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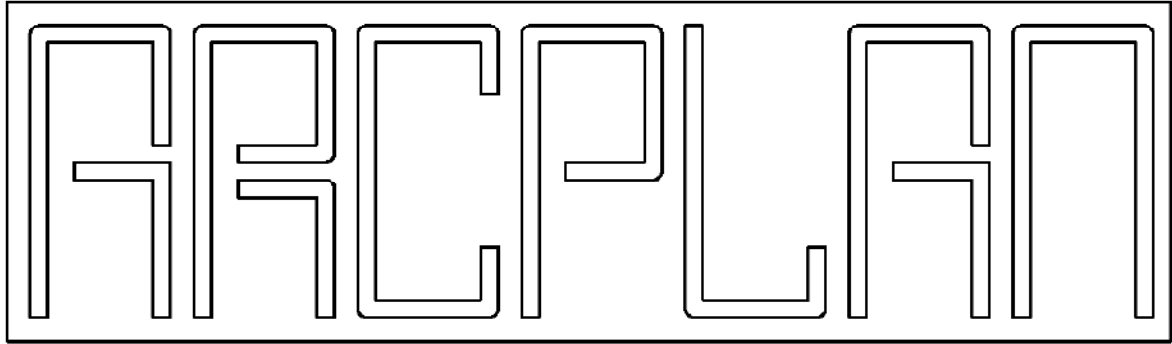
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Planning Knowledge: A regional perspective in the era of Globalisation

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The local and the global in the development of planning knowledge

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Abstract

This essay attempts to stimulate debate among planners in academia and practice, particularly in the context of the Arab World, about the range of knowledge required to develop the profession of planning in the region. It thus discusses the development of planning knowledge between the specificity of contingent practice with a particular geography and history, and the globally, more universal resources. Subsequently, the paper challenges the global planning intellectual community to bring more attentiveness towards locally situated planning practices in a way that allows the growth of planning knowledge beyond importing foreign 'concepts and practices', through 'reflexive' critical thinking. This challenge does not involve developing 'canons' of knowledge transfer that expects a 'universal' planning practice, but rather a critical questioning of the assumptions underpinning planning. This paper kindles such debate through six sets of questions: the idea, and tools of planning, dynamics of development, the wider context, planning expertise and education. In conclusion, it promotes this exercise of 'questioning', experimenting with planning knowledge and knowledge transfer, rather than awkwardly applying general concepts to the particularities of diverse planning practices.

The global and the particular

In this essay, I hope to stimulate debate about the range of knowledge which needs to be developed to meet the challenges of planning work in the specific contexts of the Arab world. Does this just involve adapting the body of knowledge developed globally or does a distinctive body of knowledge need to be developed for different parts of the world?

These days, we academics increasingly live in an apparently global intellectual community, sharing our ideas, research and teaching programs at conferences and in journals (Jasanoff, 2012). We draw on concepts, datasets and narratives from many different parts of the world. Yet in our field we are also encouraged to recognise that planning activity consists of distinct practices, each situated in specific circumstances with a particular geography and history (Campbell, 2006). Our universities, though sharing some common features, each have distinctive features, reflecting local and regional contexts. While some of our students will end up working in international circuits, most will provide the professional personnel for municipal planning offices and consultancies, working on development plans, creating projects and doing regulatory work in places embedded in local cultures and practices. How then to draw on global knowledge resources in our field, while grasping local dynamics? When should such resources be rejected as embodying ideas and practices alien to local culture and traditions? What alternative resources need to be accumulated in such contexts, and what messages for the global planning intellectual community does this effort teach us?

These questions are currently actively debated within the global planning academic community. A few years ago, I discussed the general issue of the 'universal' and 'contingent' elements of planning knowledge. What travels "well" and what is contingent on situational specifics? (Healey, 2012). This drew on a collection of papers on what happened when planning concepts "travelled" from one situation to another (Healey & Upton, 2012). For

some time now, papers in the academic planning literature have been highlighting the adverse consequences of importing concepts from dominant discourses into circumstances quite different from the imaginations of those promoting them. Watson (2009) argues that 'planning theory' with a 'South' perspective needs to be developed to challenge the 'North' (That is to say North American and Western European dominance of global planning discourses).

Getting it wrong

As the critics of Western hegemony point out, the history of planning endeavours is full of examples where planning concepts relevant to one situation have been imported inappropriately into a very different situation. For example, Fawaz and Moumtaz (2017) discussed how the concept of individualised property rights articulated in planning concepts originating from France was imposed on the communal land ownership traditions of rural Lebanon. Vidyarthi (2010) describes the introduction of the American neighborhood unit into urban planning in post-independence India. Presented as a universal design for all housing, it was soon appropriated just by the affluent. Perera (2010) reports on his struggles as young local expert to insert a local perspective into a major regional development project in Sri Lanka.

