Planning theory and practice and the INPUT 2012 Conference

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This paper defines and discusses a tentative set of narratives concerning the INPUT 2012 Conference. Narratives refer to theoretical issues derived from the observation and analysis of significant case studies, to new and innovative ways of interpreting and implementing progressive planning, and to the question of complexity and its relationship with structuralist and post-structuralist planning theories and practices.

Introduction

What Hillier (2010) puts in evidence in the introductory essay of a Companion to planning theory can be applied to the INPUT 2012 Conference (Hillier and Healey, 2010), whose essays can be viewed as «concerned with conceptual challenges for planning theory – including concepts such as contingency, complexity, subjectivity, schemes of signification, creativity, etc. and the challenge of reconceptualizing or retheorizing planning practice – and for planning practice and its key concepts such as sustaina-
bility, multiculturalism and so on» (p. 13).

The overall view of planning theory and practice which INPUT 2012 supports is that planning is empirically-founded, and that its current theoretical issues are attempts to give foundations to planning analyses and decisions, which are important points of reference for theory since theory arises from observed practice, that is, from past and present analyses and decisions. There are two main narratives INPUT 2012 proposes in order to

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tentatively design the contemporary key concepts of planning theory: poststructuralism and complexity.

From this perspective, the INPUT 2012’s view is realistic and pragmatic, and it considers these questions as intrinsically multifaceted. This is in line with Hillier’s position, «[f]ollowing the principle of heterogeneity triggers the emergence of new ideas and prevents theories and processes solidifying or getting “locked in”» (p. 21).

In the following sections a set of possible reading perspectives concerning the Conference’s essays are presented in the form of narratives, which mainly refer to entanglement of planning theory and practice, progressive planning, and the relationship between complexity and structuralist and post-structuralist interpretive positions.

Planning theory and practice

A first narrative for the INPUT 2012 Conference refers to important issues for theory derived from planning practice, which entail discussions on:
- the meaning and role of governance with respect to planning processes (Conference Sessions on: “Innovation in spatial governance”, “From location-aware technologies to open data: toward a new urban research agenda”, and “Considering 3D in spatial planning and geo-information delivery”);
- the complex relationship of planning to politics, with particular reference to informal economies and the recognition of local cultural peculiarities (Conference Sessions on: “Trends in strategic environmental assessment”, “Urban planning and innovation potentially induced by Strategic environmental assessment”, and “Cultural heritage”);
- the interpretive approaches in planning practice, which support a relativistic view of planning analysis and interpretation, since «The subject [humanist philosophy, that is the transcendental and free-willed subject which the history and society are founded on] is a form, not a thing, and this form is not constant, even when attached to the same individual» (Huxley, 2010, p. 144), and the issue of the role of planning in contemporary urban and regional contexts: is planning an increasingly-technocratic economic and social exercise? or, is planning a social mobilization (à la John Friedmann, 1987), or an advocacy exercise in favor of the poor? (Conference Sessions on: “Urban development management”, “Sustainable development”, “Participation in planning processes”, “The spatial strategies of the Italian Regions”, and “Tools and methods for sustainability in planning processes”);
the issue of creativity in planning, viewed as an effective way to implement strategic planning, where creativity is a necessary condition for planning effectiveness (Conference Sessions on: “Spatial strategic foresight”, “Mobility, space and governance”, and “Landscape planning”).

Most of the papers emphasize that contemporary planning practices are characterized by heterogeneous technical and procedural approaches which require the attention of theory. According to Healey (2010), it is hard to derive universally-valid lessons at present, but it is worth making a robust effort to conceptualize current planning practices, paying attention to the particular contexts in which these practices arise and are shaped. A central question concerns the analysis of relations between planning, power and politics. This entails normative analyses, which include subjectivity and intentionality, and possibly a politically-active role of practitioners, and, consequently, of planning theorists who [should] not treat practices in the language of stereotypes and broad generalizations. Instead, they should be encouraged to see them as a myriad of institutional sites, with particular histories and geographies, specific power dynamics and variable capacities to promote progressive futures (Healey, 2010, p. 52).

Progressive planning

A second narrative for the assemblage of the INPUT 2012’s essays could be identified by finding ways both appealing and convincing to build a new theoretically-founded progressive planning. The most appealing conceptual issues of planning theory presented by these essays are:

- new approaches to define and analyze cities, which «can hardly be conceptualized without a physical infrastructure of buildings, streets and various conduits for the circulation of matter and energy, defined in part by their spatial relations to one another» (DeLanda, 2010, p. 251) and new approaches to analyzing and problematizing cities in contemporary planning theory are also discussed, in a vitalistic perspective, by Pløger (2010) who notes «The fact that humans are attached to the world bodily, by sensing, by memory, by experiencing and imagination, has not moved urban studies to consider vitalism and the role of its forces in the production of social spaces and forms of urbanity» (p. 327) (Conference Sessions on: “Assessment of public programs”, “Smart people in smart cities”, “Smart cities and planning in a Living-Lab perspective”, “Landscape, rural and urban planning”, and “Safer and accessible cities”);
- Planning Support Systems (PSS) and PSS modeling, which represent central nodes of the Conference’s themes;
- the interpretive uses of remote sensing, spatial data analysis and spatial
  and geo-statistics in regional and urban analysis and planning imple-
  mentation which are central themes of the Conference as well;
- the issues of the relationship between accessibility and planning, trans-
  ports and logistics, and transport planning.

