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Conference report

The Evolution of Planning Thought Symposium

19 – 23 May 2014, Vienna University of Technology, Austria

Louis Albrechts, Rachelle Alterman, Michael Batty, Andreas Faludi, John Forester, John Friedmann, Cliff Hague, Peter Hall (via Skype), Patsy Healey, Charles Hoch, Judith Innes, Klaus Kunzmann, Peter Marcuse, Barrie Needham and Gerhard Schimak met at the Vienna University of Technology, Austria – for an entire week in May 2014. But why? All of them came to explain, with the help of their own intellectual biography, how and why they have developed theories and conceptual tools, how these conceptual tools shaped the development of practice, how these planners organised themselves increasingly at an international and global scale, and the conceptual, institutional and practical lacuna that remain to be filled. The Vienna symposium, an important milestone in the Evolution of Planning Thought book-project, took place as part of the 200 year anniversary celebrations of the Vienna University of Technology, Austria.



Figure 1: Speakers Evolution of Planning Thought Lecture Series
Source: Fang Wang

Planning ideas seen in context

Several frameworks (such as particular places, pre-conceived political frameworks and value systems, national and international networks, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, expectations from institutions, professional experiences, international developments, mega projects and events) influenced – and still influence – people to think and work in a particular direction. Therefore, unravelling the “history of planning ideas” also requires looking at the history of the person, who generated the idea as well as all the social frames which have influenced the person’s way of thinking. However, why should we care about the “history of planning ideas”? I argue that only if we understand the real purposes for which these ideas were generated (meaning ideas seen in context) can we use them to tackle contemporary challenges. If we fail in this endeavour, there is little point in using them and we will forget them over time.

Understanding the roots and the transformation of planning thought in the context of personal values and experiences as well as in relation to an ever-changing world, implies capturing the oral histories of those first generation planners who are still alive. The first generation of academic planners, the pioneers of planning with regards to planning research and education, were those who entered into their careers in the field in the 1960s and the 1970s. Though it is true that the roots of planning go back to the public health movement of the nineteenth century, as well as to the Beaux Arts, it was not until the post-war period that universities formalised and developed planning programmes.

The planning pioneers involved in this project were those who have influenced me the most, mainly through reading, in my planning education at the Vienna University of Technology, Austria. Some may argue that this is a subjective person-based selection. That is absolutely true, but it also showcases that this group of people succeeded in influencing planners outside of their home countries, either through publications in English or through conference participations. Others may argue that many other planners should have been included in this project. There is nothing to say against this, only that for capacity reasons it was not possible to work with a bigger group.

By capturing the reflections of various first generation planners, this project provides an essential understanding of what were and what are the most salient elements of the planning field, which should be valued and taken forward by current and future generations of planners. Placing oral histories into the centre of discussions allows the overall resonance of key planning ideas and major planning achievements to be understood better and doing so builds up the basis for clarifying and shaping the legacy to be taken forward. Moreover, it provides an understanding of what it means when planning theories and ideas travel from the past to the future and in particular how they can be adopted meaningfully in a different time, context and situation.

Working with embodied minds

The Evolution of Planning Thought project is set up as an inter-generational dialogue in which current and future generations’ needs and interests build up the core element of its narrative. It aims in particular to facilitate an open and transparent dialogue – at three different levels – between different generations and

cultures about where we are as planners, how we have arrived here and where we are going into the future as a community.

Firstly, this book applies an inter-generational editorial dialogue. It is edited by two young, mid-career researchers from different cultural environments (Beatrix Haselsberger [Vienna University of Technology, Austria] and Laura Saija [University of Catania, Italy]). The editors are representing the voice and interests of future planning generations in this dialogue, and are challenging their authors to come up with messages that have a resonance, interest and value beyond mere retrospective that will influence the practice into the future. An international Editorial Advisory Board composed of John Friedmann, Patsy Healey, Judith Innes and Michael Batty is representing the views of the retired or soon- to-be retired elders of the academic discipline.

Secondly, this project engages in a broader inter-generational dialogue between its authors and potential readers. In the Vienna symposium all of the planning pioneers were asked to address different audiences (such as lecture series participants, students, planning practitioners, other planning pioneers, the editors) in different settings (3 evening lectures with around 200 participants each, a world café with students and young planning professionals, 4-eyes conversations with young planners and several book-workshops involving “just” the authors and the editors). All of these events were quite a challenge for both the organisers as well as for the aging pioneers, whose average age is 74. The roundtable at the AESOP 2014 conference in Utrecht, NL, as well as the roundtable at the ACSP 2014 conference in Philadelphia, USA, turned out to be very enriching follow-up events. Now I am looking very much forward to the keynote panel discussion at the AESOP 2015 conference in Prague, CZ.