In the Arab world, regimes of planning law have been imported from France and the UK as part of the post-WW1 colonial package, with little attention to longstanding systems of land and property allocation, as Fawaz and Moumtaz (2017) point out. Housing schemes assuming mid 20th century ideal Western nuclear families have been constructed in places where households are composed of much more complex arrangements of family obligations and with different customs related to the internal organization of a dwelling. Sometimes it has been powerful leaders who have adopted grandiose Western models of urban development,

clearing city centres of poorer people¹. More recent examples include the adoption of 'urban regeneration' models driven by private sector developers and real estate speculation. Marketed as creating modern built forms in old harbour and industrial areas, such projects have often displaced poor people directly, or by gentrification of the areas around them. In the global literature, such practices have led to a general criticism of 'neo-liberal' urban development projects. Yet probing into the particularity of such projects in different parts of the world suggests that what is going on, who gains and who benefits is much more complex than such broad generalizations suggest.

If the global planning intellectual community takes up the challenge of being much more attentive to the situatedness of planning practices, perhaps the mistakes of the past will not be repeated. Yet there is a vigorous global flow of planning knowledge – of modes of analysis, designs, techniques and methods of evaluation and regulation, which flow through the 'circuits of knowledge and power' (Roy, 2010) that flow globally. These circuits are formed through professional networks and aid agencies, through planning consultancies which operate internationally, through the academic journals which are still dominated by western-based scholars (Kong & Qian, 2017), through the role of Western planning schools in developing programs in other parts of the world, and the flow of planning academics and students trained in the West and then returning home. It is not the circuits themselves which are the problem here, but the lack of critical thinking about the assumptions underpinning planning concepts and the algorithms built into planning techniques. Within our globalized planning intellectual community there are valuable resources to encourage such critical thinking, from Donald Schon's emphasis on 'reflexive practice', continually probing what lies behind the surface of problems and ideas (Schon, 1983), to Michel Foucault's proposal that we 'excavate' the conceptions, assumptions and habits which condition (or 'discipline') prevailing practices (Rabinow, 1984). This is not such an easy habit to develop. In developing it, it helps to travel outside one's own taken-for-granted world. In the next section, I reflect on some experience from my own biography².

Experiencing 'elsewhere'

After a few years in planning practice in a municipal planning office in London, I started a PhD in which I hoped to explore how planning ideas influenced the process of 'urban change' (Healey, 2017)³. Through the turn of fortune, I was able to explore this idea empirically in the then rapidly urbanizing contexts of Venezuela and Colombia. I prepared for this experience by reading a great deal about planning, about 'development' and about the history and geography of this part of the world. Through this reading, I was already prepared to challenge the then dominant notions of development as a linear progress to economic prosperity and liberal democracy⁴. But I did not know when I started out what I needed to know. Latin-America was about as far away as I could get from my own British background. Venezuela at the time was a lively young oil-rich democracy, full of hope for its future, and building apace. The high end of this building effort was influenced by US real estate development concepts, with which I was quite unfamiliar at the time. Perhaps 50 % of urban development in terms of housing provision was achieved through a squatting process, creating what these days we often refer to in the literature as 'informal' development, because it does not comply with formal law. The national government was attempting to build housing opportunities for workers' but built many fewer homes than the vigorous squatters who were skilled in land invasion practices and in making use of physical and political networks. I encountered not just one stream of western ideas, but several, carried by different circuits of 'trade and aid'. Each had different conceptions of what planning meant and how urban development should be managed. Each connected to different groups of local professionals, which exacerbated local co-ordination problems.

From this experience, I learned that there were different ways in which land could be urbanized, each with a particular nexus of actors and resources, and that there were different ways in which 'planning' was conceived and practiced, insights which have shaped my thinking ever since. This led me to look much more carefully and critically at how

development and planning were practiced in my own country. The experience helped me to look into the world I had come from more as an 'outsider' looking in. What structured the institutionalized cultures of practice in which planning work in Britain was given meaning and had material effects? How far was this changing as planners and others was challenged such ways of going on? This attitude of critical reflection was especially helpful in the 1990s, when many of us planning academics in Europe began to meet up and undertake joint research projects. Coming from different parts of Europe and different national cultures, we had to learn to 'excavate' our different cultural, institutional and professional assumptions and practices, and locate them in the contexts which gave rise to them. Our legal traditions are different, as are the distribution of power and resources between levels of government, attitudes to towns and 'nature', the professional formation of those who do planning work and the respect in which academics and professionals are held in the society. These all affect what is understood by 'planning', 'planners' and a 'planning system.'

