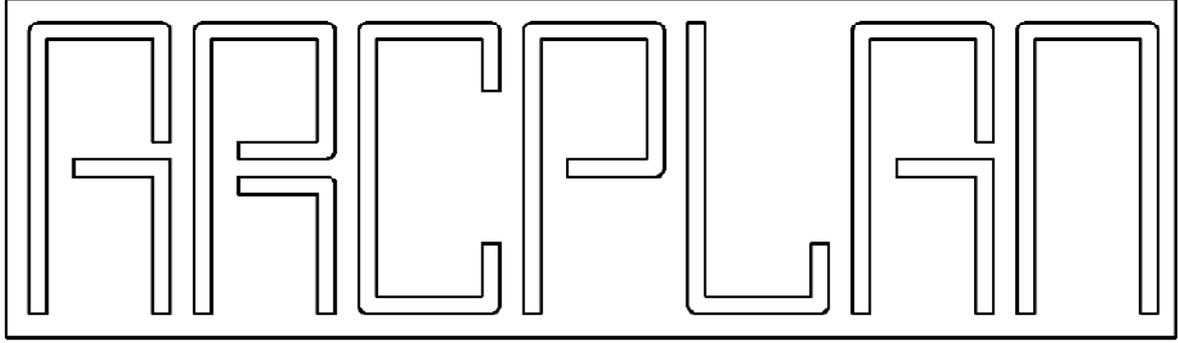# ARCPLAN

Strategic Spatial Planning

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Table of contents:

قائمه المحتويات:

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Louis Albrechts graduated and received his PhD from the University of Leuven, Belgium. He was full professor at the University of Leuven for 1987 to 2007 and is now emeritus professor. He has been visiting professor at a number of European Universities and visiting research fellow at the University of West Australia, Perth.

Louis Albrechts is corresponding member of the German Academy for Research and Planning, founder and editor of European Planning Studies, member of the editorial board of several international journals, chair of the first (Shanghai) and second (Mexico-City) World Planning Schools Congress, chair of the third joint AESOP/ACSP congress in Leuven, second president of the Association of European School of Planning, chair of UN-Habitat HS advisory board and chair of the planning commission in his hometown. He was also in charge of the strategic plan for Flanders (1992-1996) and perform the scientific coordination for the Flanders transport plan (1999-2000). He is author/editor of 18 books, some 90 chapters in international books and over 60 articles in leading international journals with blind peer review. His work has been published in 10 languages. His current research and writings focus on the practice and nature of strategic spatial planning, diversity and creativity in planning, public involvement in planning and bridging the gap between planning and implementation. He lives in Beringen in Belgium.

Strengths Challenges, Opportunities and Pitfalls in and for Strategic Spatial Planning

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Abstract

The purpose of the essay is to contribute to the debate on existing planning approaches and the search for new ideas. Therefore, after briefly dealing with the logic, aims and critiques of the current statutory planning, the essay, starting with the history, aims and critiques, sketches the contours of a more radical strategic planning. In this way it invites theorists and professionals (public and private) to reflect on their perception and their approach to how plans, policies and public services are conceived and delivered, with the objective of enabling the (structural) change needed in an open and equitable way. The essay relies on a selective review of the planning literature, a dissection of strategic planning processes all over the world and the author's experience in practice.

Introduction

What type of planning is up to dealing with the (structural) challenges ahead? Traditional spatial planning is more concerned with pragmatic negotiations around the immediate in a context of the seeming inevitability of market-based forms of political rationality.

A growing literature and an increasing number of practices, all over the world, seem to suggest that strategic spatial planning may be looked upon as a possible approach that is able to cope with the challenges and to embed structural change. This essay reflects on the problems and challenges planning has to cope with, the need for a transformative agenda and the logic and shortcomings of statutory planning. It then introduces strategic planning as a complement to statutory planning. I rely on the theoretical literature, a dissection of strategic planning processes all over the world and my experience in practice.