Progressive planning practices can be viewed as the effective imple-
mentation of the concept of subsidiarity into planning processes².

[The attributions of functions] have to observe the principle of subsidiarity. The
majority of tasks and administrative functions should be attributed to the cities,
provinces and mountain communities, on the basis of their territorial size, and
community and organizational complexity, with the only exclusion of the functions
inconsistent with these size and complexity. Public responsibilities are also at-
tributed to the part of the public administration closest to the citizens in order to
help families, organized groups and communities to take on social tasks and func-
tions [...].

A Foresterian narrative³ shows that everything could change, if each
participant changed the way he sees the role he has to play, and if each par-
ticipant changed the way he sees the role the other should play. In particu-
lar, the fundamental point is that the regional administration should change
its attitude towards subsidiarity. It is worth quoting the definition of subsid-
iarity given by the European Union’s Glossary:

The principle of subsidiarity is defined in Article 5 of the Treaty establishing
the European Community. It is intended to ensure that decisions are taken as close-
ly as possible to the citizen and that constant checks are made as to whether action
at Community level is justified in the light of the possibilities available at national,
regional or local level [...].

The Edinburgh European Council of December 1992 issued a declaration on
the principle of subsidiarity, which lays down the rules for its application. The
Treaty of Amsterdam took up the approach that follows from this declaration in a

² Italian Law n. 59/97 titled “Law which delegates the Italian government to establish
the procedures to attribute administrative tasks and functions to the regional and local ad-
ministrations, in order to reform the public administration and to simplify the administrative
procedures”, art. 4, par. 3, lett. a.

³ An analysis is developed in the light of the lesson learned from Forester (1999). One
of the main points of Forester’s approach is that the practitioner should try to understand and
solve conflicts concerning decision-making in the public domain by favoring empathetic
dialogue between the fighting parties. Forester’s narrative is that conflictual processes can
succeed (that is, can be deliberative) if the parties start esteeming each other, and, by doing
so, try to understand and possibly appreciate the other’s point of view.
Protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality annexed to the EC Treaty. Two of the things this Protocol introduces are the systematic analysis of the impact of legislative proposals on the principle of subsidiarity and the use, where possible, of less binding Community measures.4

In other words, the principle of subsidiarity indicates that the regional and national (and of the European Union) authorities should not interfere with the administrative autonomy of the local communities as long as the local communities are willing and able to deal with and successfully govern certain matters. Urban and city planning are certainly among these matters.

From this perspective, there are two main normative points which should be kept in mind. First, the right concept of subsidiarity has to be restored in planning implementation codes. Second, planning activity has to be based on a true cooperative-planning approach so that the relations between the different sectors of the public administrations may lose their conflict-derived inefficiency.

Dissemination of information and fairness of the decision processes, which are most likely to be ensured by awareness and participation of local communities in defining and implementing public policies, are certainly important in generating the most socially desirable outcomes.

Structures and complexity

Another narrative for the INPUT 2012’s essays is that they do not reject the idea that structures matter; but they do reject theoretical approaches founded on dualistic readings of the relations between agents and structures. In other words, the substances of structures (capital, class, linguistics, etc.) and of agents are interdependent; agents can influence the substance of structures, and their behavior is not deterministically dependent on structures: causality flows both ways. Despite this general post-structuralist narrative, the conceptual challenges implied by this second narrative are various, and it is difficult for the reader not to be disoriented. The issues proposed range from new theories of the city to PSS, from case-studies concerning plan and program assessment to discussions on sustainable planning, from vitalistic interpretations of the contemporary cities to participatory planning, from innovation in spatial governance to remote sensing.

techniques, from cultural heritage to geostatistics-based models, from landscape planning to urban and regional transports, and so on. It seems that the authors of the Conference’s papers have chosen not to disguise the complex and multifaceted nature of contemporary planning theoretical approaches; but perhaps it would have been worth focusing on a more limited horizon, and giving the reader an easier way to compare different theses. The questions discussed are somewhat too heterogeneous for the reader to conduct a critical analysis of the different positions presented by the authors: too many positions, too many (rather complicated) issues.

