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Editorial

Or is it Learning?

Going through the contributions of this issue, I am struck by the fact that the word “planning”, while abundantly used as a noun, is hardly, if ever, used as a verb. I’ve traced the word’s usage through articles, Interface, and reviews, and found abundant references to planning systems, contexts, cultures, traditions, circumstances, and situations. There is a planning profession and planning work, a planning community, and a planning world. There are planning practices, processes, initiatives, efforts, exercises, endeavours, interventions, actions, experiments, outcomes, not to mention less grandiose planning stories, experiences, and cases. There are planning organizations, agencies, departments, authorities, offices, services and consultancies. There are planning practitioners, professionals, consultants, academics, scholars, students, and there are planning directors, managers, lawyers, and specialists. There are planning agendas, matters, needs, issues, problems, policies, strategies, approaches, objectives, choices, decisions, schemes, instruments, components, routines, outputs, regulations, requirements, laws, applications, permissions, and meetings. There is planning change and there are planning reforms. There is also a planning vocabulary, theory, methodology, research, discourse, history, and literature, and a planning responsibility, comprising ethos, expertise, guidance, and advice. There are even planning instincts.

In short, we hear an awful lot about the noun “planning”, but very little about the verb, planning as an activity. The dictionary does not help much either. According to Merriam-Webster, “planning” is “the act or process of making or carrying out plans”, and a plan is a “method for achieving an end”. But what does this “act or process” entail in concrete terms? What is this “method” actually about?

If one takes a second, less superficial look at the articles in this issue with this question in mind, a thread does emerge, and, perhaps surprisingly, it is a rather clear and consistent one. For these authors, the answer to the question “What does planning mean, as an activity?” lies in the word “learning”, which plays a central role in several contributions and a more implicit one in others. But this leads to more questions: who learns what, and why? What, precisely, is the role of planners in this process?

Let us get a yet closer look. In the first article, Gazzola, Jha-Thakur, Kidd, Peel, and Fischer focus on “organizational” learning. They show how the capacity of a planning organization to learn is essential if it is to be able to deal with complex environmental issues in a progressive, transformative way. In particular, they show by means of an Italian case study how not just the external, formal context but also the internal, informal context of the organization—its culture, and the internalization of this culture by the individuals that belong to it—is important.

In the second article, Steele again puts learning centre stage. For her, “institutional” learning is an essential precondition for achieving a turn towards sustainable development. Citing work by Dovers, she contends that “one day sustainability might ... realise its potential to integrate social, environmental, and economic aspirations ... but that will not occur if we do not create the basic institutional capacity.” For Steele, institutional learning is

needed to build that capacity. Her paper introduces an analytical framework for research on the topic, which revolves around the three notions of problem re-framing, governance re-organization, and transformative change and learning. Her Australian case study documents the struggle to achieve sustainable development in planning institutions as they are currently configured.

In the third article, Lissandrello and Grin follow this theme, but zoom in on the micro-dynamics of transformative learning processes towards sustainable development. The key concept in their account, taken from Beck, is “reflexivity”, or the learning process through which one recognizes that moving towards a desired future implies first and foremost “a creative reconfiguration of the present.” In the face of complex sustainability challenges similar to those discussed by the preceding articles, the involvement of a variety of actors and perspectives is critical and the Dutch case study used by the authors shows particularly well what the role of the planner (both as practitioner and researcher) in such a process might be. In their own words, “our work as intellectuals, academics, and reflexive planners has been to *structure* a context for critical knowledge about the future—through multiple actors—and to encourage individual agents in imagining, desiring, and assuming an active role in structuring present and future trajectories” (emphasis in original). It is a facilitating and enabling role, where the learning of others is key.

The fourth article, by Harris and Thomas, looks at planning from the perspective of its users, who are currently being defined in the UK as the “clients, customers and consumers” of “planning services”. While the theme of learning is less explicit here than in other papers, it nonetheless has a critical role to play, being central to the authors’ contention that planning is something that non-planners involved in development have actively to learn, and not a given ability or obvious aptitude, as some might think. Such learning, Harris and Thomas conclude, has to be proactively facilitated, if the notion of a “user” of a “service” is to be more than empty rhetoric, in other words, if it is to have the capacity to lead to true empowerment.

In the fifth and final article, Rauws and De Roo shift the focus from planning organizations, institutions, processes, and services to the very objects of spatial planning, i.e. places. Learning is not an explicit theme in their contribution. However, their characterization of spatial transformation in rural–urban landscapes as a complex, largely unpredictable and uncontrollable process is a powerful reminder of the need for planners to keep learning about what they can do in this process (which might be relevant), but also what they cannot do (which is often decisive). Furthermore, this contribution draws attention not so much to planners’ own learning, but rather to the need to facilitate the learning of many others, who form a multiplicity of actors involved in the shaping of place.

Anyone who wants to understand what this facilitating learning might entail, and what it might bring about, will find deeply revealing clues in this issue’s *Interface*, edited by John Forester and dedicated to the work of architect-planner Lawrence Sherman. Even just this sentence, drawn from Sherman’s own reflections about his work (which form a main ingredient of the *Interface* section in this issue) feels like a revelation: “I’m *facilitating*—I’m not designing the hospital yet—I’m mediating their attempts to resolve *their* issues” [emphasis in original]. And there is much, much more, so much in fact that it is difficult not to agree with the editor’s conclusion, that “Sherman ... attends ... to the subtle enabling roles of designers and planners who hope not just to listen but to create, not just to solve problems but to solve the right problems, not just to make convenient agreements but to satisfy real and diverse interests.”

Let us now go back to the questions that prompted this brief review of the contributions to this issue, and point to some of the answers emerging. Who learns? What do they learn, and why? And what, precisely, is the role of planners in this process?

Who learns? The answer is both straightforward and challenging. All those involved in planning have to learn. They have to learn in the first place as individuals, as “people”. However, if real, robust change is to be achieved, individual learning is not enough: it must be translated into the transformation of planning organizations and institutions. The arrangement is reciprocal: organizations and institutions with an ingrained learning culture and an adaptive attitude are an essential breeding ground for the learning processes of individuals. Planners should keep learning too, of course, but more importantly, they must facilitate the learning of others, as is beautifully conveyed by the Sherman Interface.

What is being learnt? Again, the Sherman Interface offers a precious clue, and one echoing many planning classics (just think of Rittel and Webber’s “wicked problems”): above all, planning must learn what the problem really is, and what actions might be required to cope with it. Neither question is easy, and neither can be finally settled, and yet some shared understanding of both is needed if common action is to be undertaken. In the words of Lissandrello and Grin, a key element of this learning is the identification of the particular “creative reconfiguration of the present” that is required by a certain desired future.

Why is it being learnt? Quite simply, because the challenges societies and places are confronted with cannot be addressed by any single actor or rationality alone, and because not learning would mean accepting what Lissandrello and Grin call, following Beck, the “dominance of the past”, that is, the constraints and possibilities offered by current institutions which, we know, are often not sustainable.

And what is the role of planners in this process? The essence has been reiterated a few times already, and does not need new discussion: it is facilitating the learning process. It is a complex role, and one which requires much skill and dedication. For the details, I urge you to go and read the contributions in this issue. All articles have something to say on this, and the Sherman Interface is particularly rich in its insights.

I am left with one last thought. While writing this Editorial, I started wondering whether the word “planning” is still the right term to use. Whatever the answer, the realization that what those engaged in “planning” do, is increasingly, perhaps even ideally, to facilitate the learning of others, could, or perhaps even should provide more focus to our teaching, research, and practice efforts.

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