Obstacles for change in Northern European planning. Planners' Paradise lost in modernist Thought?

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# Obstacles for change in Northern European planning.

# Planners' Paradise lost in modernist Thought?

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## Introduction

Recently more and more planning scholars adhere to a post-modern and analytical approach. Instead of creating new concepts and new models in the self- referential world of actual planning systems these people try to improve plans and planning from a more profound analytical base. We call them post- modern planners, planners starting from a social constructivist frame of investigation and drawing on the post- modern findings of the humanities (anthropology, philosophy, history, policy studies,..).

By doing so they not only show more accurately how planning really works, they also deconstruct many of the dominant modernist theories, concepts and ideas still present within the planning discipline. One would expect that the planning discipline, in parallel with other disciplines like anthropology, policy studies and cultural studies, would undergo a major change towards a more analytical and post-modern approach.

Although this seems to be the case at some European Universities, where scientists like Flyvbjerg, Hillier and Allmendinger, seem to become increasingly influential, generally speaking Northern European planners, also in the Dutch planning paradise, tend to cling to the modernist discourse, dominant in planning disciplines and institutions. It is produced and reproduced, seemingly unaffected by the upcoming post-modern frame of thought. In this article we will describe the problems that originate from that modernist discourse and we will elaborate on the need for a post-modern approach of planning.

A post-modern scientific look at the planning system reveals the presence of images of self and the outer world that are far from realistic and far form democratic. Consequently there is a real need for change. Next we will make explicit the constraints, power relations and attitudes, which constitute obstacles for change. Making these obstacles explicit is not only a way to critically reflect on planning approaches within the Dutch and Northern European academic context.

An analysis of the obstacles for change is simultaneously an analysis of the reproductive mechanisms of the planning discourse and an analysis of the gradual breakdown of the democratic character of planning. A shift from a modern to a post-modern planning approach is therefore not only an academic challenge, but also a struggle for new forms of democratic legitimacy.

## Modernist planning in Europe

### Exporting planning discourse

In Europe, a wide variety of spatial planning systems exists, as well as a wide variety of labels referring to similar activities. (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002) It would be pointless to distillate one ideal- typical planning system present in Europe, and meaningless to find a common denominator in European planning. There is though in planners circles a tacit consensus on the superiority of Northern European models, and among these the Dutch model is often seen as the best one –it is frequently taken as a point of reference in the planning literature. (Faludi and Valk, 1994, Valk, 1998) Among planners, planning is mostly seen as a state enterprise, an enterprise that is fuelled by empirical data en aimed at objectively defined goals by means of scientific methods.

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(Flyvbjerg, 1998) In short: planners identify with bureaucracies and they both identify with a positivist view of knowledge and its application.

At present, one can notice the formation of a new planning discourse, a discourse about planning on a European scale. (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002) The new discourse entails the idea of an objective need of planning at a European scale, it implies that a new bureaucracy is needed, and it copies the ideologies of state- led planning and associated social engineering from the Northern models. Of course, this description of the state of affairs is a highly simplified one: other discourses are in formation, other lobbies are going on, Mediterranean countries perceive the planning lobby as a threat and an alternative for the present system of subsidies. In several of the Northern model- states, including Holland and Sweden, the roles of the state and the planning systems are currently being revised. (Heiden, 2003) Still, the European planning lobby is a real one, and a special one, since it claims to know and to defend the public good. (See AESOP 2004 contributions)

Furthermore, it claims to further these objectively good ends by objectively good means. Planning is seen as a clearly delineated tool, a tool capable of functioning apart from the cultural and institutional context it is embedded in. A tool capable of functioning in every cultural and institutional environment. Therefore, the eastward expansion of the European Union offers a perfect opportunity to export the Northern (Dutch) European planning model, while at the same time convincing the Union to adopt the Northern model everywhere –such a conglomerate of states simply asks for spatial cohesion, doesn't it? (Jansen-Verbeke et al., 1992)

## The necessity of deconstruction

While the Northern model has several advantages we will not dispute, and while some of these advantages are still present today and could arguably be exported, we argue that it is inefficient, undemocratic and potentially dangerous to export the planning system as a whole, in the name of a scientifically grounded improvement of the public good.

