

What is Planning?

Introduction

I've often been asked, 'so what is "planning" anyway?' As I suspect with much of the planning fraternity, this question usually elicits a vague response about coordinating how society interacts with and within built and natural environments. To more academically attuned ears I might even venture to present the RTPI's more thought-provoking, but equally ambiguous assertion that planning is 'the mediation of space; making of place'. Neither explanation normally satisfies my interlocutor. I am thus compelled to list examples of common practitioner activities. Unfortunately, as the list lengthens so too shortens the tolerance of my quizzer as they generally fail to see how diverse activities such as transport planning, environmental assessment and community development can be legitimately held together beneath the rubric of 'planning'. If I can retain their interest a little further, I'll typically relate a litany of objectives. Somewhere in here I'll describe how planners act as facilitators who provide expert knowledge in assisting stakeholders reconcile different perspectives on a planning matter. Should I be probed on what a 'planning matter' comprises, I'm liable to find myself circling back to my initial vague response or falling onto the bureaucratic crutch of 'what is specified by policy and regulation'. Yet, we as practitioners and academics intrinsically feel that there is more to planning than this. Nevertheless, trying to somehow convey what this elusive 'more' entails is commonly a challenge. This Viewpoint offers a perspective on identifying this 'more' by attempting to answer the all-too-often uncomfortable question, 'what is planning?'

What is Planning?

The literature abounds with different conceptions of what planning involves. To properly understand them, it is necessary to appreciate the journey planning has taken as a discipline. Some trace planning's lineage to public health, some to engineering, and others to architecture. However, there is general consensus that

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modern 'planning' emerged as a response to the appalling living conditions of the late industrial revolution (Hall and Tewdwr-Jones, 2011; Cullingworth et al., 2014). Such early ideas about planning didn't differentiate it from the 'art' of design and viewed it as essentially 'architecture writ large' (Taylor, 1998: 159). This outlook conceived planning as the *designing* of blueprints for the desired state of an area. Here, planning was seen to have far-reaching control over the evolution of society's relationship with the space in which it was embedded. However, with a growing recognition of urban complexity, this morphologic and aesthetic centred view became increasingly untenable as sociological understandings of space gained academic respect (Harvey, 2010). Buoyed by the growing dominance of positivism, planning became ever more focused on 'systems' and how to scientifically evaluate and determine the optimal choice in a series of alternatives (McLoughlin, 1969). Thus, the focus of planning moved from the design of space to *mapping* and *predicting* the complex processes that shape spaces. With this move, planning shifted category from 'art' to 'science'. However, the dominance of systems thinking wasn't unanimously welcomed with several prominent thinkers on planning arguing that the preoccupation with scientific methods was losing sight of normative goals (Hirt and Zahm, 2012). Hence emerged a movement in planning that conceived planning as '*advocating*' on behalf of those who live, work and use the spaces being planned (Davidoff, 1996). This movement ultimately laid the foundations for a philosophically sophisticated drive towards bottom-up inclusion and consensus seeking in planning (Forester, 1999; Healey, 2005). Here, planning is essentially viewed as '*managing*' the decision-making process. This 'collaborative' approach ostensibly dominates planning practice today, at least in the UK and Irelandⁱⁱ.

What this very brief review of planning's evolution demonstrates is that the emergence of the discipline has taken several turns as new directions seek to correct the perceived deficiencies of contemporary practice. However, one paradigm has not simply supplanted another in a linear fashion. Rather, the previous paradigm survives, albeit generally confined to a particular subfield of the discipline. For example, the architecture informed 'art' of planning lives on in urban design, just as the 'science' of systems thrives in transport planning. Although a focus on the

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spatial dimensions of society-environment interactions seem shared across time, with so many rationalities deployed in parallel to tackle a range of different issues it seems like the rather unsatisfactory answer to the question 'what is planning' is that 'it depends on the context in which the term "planning" is being used'. Perhaps then the answer to 'what is planning' is 'that which is done by planners'! This of course begs the question 'who does planning?'

Who does Planning?

