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Editorial

Planning, the political in the everyday

Along with many others, I am deeply troubled by the development trajectory that most, if not all, world nations and cities still seem firmly to be on. The dangers of the ever-growing claims that our mode of development makes on the limited resources of the planet get lip service at best. The same fate applies to the increasing gap our mode of development digs between those having more than they need and those having much less than enough. I was once again, and painfully, reminded of this during the recent national election campaign in the Netherlands, where the sole concern of all parties seemed to be how to get the country back on the economic growth path as we knew it. Not even the possibility of a different economic growth was debated. Once again, the only concern of our political leaders and much of the electorate seemed to be that of how to get us “back to shopping”; as if the questions raised by the present crisis do not go any deeper; as if they are not also about what we should aim at (is it shopping or well-being?), and at what cost (at all costs?). We all seem to be victims of some form of mass denial. But what has this to do with planning? A lot, I think, and more than many of us would be comfortable acknowledging.

In a *Planning Theory & Practice* editorial not long ago (in volume 12, issue 4) Libby Porter lamented the neoliberal addiction in which planning seems to be ensnared, and made a passionate plea for planning that acknowledges its intrinsically political nature and overtly addresses the antagonistic implications this brings to it. In another of this journal’s previous editorials (in volume 13, issue 4) Aidan While made a step in that direction and asked planning critics to start questioning the “growth obsession” at least as forcefully as they have been doing with the notion of “sustainable development”. I share their concerns and subscribe to their appeals. I think it is not just a matter of social responsibility, but of planning’s utter relevance. However, it is a direction that also opens up the question of how exactly planning must and can be political. Or in other words, is there a way of being political that is specific to planning? As a contribution to this much needed discussion, I will make and articulate three claims here: (1) planning is, above all and foremost, about the everyday, (2) the everyday is, now more than ever, deeply political, and (3) only engaging with the everyday, and engaging politically, can planning be relevant.

My first claim is that planning is, above all and foremost, about the everyday. This is because planning is, above all and foremost, about shaping spatial conditions for the everyday life of people. It may do so directly, by designing and implementing alterations of the physical environment. These, by definition, will result in spatial possibilities and constraints to individual practices: facilitating some lives, making other lives more difficult, or even impossible. The development of highways, central business districts and residential suburbs made the everyday life of some easier, that of others more difficult. The same applies to any spatial intervention, including what we nowadays might deem “progressive”. Again, it will inevitably favor the everyday practices of some, and hamper those of others. Planning may shape conditions for the everyday also in more indirect and subtle, but no less influential ways by regulating the use of the physical environment: for instance by allowing particular forms of work in some places and not in others. Even more indirectly and subtly, planning can shape the physical environment by selectively directing public attention towards some issues instead of others, by involving some in the ensuing debates instead of others, and by framing the process through which those involved can identify problems and explore solutions. Scores of planning studies analyze how all these different influences of planning on the

physical environment, and of the physical environment on everyday practices, may unfold. This is the heart of planning knowledge, if there is one.

The matter here is that, be it directly or indirectly, blatantly or subtly, this shaping of the physical environment always involves a huge responsibility, with overwhelming political and ethical implications. The political implications are that spatial constraints to everyday individual practices amount to an implicit, but nevertheless extremely powerful message. More and less *possible* practices also, implicitly but no less powerfully, become more and less *desirable* practices. The ethical implications are also overwhelming; *desirable* practices are, in fact, also *legitimate* practices, others are not, or not as much. Using a designated commercial space as a shop and a residential space as a home is made possible, and thus desirable and legitimate. Sleeping in a grocery store and running a restaurant from a home are not. Travelling miles to access a job or a retail outlet is made possible, and thus implicitly desirable and legitimate, whatever the environmental or social costs. Working and shopping in one's own residential neighborhood are made impossible for many, and thus implicitly undesirable and illegitimate, even if it might be environmentally more efficient and socially more inclusive. To be clear, there might be good reasons for all of these choices, but my point is that they are still also political and ethical choices, not just technical; they allow some lives and exclude others.

My second claim is that the political and ethical implications of planning constraints to the everyday are today deeper than ever. Few would contest that the present patterns of everyday life in developed countries and cities are in the long term not compatible with the limited resources of the planet. And yet, the fact that they are facilitated embodies the message that they are also desirable and legitimate, whatever the claims to the contrary. Furthermore, it makes them de facto a possible, desirable and legitimate aspiration in developing countries and cities. This is an extremely powerful message, and one which apparent consensus on the environmental risks this implies, or even international agreements to try and cope with these risks, can do little to affect. Similarly, we know that making the everyday life of developed countries and cities possible – or, for that matter, bringing the everyday life of at least some in developing countries and cities to similar levels – might translate into a widening of the gap between the privileged and the unprivileged, those enjoying and those suffering the everyday. There is also increasing evidence that, at least beyond a certain level, there is no relationship between well-being and the material wealth which often seems the only measure of the quality of the everyday. And yet, the physical environment keeps by and large sending the message that the everyday life of developed countries and cities is possible, thus desirable, thus legitimate. Again, there is no informal declaration or formal contract that can match the power of such a message. The ethical implications are overwhelming. How much do we weigh the comfortable everyday of some against the struggling everyday of others, now and in the future? Is an everyday that requires suffering elsewhere or risks collapse in the future morally acceptable? But also and more positively, which everyday choices do people really need for their well-being? Is this also the everyday choice that the spatial order is making possible, and thus indicating as desirable and legitimate? Why not? How could it?

My third and last claim is that only by engaging with the everyday, and engaging politically, can planning be relevant. Both terms – both “everyday” and “political” – are important. Most, if not all human activities can be seen as political, but specific to planning is that it is political because it conditions everyday practices through the shaping of the spatial order. Planning and related disciplines (such as human geography, civil engineering, or architecture) have developed an impressive body of knowledge about how a spatial order may be constructed, and about how it may affect everyday practices. This is in many respects unique knowledge that others cannot give. Crucially, it is also knowledge that, when effectively shared, can empower not only planners, but also all others, to be more political in their own everyday choices. Three main responsibilities seem to derive from this. First, planning has to help create more room for individual choice in the

physical environment, so that more people can choose their own everyday. Second, it has to help raise the awareness that individual everyday choices might have implications for the everyday of others, in different places or in different times. Third, planning has to help find concrete ways to make individual freedom and the freedom of others spatially compatible. There is a lot we know already about what might be needed, both in terms of the sort of physical order and in terms of the sort of process to get there. There is also a lot we do not know yet, and that we must discover. I think it would greatly strengthen our position if we were more explicit about the political and ethical implications of the choices along the way. Not doing so, choosing to conceal rather than reveal these implications, might give us immediate gratification and apparent consensus. It would, however, not get us closer to addressing the issues that society urgently needs to deal with. And, I am afraid, this negligence would, sooner or later, turn on us by making planning redundant.

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