It is never possible to stand completely outside one's own background, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued many years ago (Geertz, 1983). However hard I try to explain my background, I can never see all that someone from elsewhere might see. Even now, the essay style in which I am writing these reflections comes from a particular Western tradition, and my rather long sentences, discursive presentation of argument and use of the first person to present my thoughts comes from a literary style rather than a more formal scientific style. The references I use reflect what I remember and the material I have been reading recently. My book Collaborative Planning (1997), which has come to occupy a symbolic place in the 'global' story of 'planning theory,' is deeply positioned within the particular challenges of my own country, with its imperial past and hyper-centralized government arrangements⁵. Translating from English into another language (and vice versa) inevitably means some loss of meaning.

Learning from others through probing questions

My experience suggests that the challenge of understanding and practicing planning is greatly enriched by sharing experiences from different contexts. But our objective in such sharing should not be to develop some 'canon' of tenets, techniques and good practice, which we can carry about from place to place in our professional store of knowledge. Instead, we should consider ourselves as sharing a set of debates about challenging questions which recur in our field. There may be no definitive answers to such questions but honing our thinking about them should help in probing the specific realities in which we do our research, practice and teaching. The following questions give a suggestion of what I have in mind. Readers may consider refining or challenging them, from experiences in another part of the world. In this short essay, I can only sketch brief thoughts about them.

There is no order of importance to the questions, as in any situation all are likely to come into play. I organize them into six sets. The first relates to the idea of planning itself; the second to the tools of planning work; the third to the dynamics of development which planning work seeks to shape, manage and/or regulate; the fourth to the wider context of this development effort; the fifth to expertise in the planning field; and finally, the sixth focuses on the challenge of teaching such expertise.

The idea of planning

As any review of planning theory shows, as a global 'community of inquirers' in our field, we cannot agree on what we mean by 'planning' (Healey, 2012). Yet in much of our literature, we refer to 'planning' and 'planners' as if the meaning was perfectly clear. Some claim that planning is a general activity, which we all engage in, or at least all governance agencies. John Friedmann argued that planning was about the application of knowledge to action in the public domain (Friedmann, 1987).

Others consider planning to be what a formal 'planning system' and those who operate it do (Faludi, 1973). Others again see planning as a form of 'place governance,' in which many people may have a role⁶. Wrapped up in these debates are questions about the purposes and values embedded in the idea of planning, the focus of planning activity as practiced, how this affects who does planning work, and who is expected to and actually does gain and lose from planning activity. In the Arab world, what is understood by planning in different countries and how does this idea get translated into practices? How far is the idea itself seen as an external colonial imposition and how far a valuable tool for promoting better futures, for whom and how?

The tools of planning work

Since even within the global discourse there is no settled meaning for the planning idea, generalizing across contexts about the instruments used to do planning work might seem an impossible and inappropriate task. Yet if we assume the planning idea focuses in some way on shaping ongoing development processes to pursue the interests of a collectivity of some kind, we can discuss the 'typical' instruments used in such work. A great deal of attention has been given over the years to the form and processes of making 'development plans', from zoning plans and master plans, to broad development strategies. These relate to situations where the agency undertaking such planning work expects to guide indirectly how development unfolds. There is some overlap between this kind of tool and the production of 'project plans'. Here the planning agency expects to have much more control over the actual development process, and as a result can engage in details of the programming and financing of development, as well as its purposes and design. Then there are instruments for regulating the ongoing flow of investment in maintenance and change. There are also many ideas about how to manage the interaction between all the parties (stakeholders)⁷ whose concerns are necessary for, or affected by, the actions proposed and pursued through planning work. Finally, there is an array of techniques for evaluating performance. There is a considerable literature in our field which seeks to compare instruments across

different contexts, but typically this is focused around a specific meaning of planning, for example the comparisons of spatial planning systems in the EU Compendium (CEC, 1997) or of approaches to development exactions in land use planning systems across the world (Alterman, 1988). A specific focus is needed in order to take account of the different institutional contexts in which particular instruments are developed and deployed. But there might also be some merit in linking the discussion within the planning field to that in the fields of policy science, policy analysis and public administration. For example, regulating land use and development change is a key task of many spatial planning systems. How often do we compare the approach to regulation developed for this purpose to other regulatory activity, as with financial regulation, 'health and safety' concerns or traditional communal arrangements for managing how land is used and developed?