Thirdly, to make this embodied-mind knowledge accessible to as many different generations from as many different planning cultures as possible, even those who are not able to physically participate in the events, we have organised a website (<http://info.tuwien.ac.at/planning-thought>) and a twitter account (@PlanningThought).

Lessons learnt at the Vienna Symposium

The Evolution of Planning Thought symposium in Vienna was set up as a discussion and reflection platform about the past, present and future of planning. In this regard, I want to stress that it was never intended to offer a generalised “grand” theory about what planning is or should be. Considering that there are so many different takes on what planning is (deriving from context, see above), this is not only impossible, but even undesirable.

To provide the readers of *Planning Perspectives* with a limited glimpse of the richness of the discussions undertaken in Vienna, I have outlined below a few ideas/topics which emerged in one thematically focused world-café table discussion. Dr Sabrina Lai, from the University of Cagliari, Italy, one of the Planning Thought Award winners, was the host of the world café table reflecting on the impact and the role of quantitative and qualitative data within planning. With the help of her notes, the following insights are provided, which by no means provide a comprehensive picture of all the topics discussed at this table; they are rather three randomly selected examples.



Figure 2: Impressions from the world-café table hosted by the Planning Thought Award winner, Dr. Sabrina Lai
 Source: Beatrix Haselsberger

Example 1. The beginning of research is what somebody calls “empirical amazement”: Researchers become interested in something unexpected, and this is often the case with data (the number of houses unfit for residence was cited, and the person who cited it said he found it astonishing for his country). Researchers compare in their minds the numbers they come across with their expectations, and so they start wondering and investigating on the figures, on the reasons, on the consequences. That is, the unexpected data. The researcher’s expectations about them are often the very stimulus for research. However, we need a conception of the problem, or, in other words, we need qualitative reasoning to frame the quantitative model. This is because planning issues are issues that cannot simply be explained by means of numerical reasoning, and hence qualitative methods are indispensable to frame the research, to identify what information we need and how it should be processed.

Example 2. To measure is to know, or, in other words, “you don’t know something until you measure it”: Humans need numbers to make sense of their world; they need a way to superimpose an order on the world, which would otherwise be chaos and uncertainty. However, planners must be aware of the rhetoric of measurement, of the “sex appeal of numbers”, as numbers give the illusion that there is an objective truth that they are telling us, when, actually, it is the use one makes (or does not make) of numbers, statistics and maps that is important. Given that data are often a sheer reflection of vested interest, planners need to be aware of various issues when dealing with quantitative data; for instance:

- One can select which data can be presented to the audience and which should be hidden.

- One can manipulate data so that they will tell us a pre-defined story (two famous books “how to lie with statistics” and “how to lie with maps” were cited, as well as the discussion that led the European Commission to agree on the 75% GDP threshold to be eligible as an objective 1 – now convergence objective – region).
- One can misinterpret the data collected.
- One can use a wrong method leading to meaningless results (see for instance spurious correlations).
- Decision makers can decide to reject data because their evidence might contradict pre-conceived ideas.
- A lot of data are non-controlled and/or non-representative (for instance, data about crime).

Example 3. The relation between planners and quantitative data was discussed and was thought to be difficult.

- In some countries, quantitative data and methods have been rejected for such a long time that planning documents reveal major problems, from the author’s side, in understanding and explaining data and charts.
- Planners should have some literacy in dealing with numbers – but there was no agreement on how much is needed; when discussing how much importance we are giving in planning education and research to quantitative methods, grades varied between 6.5 and 7.3 out of ten).
- Planners especially need to be aware of what the assumptions behind certain methods are, how data were collected and for what purpose.
- Planners need to learn the skill of interpreting data.

The discussions and debates in the frame of the Evolution of Planning Thought symposium in Vienna very clearly brought to the fore that there exists no general valid recipe for tackling particular planning challenges. There is just the real, diverse world out there, with real people, actions and reaction. Nonetheless young planners can benefit and should learn from the wisdom of the first generation of planners. Key in this learning process is the understanding of how planning ideas can travel from the past to the future and from one country to another country. I am confident that the book, once it is on the market in 2015, will stimulate a fruitful discussion about the past and future of planning.

Notes on contributor

Dr Beatrix Haselsberger is a senior researcher at the Department of Spatial Planning of the Vienna University of Technology (Austria). In 2012, she was awarded the prestigious Hertha Firnberg Research Grant from the Austrian Science Fund for the project COMPASS (Collective Memory & Planning: Across Social Separation), Project Number: T591-G16, which she is currently carrying out. The Evolution of Planning Thought book is one of the results out of this project. Email: beatrix.haselsberger@tuwien.ac.at