



Title	Planning as Justification
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Publication date	2020-06-01
Publication information	Lennon, Mick. "Planning as Justification." Taylor & Francis, June 1, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2020.1769918 .
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/12066
Publisher's statement	This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Planning Theory & Practice on 01 June 2020, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14649357.2020.1769918
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1080/14649357.2020.1769918

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The published version of this paper is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2020.1769918>

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Conceiving Planning

Much theorising in our field is focused on what planning should do. Such work is generally informed by perspectives borrowed from social and political theory that are used as an analytical lens to examine where planning practice has gone wrong and as a platform to prescribe how planning should be corrected to deliver better ends. For example, the work of Dewey and Habermas has deeply influenced the communicative and collaborative approaches to planning by informing stances on how planning should be democratically orientated to provide an effective means to identify and provide for ends. Associated with these theories but differentiated by emphasis, is a strand of planning theory that combines social and political thinking to focus on the ends to which planning practice should be directed and specifying the means necessary to deliver such ends. This family of planning theory includes Just City, advocacy planning and phronetic planning approaches. Another prominent vein of planning theory is primarily occupied with critiquing consensus focused approaches, and is illustrated by neoliberal and post-political critiques, as well as work on the dark side of planning. Although different in their particularities, what all these approaches have in common is a concentration on what planning should or shouldn't do, rather than what planning isⁱ. Linking these approaches together is an implicit prioritisation of means over ends, such that democracy, participation, recognition, respect, (re)distribution and avoiding abuses of power become the focus through which the formulation and delivery of ends are evaluated. In this sense, a concern with means is implicitly privileged over, or even conflated with ends in theorising and interpreting practice. For example, a common theory-infused planning analysis would seek the provision of more affordable housing (ends) through greater state intervention in house building (means #1) and collaborative methods in decision-making (means #2), rather than seeking the provision of more affordable housing (ends #1) by relying primarily on a private sector dominated system of property companies acquiring and developing land banks in response to market dynamics (means) with the ultimate aim of maximising shareholder profit (ends #2).

Conversely, much applied work in planning academia and practice often focuses on ends at the expense of, or via implicit conflation with means. For example, Smart City approaches frequently prioritise the delivery of ends, such as the real-time coordination of traffic flows, with the implicit assumption that planning involves enhancing the efficiency and effectivity of service delivery (ends) through improving information management and use (means). Other areas of planning research and practice frequently falling into this camp include environmental management, urban regeneration, as well as much transport and retail planning. This is not to say that these two broad domains of abstract theory and applied research are discrete. Indeed, much ink has been spent on issues of participation and justice in the fields of transport planning and urban regeneration. However, where this has occurred the case generally remains that an emphasis is placed on means or ends, with one implicitly conflated with the other through the focus of the research's conceptual lens.

Hence, one is left wondering if planning academia is missing a beat! Specifically, by emphasising (and frequently conflating) means and ends there is a tendency to unwittingly reduce what planning is to what planning does. This is important as it risks obscuring our understanding of what planning 'is' in a fog of critique and correctives as to how planning 'should be'. Consequently, it may be useful to step back from the frontline for a sweeping perspective on the landscape of theoretical combat to seek vantage over the various camps. From here it may be possible to distinguish what unites them rather than just what differentiates them. Indeed, this perspective facilitates recognition that threading together the normative banners of these varied factions is a desire to best represent the 'public interest'. To be sure the public interest is an oft reviled concept that has received volleys of criticism from various quarters (Lennon, 2017a), which have accused it as being at best little more than a 'flexible construct' to support partisan arguments (Grant, 1994, 2005), or at worst a vehicle to suppress dissent (Sandercock, 1998). However, an ever-increasing volume of papers debating how planning should operate to maximise public benefit (means) and what outputs best serve the common good (ends), along with a waxing of specific commentary on planning's public interest (Alfasi, 2009; Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Chettiparamb, 2016; Lennon, 2017a; Moroni, 2019; Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015), seems to endorse Flathman's (1966) contention that 'We are free to abandon the concept but if we do so we simply have to wrestle with the problems under some other heading' (p.13). Thus, in spirit if not in name, planning is legitimated by its ultimate aim of acting in the public interest. This then begs the question as to what constitutes the public interest, who determines this, and what does it mean for planning to act in the public interest?

The Centrality of Justification

The history of planning theory and practice has been largely contoured by a desire to 'do good' (Lennon, 2017b). While it is acknowledged that sometimes this has resulted in planning practices that would be negatively evaluated by most contemporary practitioners, the motivation and justification at the time when these practices were formulated was to

'deliver', 'improve' or 'ameliorate' something in the public interest (Hall, 2014). Thus, if the impetus and legitimation for planning has continually been to realise the public interest by doing good, what profiles the varying terrain of planning theory and practice is the different justifications advanced for conceiving what the public interest is (ends) and how it is best realised (means). Indeed, by stepping back and surveying the play of debates in planning theory, one can surmise that understandings of the public interest are constituted by the particular configuration of means and ends established via the specific logic of justification advanced by different theoretical approaches. Similarly, what the public interest entails in planning practice is a specific logic of justification that has achieved privilege in a certain decision situation. Here, the perceived validity of the justifications deployed in both planning theory and practice is supplied by appeal to what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) refer to as 'regimes of justification'. These 'regimes' are logics of appraisal shared by a community of evaluatorsⁱⁱ that frame the identification of relevance and allocate relative importance to different ways of interpreting the world in the appraisal process. Hence, the public interest is not something 'out there' to be discovered but rather is something 'in here' to be reasoned relative to particular modes of justification. As something 'in here', the public interest is thereby always contingent on its nested position within the complexity of relationships between debates at different scales and among multiple agents on how to understand and manage our interactions with each other and our environments.

