to the public. The public saw its merits, what it means to them.

Pharpe: Do you think he could still do that given the temperament of the people today? Can a leader still emerge and get people to rally around a simple concept of thinking about the future?

Oulan: I am optimistic that if we come up with a vision that tells the public very clearly why we are here and why we are doing what we are doing, the public will see the purpose of what's being done. I
do realize, of course, that many things have changed. The most difficult change that has occurred in the last 30 years is the tax revolt. But on the other hand, maybe the salvation, depending on the answer to the fiscal crisis, is that we in the public understand the importance of quality of life, even if it means that you have to pay 10 cents extra on your tax bill. It's a question of how to do it. Do we basically tell the public what we think they like to hear? Or do we go out and say, look what we have done in the past when we had tools, companies, and the dedication of the public. Look to us here and look to our profession. We are the envy of the rest of the country when it comes to our quality of life. But we are living today on the principal, we are not living on the interest, we are living on the principal that we have. To live on the principal means it's only a matter of time before you consume it. We want to protect that principal. We need to, at least, agree among ourselves how we want our children to live 20, 30, 40, 50, 100 years from now and beyond, because unless you believe that the end of this universe is coming soon, you have to plan for life in 200 years and 300 years and so on.

Pharpe: Returning to the question of regional growth, one criticism is the notion that becoming more dense restricts land supply and pushes up the price of housing, yet planners argue that setting boundaries and establishing limits has increased the affordability of housing. Planners need to deal with this issue head on. Otherwise, you lose the strength for arguing for end trail logging, for high densities, or low compact communities.

Foulan: It is a big issue that we cannot answer in a satisfactory way. We limit ourselves to the institutional framework that we have to live in. I think about eight or nine years ago when we focused on land development starting . . . [under Mayor Bud] Clark, we went to make a presentation in front of the city council, and I raised the question of the need for the city to seriously accept the fact that we may have to subsidize middle-income and perhaps upper-middle-income housing buildup. I got looks of disbelief from the people listening. I did manage, in those eight years, to get some converts to agree. But I was asked how I expected to get such an idea through? How do you expect to get it through? My answer was that, in reality, the City of Portland will subsidize the middle-income housing, upper-middle-income housing, and even upper, upper-income housing, if we continue to let that housing be relocated 10 miles away along the Sunset Highway because in 10, 20, or 30 years from now, we will have to expand the Sunset Highway to six lanes. In 10 years, we will have to invest maybe a billion or two billion dollars into expanding that corridor. And nobody is going to find it a fantastic notion that we were subsidizing those people who moved out of the City by using public money to widen the corridors so that they can come downtown, enjoy themselves, and then go back home again. It could actually be much nicer and more helpful if we spent money subsidizing housing that becomes a formula for the middle and for the upper-middle-class so that the city doesn't need to grow around the Sunset Highway. So that people live in the Pearl District. And live in the University District. And live in the West End. And live in the glorious city, but in housing that we can afford. So, the notion is, yes, the boundary did raise the prices of housing. But if you break the boundary, you would be allowing growth to occur outside, and you will have to subsidize that through the kind of infrastructure investments that I've talked about. So, would it be much wiser to keep the boundary intact and subsidize those people who live inside the boundary. I am not denying that urban growth boundaries raise land values. I am just saying that you should look to the totality of investments and look to the totality of costs, then decide. You will find that in reality, if we reject the notion that transportation money has nothing to do with subsidizing social services and subsidizing housing — that we look to the subsidy as one single pot of subsidy — then all the services would move downtown from out in the suburbs. Which is more economic? To allow affordable housing, decent grocery stores, transit — to grow up in the downtown where you already have infrastructure, you don't have to build sewers, you don't have to build sidewalks? The infrastructure is here.

Pharpe: What are you going to turn your attention to now that you have time? I hope you don't simply ride off into the sunset.