From Developments, Problems, Challenges to the need for a transformative agenda

World society is facing major developments, problems, and challenges: poverty, persistent inequality, environmental issues (global warming, flooding), the crisis of representative democracy, diversity, an ageing population in some parts of the world and young people and woman entering the labor market in other parts. I am fully aware that these problems and challenges are structural and ever changing and hence resistant to description in terms of fixed categories. Moreover, there is a growing awareness that a number of planning concepts cannot be achieved solely through physical hard planning and the fact that (in addition to traditional land use regulation, urban maintenance, production and management of services) governments are being called upon to respond to new demands. For me, there is ample evidence that the problems and challenges that regions, city-regions and cities are confronted with cannot be tackled and managed adequately on the basis of the intellectual technical-legal apparatus and mindset of traditional planning. Hence my call for a transformative agenda to cope with the continuing and unabated pace of change driven by structural developments and challenges. Transformative practices focus on the structural problems in society; they construct images or visions of a preferred outcome and how to implement them (see Friedmann, 1987). Transformative practices simply refuse to

accept that the current way of doing things is necessarily the best way; they break free from concepts, structures and ideas that only persist because of the process of continuity. It is precisely the discontinuity that forces us outside the usual boundaries of reason. My focus on transformative practices does not imply that the day-to-day problems are not important for me. They are important! But there is evidence that, for whatever reasons, spatial planners are often left out (or leave themselves out) or else are reduced to being mere providers of space when major decisions are at stake. My call implies the abandonment of bureaucratic approaches and the involvement of skills and resources that are external to the traditional administrative apparatus.

Aims, logic and critiques of statutory planning

Aims and logic

To steer developments in a certain direction, statutory plans are used as a control tool for the actions of third parties, as a (legal) framework for spatial development and the building rights of owners. They claim legal equal rights; they focus on bureaucratic and political control and legal certainty for investors. For some, an additional aim is also to avoid clientelism and corruption within the permit policy. But, today, the main rationale seems to be the pursuit of legal certainty as a basis for the permit policy. As a consequence, documents have to set out land uses and formal requirements very carefully and very accurately while eliminating uncertainty as much as possible. Planned residential subdivisions give land and property owners' certainty of investment returns. In this way, land use planning and economic growth are intrinsically connected. Progress is equated with order, with buildings, urban markets need it. In the logic of statutory planning there is no way of managing city growth without some form of grids and regulations. The challenge seems to be how to redefine the use of zoning to make it more functional to polity life and to spatial governance for developing local citizenship through proper spatial choices.

Critiques

Traditional statutory plans remained more of an administrative framework for development than an action plan aimed at the implementation of visions and concepts.

They entailed false assumptions of certainty and static context. The approach to planning via a single policy field (that is, spatial planning) met fierce opposition from other and usually more powerful policy fields. Although land-use plans had formal status and served as official guidelines for implementation, when it came down to the actual implementation, other policy fields which, because of their budgetary and technical resources, were needed for the implementation were easily able to sabotage the spatial plans if they wanted.

Most statutory plans are designed for situations of stability and predictability in which plans can serve as blueprints offering investors and developers the certainty they want. The interpretation of statutory plans in terms of form and content (comprehensive, detailed, etc.) is in effect often a negation of change, dynamics, uncertainty, etc., meaning that they soon become outdated, are often utopian, are often not based on sufficient and correct data, and do not take into account resources or the time factor or even the possibilities for their implementation. In short, they focus on legal certainty that makes the plans far more rigid and inflexible and less responsive to changing circumstances. In this way they seem unsuited for dealing with the dynamics of society, the challenges mentioned, changing issues, changing circumstances and a changing context. They force planners and politicians to make choices before the time is right to do this and the mainly comprehensive nature of land-use plans is at odds with increasingly limited resources. In addition, most land-use plans have a predominant focus on physical aspects, providing physical solutions to social or economic problems.

Strategic planning: History, aims and critiques

History

The word "strategy" has its roots within a military context (see Sun Tzu, 1994 [500BC]). The focus is on accurate understanding of the real situation, realistic goals, and focused