Let us return to the example of affordable housing to help illustrate this observation. The very idea that more affordable housing should be available (ends) is contingent on the belief that affordability is something of import for the public and perceptions of what affordability amounts to in a particular context. Presuming the former of these is a broadly shared view, it nevertheless requires a justification before action can be initiated. Indeed, while the delivery of affordable housing (ends) may be a shared public interest objective, the processes of reasoning why this should be the case may vary widely to encompass shades of positions from arguments on the value to society of private property ownership (Slater, 2016), to arguments on facilitating peoples' opportunity to live a fulfilling life (Batterham, 2019), and post-Marxist arguments on redistribution (Marcuse et al., 2009). Furthermore, the issue of what amounts to affordability requires justification through deliberation. Such deliberations may entail contending arguments as to what is relevant and of greatest importance in the determination of affordability. For example, what size of house in what location should be considered affordable in the context of different income bands. Hence, immediately we find ourselves embroiled in debates on the relevance of 'what', 'who', 'where' and 'when'. The delineation of these criteria quickly becomes a matter of justification relative to different moral and technical registers. Accordingly, views are advanced as to whether the most appropriate means to deliver a particular conception of affordability is via more or less state intervention in generating supply and/or regulation. These views may be further elaborated through justifications that support or oppose more private sector involvement in housing delivery and the enhancement of democracy in decision-making processes. Eventually a logic

of justification will emerge via electoral politics or through processes of knowledge legitimisation and judgement consequent on the dynamics of communities of practice (Lennon, 2015b). Therefore, how action is taken (means) in seeking to realise the objective of delivering affordable housing (ends) will depend on which forms of justification achieve precedence in the relevant decision-making arenas on planning for housing.

Reconceiving Planning: Planning as Justification

Different justifications are contingently interwoven across different domains of planning activities creating an intricate tapestry of practice that is predicated on rationalising what the public interest entails in different types of decision situations. The matting of these over time and space creates a complex quilting of justifications that profiles planning practices concurrent to prompting new practices and influencing their evolution (Salet, 2018). Those most resonant with prevailing justifications and thereby best able to negotiate this varying field of justifications enjoy enunciative positions, and as a consequence, bestow authoritative identities on those who promulgate them (Lennon, 2015a). The influence of those who deploy such justifications consolidates the patterning of activities that gives shape to planning practice, such as facilitating greater public participation in identifying affordable housing objectives (means and ends), or providing a greater role for the market in determining and delivering the quantum, type and location of affordable housing (means and ends). Conceived in this way, planning is the activity of justifying: (1) the identification of decision situations; (2) how decisions should be made in such situations; and (3) the decisions that should be taken. While some justifications seem privileged consequent on their resonance with the prevailing logic of justification in a particular domain or across domains, as is a frequent criticism of neoliberalism, this nevertheless does not excuse the need to justify.

The upshot of reconceiving planning in this way is that it cuts through many of the debates in planning theory to identify what provides unity to planning. Hence, approaches such as agonistic planning, phronetic planning, Just City approaches and collaborative planning can be rethought of as normative justifications for 'how' planning 'ought to operate', rather than as arguments for what planning 'is' or 'should be'. Likewise, rather than an identification of what planning 'is', critiques of neoliberalism, post-political consenses and the dark side of planning can be rethought of as analyses that criticise the consequences of the relationship between justifications advanced by different agents to different audiences for different reasons. In other words, such analyses focus on criticising the logics of how planning operates in specific contexts, rather than what planning 'is'.

Identifying 'planning as justification' unfetters it from any association with foundational epistemologies. This is because, planning as justification is a pragmatically sensitive reflection on the act of doing things in the world that gives shape to situated practices that operate in dialogue with broader configurations of practices (Salet, 2018). Hence, there is no 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1986): all justifications are developed and deployed from perspectives

informed by needs and desires, which themselves are contoured by contextually relevant histories of thought and action (Lennon, 2017a). Thus, floating free of idealism and realism alike, as well as from the grounding principles of ideology, planning as justification is a post-foundational epistemological hypothesis leading to an ontological view that reconceives what planning 'is' without specifying how it does or ought to operate. More descriptive than prescriptive, this perspective nevertheless offers an understanding of planning that is potentially useful for those working in the discipline's various theoretical camps when reflecting on how the lens they employ could be better calibrated for greater reflexive subtlety in considering how means and ends are related in planning by the ways we think, talk and theorise.

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ⁱ An emerging, yet still comparatively smaller strand of planning theory advocates for greater attention to how planning operates (e.g. complexity theory; assemblage theory) and is more descriptive than prescriptive in orientation.

ⁱⁱ Referred to as 'polities' by Boltanski and Thévenot but as 'communities of evaluators' here to avoid confusion with the use of the word 'polity' in political science.