Wenger's (1998) 'Community of Practice' concept furnishes a frequently deployed approach for understanding the membership and development of a practiceⁱⁱⁱ. As such, it provides a schema for helping to identify 'who' does planning. According to this model, professional disciplines are frequently characterised by 'communities of practice' wherein membership of such a community 'implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people' (Wenger, 2012, 1). Such a domain is most often envisaged as a professional activity, such as planning (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). A community of practice is not identical with a community of interest. Rather, 'members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared 'practice'' (Wenger, 2012, 2). This shared repertoire facilitates the dissemination of information, the learning of new ways of handling particular planning problems, and assists in the cultivation of planning identities within a shared professional community (Davoudi, 2015).

Given the array of issues addressed by planning and the variety of approaches deployed by planners, it is unsurprising that identifying who may constitute planning's community of practice is not a straightforward activity. Specifically, those working in the different areas of planning may perceive themselves as having very little in common. For example, a private sector traffic planner occupied with the 'systems science' of modelling may perceive little professional commonality with a public sector community development planner focused on 'advocating' on behalf of

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a marginalised group for greater participation in decision-making. Indeed, my own experience as a practitioner and latterly as an academic suggests that it is an unfortunate consequence of administrative arrangements that even in the same local authority those formulating planning policy often have little knowledge of those engaged in development management, and vice versa. Thus, the question of 'who does planning?' may initially draw the less than elucidating answer; 'a plurality of actors'. Nonetheless, a community of practice defined by an emphasis on improving society via focusing on interactions in space and across scales seems plausible as an attribute shared by all those engaged in planning as a profession. Accordingly, replying to the question 'what is planning' may be approached by exploring the fundamental question 'why do planning?'

Why do Planning?

As noted by Campbell, 'In many respects to plan is to conceive of the future; a future, hopefully, rather better than the present but at least no worse (Campbell, 2003: 461). Hence, in seeking to create a better (or no worse) future, planning is a normative endeavour. In essence therefore, planning is an ethically informed approach to intervening in how society relates with the environment in which it is embedded. Such intervention centres on the organisation of spatial interactions in the present for the future. Consequently, what threads the various manifestations of 'planning' together across different contexts is a normative commitment to making things better via administering interactions with and within built and natural environments.

Refrain: What is Planning?

Because most people associate planning in some way with the built environment, normally when somebody asks 'what is planning', they expect a response similar to that which may be elicited by asking what is engineering or architecture. Basically, they expect a reply that is amenable to easy definition and is in some way primarily concerning with the deployment of technical knowledge. Indeed, planners themselves may wish they could supply such a definition. However, it is this

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synchronic approach to thinking about planning that provokes confusion when such a response is unforthcoming. While it is true that certain technical competencies are required to do planning, what such competencies are may vary widely depending on the context and focus of the planning activity engaged in.

As an ethically orientated activity, planning is inherently value-laden and consequently intrinsically political. Operating on this plane, planning is less about technical knowledge and more about finding ways to mobilise the wisdom garnered through experience. As such, a synchronic approach to explaining 'what is planning' risks evacuating the ethical essence of the discipline. This Viewpoint thereby argues that answering the question 'what is planning' must remain sensitive to diachronically explicating the ethical impetus lacing together the variety of planning activities across space and time. Hence, if planning is considered less of a single technical activity, and more a plurality of practices conducted in different contexts, responding to the question 'what is planning' should commence not with a list of activities, but with an explanation of what planning seeks to achieve. Therefore, these days when asked the question 'what is planning', I pause for a moment, then rephrase the question as 'why bother with planning?' This gives me a platform from which to properly answer the question.

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ⁱ This short piece was inspired by a re-reading of Ricoeur P. (1995) *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.: University of Chicago Press.

ⁱⁱ This incumbency has nonetheless been challenged by a range of different theoretical perspectives, each of which accents a different role for planning, for example see, Allmendinger P and Tewdwr-Jones M. (2002) *Planning Futures: New Directions for Planning Theory*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although widely adopted, Wenger's theory is not without its critics. See: Roberts, J. (2006) 'Limits to Communities of Practice'. *Journal of Management Studies* 43: 623-639