Development dynamics

How, in our field, do we address the relation between the 'object' of planning, and the 'subject' or agency of planning? The history of thought in our global planning discourse shows that this has been a contested issue for many years. Back in the mid 20th century, the planning agency was taken to be an all-powerful government which could control development, whether of the national economy, regions or cities, or the detailed development of plots of land. Although there have been some times and places where this could be said to happen⁸, mostly development happens through multiple forces, of which formal government and planning agencies may be only one. This implies that those involved in the planning field need some understanding of these multiple forces and their evolving dynamics. Once again, each situation will be different. But we need some concepts or analytical frames through which to grasp specific development dynamics. This is where global discussion about how to understand urban and regional development dynamics is particularly helpful, especially these days when the spatial reach of so many relationships relevant to particular places may stretch to many other places and parts of the world. It alerts us to the recurrent issue of who gains and who loses, but also to the possibility of alternative ways of promoting place

development.

The wider socio-political and environmental context

Paying some attention to global planning discourse is even more important. These days it is hard to avoid recognition that our little local “worlds” are tied into a planetary world where the environmental conditions of existence are changing rapidly around us, partly through human action. The cultural and political worlds which provide the specific institutional context for any planning work in practice do not exist in isolation from each other. Nor are they static. Influences from outside are continually being woven into the evolving concepts and practices in any place management and development work. This means it is helpful to look at global discourses to become aware of ideas and techniques in circulation which may come to land in our specific situation. It also means, as with development dynamics, that it is worthwhile engaging with global debate about the different ways the relation plays out between the planning agency and the wider socio-political context in which it is positioned. This helps to develop the reflexivity that enables us to see, in a particular situation, what are the opportunities and limits for particular kinds of action and direction. The challenge is to absorb the global debate without being blinded, trapped by the blinkers of some internationally fashionable idea.

Who does planning?

Back in the early 1970s, two influential contributors to the emerging corpus of planning theory presented two different views of who did planning work. For Andreas Faludi (1973), this involved expertise of the kind which only those trained in a particular way could perform. John Friedmann (1973) came to a different conclusion. If planning was about ‘societal guidance’ – shaping urban and regional futures – then many people and many forms of knowledge were involved in this process. Only some were trained professionals in promoting and managing development. The tension between the professional planner and everyone else who cares about and gets involved in place development in some way

continues to reverberate in debates in our field, particularly in the discussion of consultation and participation processes. No plan, project or even regulatory judgement can be made in many planning systems these days without some effort to consult 'stakeholders' and to provide opportunity for public comment. But what do we mean when we use these terms? What does a trained planning expert bring to the process, compared to all the other experts he or she has to interact with? And who exactly is 'the public' in question (Inch, 2015). And does a citizen protest group also do 'planning work' (see Legacy, 2017)? These days, there are no settled answers to such questions. Each context will have a distinct configuration. Yet raising the questions is an important contribution of global planning discourse.

Learning to be a planning professional

How do all these troubling questions affect the design and delivery of our teaching programs and of any subsequent education and training opportunities offered to practitioners? While we may ourselves be involved in research and practice, our core role in academia is to pass on our knowledge to the next generation of practitioners and academics. Even though our university situations are likely to be very varied, maybe we all are faced with many challenges as we think about our role and practice as teachers. Do we just teach modules and course units which we are assigned by our departmental head, or do we look critically at how our assigned unit fits into an overall program structure, and maybe as a result seek to change that? Do we focus on fostering students' capacities for critical reflection on planning and development, or do we seek to prepare them to "fit" into concepts and practices? Do we make sure that they are well-grounded in global discourses about our field, so that they can work and study elsewhere with more confidence, or do we insist that they learn through detailed engagement with the specific particulars of our own country and its planning practices and challenges? And how do we think about the composition of our student body, which maybe includes people from multiple countries and with multiple experiences of urban and regional situations?

Enriching local knowledge

Towards the end of the 1970s, I began to look in detail at the practices of local plan-making in England. I read and analyzed a great number of plans, and eventually published the results in a book with the prosaic title *Local Plans in British Land Use Planning* (1983).

This sounds very specific, though it should have been more so, as the plans were all from England. The publishers were uncertain if the book would sell⁹ and wanted me to develop the implications for readers outside Britain. I thought about this and added a short section at the very end. I stressed that the form and content of the British planning system, though parts of it have been exported to former colonies, was “historically specific to Britain in the second half of the 20th century.” I therefore encouraged “skepticism about the relevance to anywhere else of any method or procedure developed in the British context” (p. 285).