orientation of available strength and persistence of the action. In the early 1980s, the state and local governments in the US were called upon to use the strategic planning approach developed in the corporate world. In the 1960s and 1970s, strategic spatial planning in a number of Western countries evolved towards a system of comprehensive planning at different administrative levels. In the 1980s a retreat from strategic planning could be witnessed, fueled not only by the neoconservative disdain for planning, but also by postmodernist skepticism, both of which tend to view progress as something which, if it happens, cannot be planned (Healey, 1997). Instead, the focus of urban and regional planning practices was on projects, especially for the revival of rundown parts of cities and regions, and on land-use regulations. In the 1990s, a growing literature and an increasing number of practices seemed to suggest that strategic spatial planning could provide an answer to the shortcomings of statutory planning (Healey 1997; Albrechts 2004, 2013; Tibaijuka, 2005; UN-Habitat, 2009). It is not surprising that these ideas and practices started to travel. The Barcelona model (see Borja and Castells, 1997) became very influential. UN-Habitat promotes local economic development through strategic planning. Here the strategic approach "implies careful consideration of the various trade-offs and making difficult choices". It demands harnessing and mobilizing the local human, social, financial and natural capital towards the common vision, goals and objectives that the community aspires to achieve. With support from UN-Habitat and the African Network of Urban Management Institutions, strategic plans based on the *Millennium Development Goals* were drawn up. Integrating the MDGs within planning made it possible to rectify certain major shortcomings encountered in master planning. The approach made available a strategic spatial framework with time horizons and indicators of objectives. It gave an understanding of the realities and trends in the implementation of the MDGs at the urban level. The approach made it possible to acquire information to identify the actions to take "in order to improve living conditions and access to basic social services at the urban level. It made available indicators for monitoring the strategic plan and, thus, strengthened public accountability" (UN-Habitat, 2009: 61- 62).

Aims

The motivations for using strategic spatial planning in practice vary. However, the objectives have typically been to construct a challenging, coherent and coordinated vision and to frame an integrated long-term spatial logic (for land-use regulation, for resource protection, for sustainable development, for spatial quality, sustainability, equity, etc.). It aims to enhance action-orientation beyond the idea of planning as control and to promote a more open multi-level type of governance.

Critiques

The critiques focus on very different registers of the strategic spatial planning approach. Economic, political and ideological critiques draw a link between the rise of strategic spatial planning and the strengthened neoliberal political climate. Questions are raised whether strategic spatial planning practices are able to resist the hegemonic discourses of neo-liberalism. Some attack the militaristic and corporate terminology of strategic planning. Other critics argue that the results of strategic planning, in terms of improvement of the quality of places, have been modest. They ask whether actually existing practices of strategic spatial planning really follow their normative groundings and they point at its weakness in theoretical underpinnings. Still others question the conditions under which visions would materialize, the lack of concern about the path dependency of the resources, and a too sequential view of the relationships between visioning, action, structure, institutions and discourse. Concern is raised about the legitimation of strategic spatial planning, the role of expertise and knowledge, and how to introduce transformative practices.

Gradually a more radical approach of strategic planning has developed that takes the critique into account and is clearly different from the military and the corporate stance.

Towards a more radical strategic planning

6

In the next paragraph I sketch the contours of a more radical strategic planning that opens some perspective to broaden the scope of possible futures and to organize the relationship between (all) actors in a more open and equitable way. I therefore use a what, a how, and a why question, a brief introduction into the four track approach and an indication of the possible output.

What?

Strategic spatial planning is a transformative and integrative public sector led, but co-productive socio-spatial process through which visions/frames of reference, justification for coherent actions and the means for implementation are produced that shape and frame what a place is and what it might become (see Albrechts, 2004).The term 'spatial' brings into focus the 'where of things', whether static or dynamic; the creation and management of special 'places' and sites; the interrelations between different activities and networks in an area; and significant intersections and nodes in an area that are physically co-located (Healey, 2004, pp 46). The focus on the spatial relations of territories allows for a more effective way of integrating different agendas (economic, environmental, cultural, social and policy agendas). As these agendas have a variable reach, they also carry a potential for a 'rescaling' of issue agendas down from the global, continental, national or regional level, and up from the municipal level. The search for new scales of policy articulation and new policy concepts is also linked to attempts to widen the range of actors involved in policy processes, with new alliances, actor partnerships and consultative processes (Healey 1997; Albrechts, et al, 2003). Places become both the text and context of new debates about fundamental socio-spatial relations, about thinking without frontiers (Friedmann, 2011, p 69), providing new kinds of practices and narratives about belonging to and being involved in the construction of a place and in society at large (see also Watson 2014).

How?