Foulan: Wasn't it General MacArthur, I think, who said, "great soldiers never die, they just fade
away?" I don't expect to fade away. I've been an ethical person all my life and when I made my decision to retire, I promised myself that after 31 years, as the only Dean this College knew, I would be very careful not leave any shadow behind while I walk out of this office some months from now because the new Dean is entitled to walk in the sunlight. And I do think that. I love Portland. My wife loves Portland. This is our home. We are here. As you know . . . I built this college literally from scratch, you know, the year that we started was 1972. But there is one entity, which is my brainchild. It was my idea, the reason I went to Metro and spent 20 months inspecting Portland's agreement with Multnomah County entitled "Partnering". I quickly concluded it was an agreement based on the personalities of Nohad Toulan and Bud Clark. It was not institutionalized. So I came back with the notion of how I could institutionalize Vital Partners, and the idea of the Institute that dealt with the unusual issues of Portland. And that's how we ended up with the Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies.

When we designed this building and built it, I managed to sneak in the plans, a small office, half the size of this one, sitting in the Institute for Portland Studies. So, I had a small office there. I certainly respond to any request for impartial input that the Institute would want from me, and I did stop doing one of the most enjoyable activities for me, and that is teaching. I stopped back in 1996 because I just couldn't see myself committing myself to being in the classroom when I knew that in all likelihood the need for fundraising would take me away on short notice. So, I stopped teaching. Of course, you stop teaching, trying to get the logistics of coming back and instructing courses, while at the same time reorganizing the Commission, I could not do it. I would like to do it and teach a course here.

There is another area that, again, I am very, very personally attached to. In 1986, we coined the notion of the name "University District." That was my idea. At that time, we started some very primitive vision, talking about maybe coloring the sidewalks differently, blue or green or whatever, so that when people walk in this area they realize they are in a different part of downtown, and ask the questions, and know that they are actually in the district of Portland State University. Well, we never colored the sidewalks, and we never changed the light posts, and we never did anything with the streets. We did much greater things. We began developing plans for the expansion of the district, and we put the Plaza here. And we put in the Urban Studies Building.

We are now working on some very exciting projects, including the completion of the Urban Center, redeveloping the three blocks around it. And two or three years ago, I began talking about the need for the expansion of the inner city circle. By expansion, I mean we really should no longer be limited to the northern side of the freeway. There are areas south of the freeway where certain people from the University could really help expand the district to go all the way to North Macadam. The same area if developed properly could add value to the current development. We are talking about neighborhoods. It should not be really challenging to those neighborhoods. But at the same time, it can bring in an area that has large tracts of underutilized land. It can put the University in a position to help the implementation of the new transportation plan for the area that has been approved by the associations but is languishing somewhat. That land is great for prime office or technical buildings that could really be a significant addition and to link all the way to North Macadam redevelopment. You will have a University that is twice the size of the one that we have now with functioning connections to North Macadam. Because of those functioning connections and the size of the district, we actually would only be bringing average value to what's happening on the West End. This University is expected to grow within the next 10 years to 35,000. We are talking about new housing going up. The more academic housing that we need for our growing university, the less room we will have for the kind of older market housing that we were talking about in the original university district plan. So, the fact that we can actually find expansion outside that will still enable us to fulfill our relations by having downtown here but at the same time be able to expand our technology. It is more important than that. We are increasing the costs from small emerging companies in the new emerging industries that are coming to us. We can provide them with space, so that we can incubate them. And in return, if they become the next Microsoft or the next Intel, we could get a share of the pie. This is the relevance of attracting new industries, non-polluting industries, high tech industries. It's very interesting that as we started pushing for this building, we sold it as the first step in the redevelopment of the University District. And one of the first questions from developers is, "Well, how much land do you people have?" We told them that we have several acres. It's exciting for a developer to want to invest knowing that they have 10 or 15 years of projects to do. Seven or eight lots are three or four years of development. So, expanding would be very helpful for the city and very helpful for the University, and I would like to be a significant player in getting the University District planned, expanded, and redeveloped.