Structuralist and post-structuralist positions are issues related to the category of complexity, which can easily be retrieved in the essays presented at INPUT 2012:
- the question of uncertainty with respect to different approaches to good governance of planning processes;
- the chaotic nature of contemporary planning processes;
- the impossibility for awareness to forecast the impacts of decisions on planning processes and the parallel consciousness that planning matters in shaping and implementing public policies;
- the fundamental importance of the virtuous intermix of theory and practice for the effective management of the unknown, that is, the outcomes of complex processes derived from the implementation of planning policies.

Notwithstanding the intrinsic problematicity of the questions at stake, the reader can easily perceive that good governance, uncertainty, forecast, and the continuous intermix of theory and practice are strictly connected to complexity. Moreover, positions on these subjects are expressed in very plain and culturally rich terms, and the meaning of some important concepts related to the context of these positions as well: that is, innovation, strategy, landscape, participation, planning support systems, sustainability, spatial analysis, environmental assessment, urban and regional mobility, transport planning, creativity, etc.. These definitions are very helpful in understanding the conceptual frameworks of these papers.

Reading the INPUT 2012’s essays in the conceptual context of complexity is not easy, since its aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of the contemporary state of the art of planning theory and practice, and to define possible narratives which may lead from practice to theory, more than the reverse. This state of the art is very complex, and it resists being identified as an ordered set of categories.
Conclusion

At first glance, the INPUT 2012 perspective on planning theory and practice does not propose any hierarchy of theories, practices and approaches. In my view, as it was for the essays of the Companion, the collected essays are a tangled assemblage of different theoretical and practical approaches, grouped with the overall purpose of indicating: i) how planning theory can effectively derive from practice; ii) how planning theory(ies) derived from practice can be set up in a post-structuralist environment; iii) how the paradigm of complexity can help interpret contemporary planning theory and practice.

The complex articulation of the INPUT 2012’s essays can be effectively read in the light of the lesson read from Bertolini’s view about uncertainty in planning (Bertolini, 2010). Bertolini proposes a taxonomy of four possible situations concerning planning in the public domain, that is planning with a high level of public awareness and participation. These situations entail four different levels of uncertainty. The lowest level of uncertainty is referred to situations characterized by a general agreement on planning goals and technology, where «the term “technology” is used here in the broad sense of “means to achieve goals”» (ibid., p. 413). If there is agreement on goals and means, there will be plenty of room for planning, and, assuming goals are properly defined and means effectively used, it is very possible that planning cycles will start, develop and end-up following linear paths, and their outcomes be assessed accordingly. Medium-level uncertainty is characterized by either disagreement on goals or lack of consensus on technology. According to Bertolini, in order to address, i) uncertainty on goals, it is worth developing bargaining processes where the public sector acts as a proactive mediator between the stakeholders involved; ii) uncertainty on means, the public sector should propose planning experiments which aim at building single parts of a not-yet defined planning plot.

The most difficult-to-deal-with condition is one of uncertainty on both technology and goals. This is chaos. The way Bertolini indicates to effectively address chaotic planning situations is derived from Cross (2007). Cross’s viewpoint is described as follows (ibid., p. 78, cited in Bertolini, cit., p. 415): «During the design [planning] process, partial models of the problem and solution are constructed side-by side as it were. But the crucial factor, the “creative leap”, is the bridging of these two partial models by the articulation of a concept […] which enables the partial models to be mapped onto each other». As a consequence, the question of irreducible uncertainty in planning should be dealt with by managing and supporting complex incremental, evolutionary and open-ended processes, where goals
are not agreed and technologies are unknown.

Since there is no hierarchy among the theories, discussions and ideas of the INPUT 2012’s essays, and since these are heterogeneous both in terms of the issues addressed and positions on similar questions, the reader may initially feel somewhat confused. However, this apparently negative impression could be considered in a positive way, because the reader could interpret this feature – this is probably the local scientific committee’s intention – as a challenge to find her/his own way to deal with the labyrinth of contemporary planning theories and practices. From this perspective, an effective way to present the INPUT 2012’s contents could be to outline some of the main points which characterize the discussion of its various topics.

While there are papers which have done an excellent job in proposing possible conceptual paths from planning practice to theory, in my view there are no essays which are effective in their treatment of the labyrinth of post-structuralist theories, whereas issues concerning the contribution of planning theory and practice to a better understanding of complexity are effectively addressed by several papers.

One of the most striking concerns which is left for future research by the INPUT 2012 Conference is how to find fascinating and convincing ways to build (from practice) a theoretical framework for a new progressive planning, even though it is not entirely clear if, and to what extent, the post-structuralist narrative could be considered interwoven with progressive planning. Definitely, an important and significant conceptual path which connects planning theory and practice is represented by complexity, both in terms of analysis and interpretation, and of policy-making.

References


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