Strategic spatial planning focuses on a limited number of strategic key issues; it takes

a 'collective' critical view of the environment in terms of determining strengths and weaknesses in the context of opportunities and threats. Much of the process, which is inherently political in nature, lies in making tough decisions about what is most important for the purpose of producing just, structural responses to problems, challenges, aspirations, and potentials. Thus, strategic planning involves choice, valuation, judgment, and decisions that relate to envisioned agreed upon ends and to the selection of the most appropriate means, not in a purely instrumental sense, for coping with and implementing such ends. In strategic planning, the overall picture that inspires choices is not given by a comprehensive analysis, but rather by synthetic long-term visions. Visions must symbolize some perceived and desired 'good', some qualities and some virtues (diversity, sustainability, equity, livability, inclusiveness, accountability) which the present lacks. Speaking of sustainability, spatial quality, virtues and values is a way of describing the type of place people want to live in, or think they should live in. Where statutory planning ends up - as a result of its legal status in a closed system - the political potential of strategic planning lies in its dimension to broaden the scope of the possible and imagine the impossible. This implies the development of relational more-than-human perspectives as a way to broaden the concepts used (see Metzger, 2014).

Strategic spatial planning focuses on place-specific qualities and assets (social, cultural and intellectual, including physical and social qualities of the urban/regional tissue) in a global context. Strategic spatial planning studies the external trends, forces and resources available. It identifies and gathers major actors (public and private with a focus on civil society organizations that will speak for ordinary citizens rather than special interest groups and all those who may have, directly or indirectly, a stake in a strategic planning process). Strategic planning aims for a broad (multi-level governance) and diverse (public, economic, civil society) co-productive process. It creates solid, workable long-term visions/ frames of reference (a geography of the unknown) and strategies at different levels, taking into account the power structures (political, economic, gender, cultural), uncertainties and

competing values. Strategic spatial planning designs plan-making structures and develops content, images and decision frameworks for influencing and managing spatial change. It provides frames of reference that give direction and justify specific actions. It is about building new ideas and processes thus, generating ways of understanding, ways of building agreements, and ways of organizing and mobilizing for the purpose of exerting influence in different arenas. Finally, strategic spatial planning, both in the short and the long term, focuses on results and evaluation, feedback, adjustment and revision. Strategic planning is action or project oriented.

Strategic spatial planning relates to the pattern of purposes, policy statements, frames, plans, programs, actions (short-, medium- and long-term), decisions and resource allocation that define what a policy is in practice, what it does, and why it does it – from the point of view of the various affected publics. This stresses the need to find effective connections between political authorities and implementation actors (planning officers, individual citizens, community organizations, private corporations, developers and public departments). Most actors will not go on the long march unless they see compelling evidence, within a reasonable period of time, that the process is producing acceptable results. Therefore, short-term results are required to build the credibility, needed to sustain efforts over the long haul and needed to help test visions against concrete conditions.

Why?

Strategic spatial planning is not just a contingent response to wider forces, but is also an active force in enabling change. Strategic planning cannot be theorized as though its approaches and practices are neutral with respect to class, gender, age, race and religion. Therefore, the why question deals with values, meanings and related judgments and choices formed with reference to the ideas of desirability, the good society and betterment. Without values, we risk adopting a pernicious relativism where anything goes.

Four tracks

Strategic spatial planning is operationalized in a four-track approach. The four tracks can be seen as working tracks: one for the visions, one for the short-term and long-term actions, a third for the involvement of the key actors and, finally, a fourth track for a more permanent process involving the broader public in major decisions. The proposed tracks may not be viewed in a purely linear way. The context forms the setting of the planning process but also takes form and undergoes changes in the process. In the first track, the emphasis is on the long-term visions. In this sense, the long term constitutes the time span one needs to construct/realize (parts of) the vision. The envisioning process translates complex interrelations between place qualities and multiple space-time relational dynamics into multiplex, relational spatial imaginations (see also Healey, 2006). The visions are constructed in relation to the social values to which a particular environment is historically committed. The creation of visions is an imaginative, conscious and purposive action to represent values and meanings for the future(s). Power is at the heart of these values and meanings. To avoid pure idealistic thinking, the views of social critics have been integrated into track 1. In track 2, the focus is on creating trust by solving problems and framing answers through short-term actions. It concerns acting in such a way as to frame decisions in view of the visions constructed in track 1 and to tackle problems in view of these visions. As both the technical skills and the power to allocate sufficient means to implement proposed actions are usually spread over a number of diverse sectors, actors, policy levels and departments, track 3 involves relevant actors that are needed for their substantive contribution, their procedural competences and the role they might play in acceptance, in getting basic support and in providing legitimacy. Integration in its three dimensions – substantive, organizational and instrumental (legal, budget) – is at stake here. The fourth track is about an inclusive and more permanent empowerment process involving citizens in major decisions.

