

the environmental impact statement and visual quality

Arnold H. Vollmer
Vollmer Associates

The environmental impact statement (EIS), which is required by law as a step in every federal construction undertaking and now in many state and local projects, shows signs of developing into one of the most misunderstood, misused, and inhibiting requirements in the history of public works. The EIS procedure was, unfortunately, needed to cure some very real ills. But as so often happens, the cure threatens to be more painful than the disease. That should not be the case.

The EIS is looked upon by a great many people today as a monster—a bureaucratic contrivance designed only to delay, block, impede, and frustrate progress. Admittedly the mandated procedure is a nuisance; and the tendency of a large part of our society to judge the worth of a book by its bulk leads to unnecessarily windy, turgid, jargon-filled prose works, the reading of which becomes a Sisyphean task. But the worst-tasting medicine at times does a great deal of good. Anything as tedious as the EIS procedure cannot be all bad.

It should hardly have come as startling news to anyone in the field of planning that any of man's works has a complex influence on his environment. Although we are generally confident that the change effected by our work will be for the better, there is always some gamble. I, for one, confess that a little element of risk adds spice to life. When we have the means of completely controlling the genetic character of our offspring, will we be willing to take full advantage of this godlike power? As a father, I feel that half the fun derived from the very uncertainty of the undertaking. Who wants to stay in a card game where every player can count on being dealt a royal flush each hand?

Creative genius has, more often than not, been characterized by an arrogant disregard of both natural and social history. Bernini, Michaelangelo, Wren, and many others ruthlessly scavenged the works of antiquity to obtain their own building blocks. They changed their environments with a bold and virile self-assurance. Although we may deplore their callous lack of regard for their predecessors, we must at the same

time recognize that the Ice Age and Krakatoa—to say nothing of the deceptively gentle forces of wind and rain—have done more to change the face of the globe than have all of man's activities, planned or inadvertent.

Nonetheless, man's tools are becoming so powerful that a thoughtless use of them could lead to disaster—particularly if those tools get into the wrong hands. We must make every effort to prevent bunglers from exercising any measure of control, and in this connection the EIS may well prove to be an effectively restraining influence. The EIS procedure has the same sort of insane logic as those law-enforcement procedures that achieve the jailing of thieves and murderers on income tax evasion charges. The EIS may well turn out to be a blessing for all of the wrong reasons.

The planning process is immensely complex. It requires not only carrying water on both shoulders but juggling apples and bananas at the same time. It is characterized by involution and convolution. There are inevitably many false starts; wrong turnings are a constant peril of the road. There is little profit in the single-minded, straight-arrow approach. Effective planning demands talent and training, dedication and experience. It demands a high measure of professionalism and, despite some current misconceptions, is not to be undertaken lightly by amateurs. Unfortunately, there will always be the cooks who, when they fail to achieve a palatably grilled hamburger, cheerfully and hopefully turn their hands to Boeuf Wellington.

Cute analogies are, however, deceptive. They suggest a simplicity that is uncharacteristic of the demands of planning. The considerations that must be borne in mind from the outset defy enumeration. Each problem is different and involves different components of varying character and in varying degrees. No single formula of whatever complexity can be relied on to chart the solution. Every engineer, architect, or landscape architect maintains checklists in an effort to remind himself of the myriad influences that must be considered in the course of his work. These lists can never be all-inclusive. They are, at best, rough guides.

The environmental impact statement is, properly, nothing more than a documentation of the process by which a plan has been devised. It is a history of each of the steps taken by the planner—a record of what his reactions were to the influences on his work as he perceived them. It is a design diary, not simply of events but of the philosophy and analysis that shaped the end product. It is an amplified checklist—a record of the questions and the answers.

The integrity of a finished structure cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of a final inspection. We need the inspector's records and certifications and the construction photos to reassure us as to the proper proportioning of the concrete mix and the presence of the invisible reinforcing steel. Even those precautions do not always prove adequate, but an occasional failure does not invalidate the whole process. Similarly, the EIS carries no enforceable guarantee. It simply documents the fact that we have tried.

Thus, to the experienced and qualified designer the EIS may be a bit of a nuisance, but it is hardly a major impediment to ultimate achievement. If our work has been properly done, there should be little difficulty in articulating simply and clearly the steps we took—however faltering and indirect they may have been from time to time—toward the final goal.

On the other hand, if the proper thought has not gone into the design process, no amount of *ex post facto* rationalization, couched in even the most eloquent prose, is going to disguise the essentially meritricious character of the end result. The need to make an EIS should serve to unveil the fakers.

In a famous little book on literary style, its perceptive author had the following advice for writers, and it also applies to engineers and architects.

Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose, a sauce by which a dull dish is made palatable. Style has no such separate entity; it is nondetachable, unfilterable. The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is himself he is approaching, no other; and he should begin by turning resolutely away from all devices that are popularly believed to indicate style—all mannerisms, tricks, adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity.

In highway design, as in writing, the visual quality derives from the integrity of the design. If the design is logical, straightforward, and professional, it will be successful. The environmental impact statement will have written itself.

The negative effect of the EIS procedure—the policing and the prevention of outrage—is important. But there are positive implications that far transcend its statement of immediate purpose. The EIS requirement constitutes a clear affirmation that a public works project is meant to satisfy more than just a basic function and emphasizes aspects of the design process that are too often thought of as only of peripheral importance.

Incidentally, at the risk of being accused of nitpicking, semanticism, and bearing in mind that a rose is supposed to be a rose regardless of its name, I wish that another title had been given the EIS. The word "impact" has generally an opprobrious connotation, e.g., the impact of a bullet, the impact of fist on flesh, of an automobile on a traveler. Perhaps "consequences" or "influence" or even "benefits" would have been better.

Because we should not undertake any work unless it does promise to provide clear benefits in terms not only of its stated functional objective but also of the environment, temporary disruptions are always to be expected. But even those eggs that do have to be broken first will show up, we hope, as a nourishing and palatable omelet.

I will wager without any fear of contradiction that the reason any of us discarded a suit of clothes the last time and bought a new one was not that the old one no longer gave us physical protection but that we no longer liked the style, fit, or general appearance and condition—all essentially aesthetic rather than purely functional reasons. The purchase of a new house is as likely to be inspired by considerations of comfort, looks, spaciousness, neighborhood, and outlook—all environmental and aesthetic qualities rather than functional.

Is it possible that we will consider relocating or reconstructing a highway not solely because it does not satisfactorily fulfill its traffic function but rather because it is an offense to the neighborhood it traverses?

Most of the highways we build are essentially replacements for older ones along time-honored travel routes. It may not be too much to hope that the day is not far off when we will consider reconstructing an existing highway not because it is unsafe, not because its physical condition is unsatisfactory, not because its capacity is inadequate to current and anticipated traffic demand, but because either it is of itself an offense to our aesthetic standards or because it relates in a less than harmonious way to its environs.

The idea is not a new one. I must confess that I have resented the shrill young voices that have so recently joined our old-timers' chorus. With a shocking lack of a sense of history, they believed they were singing a very new song and all but drowned out the rest of us. I have, however, come around to feeling gratitude for their aid. If the time for the idea of the highway beautiful has really come, the EIS is a small price to pay for it, and the smug self-righteousness of the young will be quite bearable.