I still think it is really important that we planning researchers devote careful and deep attention to the specific practices of the everyday world of planning practices which surround us, especially where these are not yet well-researched. So long as we keep our critical antennae attuned to what shapes these practices in a particular way and how these forces are evolving, we can avoid some of the interpretive domination coming not just from the global academic discourse in our own field, but from other sectors of our own societies. For example, these days the development industry and the popular media in my country propagate a strong anti-planning myth, which rarely stands up to careful research inquiry. We therefore have a role as intellectuals to understand exactly how plan-making, project development and regulatory practices evolve in particular circumstances, and what their influence and impacts are likely to be. And we have to convey that understanding to those ‘re-forming’ the tools and practices of planning systems or designing urban regeneration interventions and environmental management projects. This means publishing in media which such actors read, in a language and style which is accessible to them.

But following this trajectory of local engagement, as researchers and policy advisers, is time-consuming as we get enmeshed in local details and local networks. Have we anything then to say to a wider academic audience, whether part of a regional academic intellectual community (as we have had in Europe through AESOP, and which maybe this new journal will help to foster in the Arab world) or to the global planning discourse? I have found this a continual challenge in my own work, even today, when I am trying to think who in our 'global' academic community might be interested in my recent intense experiences of local development where I now live. My answer usually goes something like this. What exactly is the question I am interested in, and why might other researchers elsewhere be interested in it? What frames of analysis do I find useful to make sense of what I am doing, what I am suggesting to others, and what I am telling others about 'what is going on here'? Who elsewhere is interested in such frames, and does my experience have any comment to make back to them? With such questions in mind, I can find wider support to help my local work and make contributions to these wider discussions. That is hopefully a key role for this new journal and will also inspire more contributions from planning academics in Arab contexts which not only challenge and enrich planning ideas and practices in this part of the world, but also challenge and enrich global planning discourses.

From probing questions to locally innovative solutions

My argument in this brief essay is that intellectual inquiry and practice in our field needs to develop through continual critical interaction between detailed knowledge of particular circumstances and the wider discussion of such experiences. If we immerse ourselves too much in the particular, we may fail to see the challenges and opportunities arriving over the horizon. If we spend our time globally with just a broad and wide-angle lens¹⁰, our generalizations will ring hollow. But maintaining a critical tension between the wide angle and the micro-focused lens is never easy. It demands not just the translation of concepts and vocabulary from one domain to another. It may also involve inventing whole new analytical schema to capture dimensions neglected in global planning discourses drawing explicitly or

implicitly on quite other situations.

Current thinking in our field is much more helpful to this critical effort than it used to be. There is more emphasis these days on the importance of situated experiences. Planning intervention is presented less as a piece of technology to insert in ongoing relations of place governance to fix specific problems. Instead, it is considered by many as a practice of continual innovative experiment, to explore what really is the problem, whose problem it is and what kinds of intervention might make a difference and for whom (Balducci et al., 2011). Probing questions work well in helping to define the possibilities (and impossibilities) for such experimentation. In contrast, imported technologies and best practice solutions tend to be 'awkward fits' into the reality of any particular situation.

So, I hope this new journal will become a forum for exchanging experiences and honing skills in thinking innovatively - not just about how to address particular local problems, but about the kinds of concepts and analytical approaches which are helpful in probing the particularities of this part of the world. I anticipate that the readership will reach out to practitioners and well as academics just because it is in the language which most people use. I hope too that now and again, some of the intellectual energy that builds up through such discussion is translated back to enrich global planning academic discourse. I look forward to the development of this new intellectual forum in our field.

Notes

1. See examples in Nasr and Volait, 2003.
2. See Healey 2017 for an expanded autobiography ..
3. This was of course a hugely vague and ambitious project, which had to be narrowed down.
4. The Marxist ideas of Andre Gunther Frank were particularly influential in critical Latin American development ideas at the time (Frank, 1967).
5. Yet many readers seem to have found it useful in opening up horizons of thought relevant in other contexts.
6. I take this last position (Healey, 2010)
7. This term has come into general use in Anglophone public policy discussion in recent years. It sometimes refers to specific agencies which need to be involved in specific decision areas. Or it may refer to all those who have a 'stake' in something (a service, an area) about which a decision is to be made.
8. Examples where the national state controlled the flow of resources included, in theory, the USSR. See also Britain during World War II. Some cities have also had significant control over resources through their local tax base and ownership of urban land (for example, Amsterdam and Stockholm in Europe and Hong Kong in China).
9. Actually, it did quite well!
10. This metaphor of a camera with a wide angle and a more focused lens comes from Etzioni, 1967.

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