Output

The end product consists of an analysis of the main processes shaping our environment, which amounts to a dynamic, integrated and indicative long-term vision (frame), a plan

for short-term and long-term actions, a budget and a strategy for implementation. It constitutes a consensus or (partial) (dis)agreement between the key actors. For the implementation, credible commitments to action engagement (commitment package) and a clear and explicit link to the budget are needed where citizens, the private sector, different levels of governance and planners enter moral, administrative and financial agreements to realize these actions. Reference could be made here to the rich tradition of collective labor agreements.

A major challenge in strategic planning consists in the dialectic between movements that seek democratization, collective decision-making and empowerment of citizens on the one hand and the established institutions and structures that seek to reabsorb such demands into a distributive framework on the other. A crucial element in this respect is the way in which people are excluded or included in strategic planning processes and the way the relationship between people – technologies of government, norms of self-rule (Roy, 2009) are organized. The question concerning who is to be considered an actor in a particular context or situation remains a fundamental issue.

Actors discover layers of stakes (see also Healey, 1997b) that consist of existing, but perhaps as-yet unconscious interests, in the fate of their city, their region. Hence the need for strategies that treat the territory of the urban not just as a container in which things happen, but as a complex mixture of nodes and networks, places and flows, in which multiple relations, activities and values co-exist, interact, combine, conflict, oppress and generate creative synergy (see also Healey, 2007, 1).

In some places, the process of "discourse structuralization" and its subsequent "institution-alization" becomes perhaps more important than the plan as such. In this way, new discourses may become institutionalized,that is, embedded in the norms, attitudes and practices, thus providing a basis for challenging current ways of doing and for structural change. The spectrum for change cannot be so open that anything is possible, as if we could achieve anything we wanted to achieve. Conditions and structural constraints on `what is' and `what is not' possible are imposed by the past and the present. These conditions and constraints

have to be questioned and challenged in the process, given the specific context of time and place. So, in order to imagine the conditions and constraints differently, we need to deal with history and to overcome history. This defines the boundaries of a fairly large space between openness and fixity.

Epilogue

Strategic spatial planning invents or creates policies and practices in relation to the context and to the social and cultural values to which a particular place or society is historically committed as something new rather than as a solution arrived at as a result of existing trends. In some places actors are receptive, finding real value in a new planning idea and a political opportunity to deploy it, whereas elsewhere the idea falls on barren ground, is actively resisted, is transformed into something quite different or is simply misunderstood. The spread of ideas occurs in varied ways depending on the context. Crucial in this respect is the (in)tolerance of the context for real shifts in power relations and the danger that weakly theorized models are adopted elsewhere in equally under-theorized or invisible power contexts.

Strategic planning needs an arena in which a plurality of interests and demands, opinions, images, conflicts, different values and power relationships are addressed. In these arenas actors may reflect on who they are, what they want and in this way articulate their identities, their traditions, their values. Strategic planning practices cannot simply be extracted from the context where they emerged, uprooted and "planted" somewhere else (see also Healey, 2012, p. 190). Experiences or ideas-in-practice must be looked upon as occasions for planners to challenge their own knowledge and values and crititcally engage with their activity as a praxis. Strategic planning that acknowltedges the irreducible nature of living space as a social product historically and culturally determined but also geared at broadening the scope of the possible and imagining the impossible takes planning beyond its traditional boundaries of theory, profession, planning laws, regulations and traditions. It implies that

This challenges the combination of knowledge (traditional scientific, tacit/experiential knowledge of local communities) with the creativity of the design of alternative (even impossible) futures. It raises uncertainties for those involved in the process. How to combine providing certainty for developers, citizens with probing futures? How to combine flexibility with robustness? The call for constructing a new governance culture through a more collective decision making and empowerment of citizens – co-production – (see Mitlin, , 2008; Roy, 2009; Watson, 2014) challenges the established institutions and structures and aims for a shift in power relations.

Notes

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