We also argue that a revised post-modern planning discipline could play a leading role in the demystification and deconstruction of positivist- modernist ideologies in planning. (Allmendinger, 2001, Sandercock, 1999, Van Assche, 2004b) In most countries with a planning tradition, the scientific disciplines of planning are intertwined with the state apparatus, and a truly scientific view, whether modernist or post- modernist, on planning theory and practice is virtually impossible. Among other things, this means that the cultural embedding of planning theory and practice, as well as the presence of a culture of the planning itself, remains unnoticed and unexamined.

In reality, every planning system is structured along lines that can be ascribed to the general structure of the state institutions: every country's institutional framework leaves a differently delineated space for a planning system. Different labels are applied to what in one country is called 'planning'. In every country, the planning system is in different degrees and ways marked by a planning culture, a culture of the cluster of organisations associated with the planning enterprise.

All these differences are systematically forgotten, and are difficult to rediscover from within the 'scientific' planning discipline, because of the long- standing Luhmannian de- differentiation between the cultures of the participating organisations in the planning system, the planning discipline being one of them. (Luhmann, 1987)

# Obstacles for change

## Postmodern planners could do the job

Since planning is a public matter, since planners decide upon spatial arrangements that affect government spending and the everyday life of tax- payers, one can argue that it might be a dirty job, but that someone has to do it. Post- modern planners could do the job. They are interested in spatial signification, drawing on developments in the humanities going on since the sixties. Post- modern planning drawing on interpretive, symbolic, narrative, or generally post- modern kinds of anthropology e.g, is from a content- oriented point of view ideally placed to disentangle the varying truth- claims present in a planning system, to study the realities that were lost out of sight, to describe the organisational cultures and power plays that shape the naturalized contingency we call the planners view of the world. (Hillier, 2002, Flyvbjerg, 1998, Van Assche, 2004b, Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002)

In other words, to differentiate where de- differentiation has taken place, to reintroduce a forgotten complexity in the description of planning systems and their relation with society. Hopefully, this new complexity will enter the self- description of the planners afterwards, and redirect their dealings with the world and its planned inhabitants. It is not a simple task. There are obstacles.

The study itself is not a simple task, and finding an audience among planners to hear the results will be less easy still. This is due to the very nature of the present planning systems and disciplines. The silent consensus on the neutrality of the planners view of the world and the objectivity and efficacy of the planners methods works as a strong counter- force to investigation and understanding of results. Planning professionals and academics feel

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threatened, almost insulted when subjected to a kind of observation and interrogation they identify as post-modern [or anthropological]. And after the conclusion of the research, they are uninterested in the results.

## De- differentiation and ethnocentrism

Because of the just mentioned irritation, because of the idea that they have a better picture of the world and a superior knowledge on how to improve it, and because of a practical orientation that can easily be used to dismiss everything that does not look like immediately applicable. (Byrne, 2003)

Apart from the extreme proximity of the organisations in the planning system, and apart from the tradition of such a proximity, such an emphasis on a practicality defined by the present state of the system, also contributes to the far- ranging de- differentiation mentioned above. These are phenomena that can fruitfully be studied by the post- modern, analytical planner. It can also enrich political, organisational, spatial disciplines. (Flyvbjerg, 2002) At the same time, they produce obstacles to that same investigation.

The de- differentiation keeps the ethnocentric core of the planning disciplines and systems alive. All the mechanisms resulting in simplification of the images of world and the methods to investigate it, contribute to the perpetuation of a discourse that essentially represents a minority opinion in a field which is supposed to pursue the common good. A misrepresentation, next abuse of science, in the production of a misrepresentation of the world, presenting it as if it were possible to scientifically produce an optimal spatial ordering, this comes down to the reproduction of the present set of power relations. (Van Assche, 2004a)

It is the reproduction of the power of a minority of bureaucrats, unfair scientists and scared politicians, hiding from their duty to make choices. (Swyngedouw et al., 2002) The images of the world acted upon in the planning system, and the images of ideals, are therefore ethnocentric. The democratic content should be considerably higher. Once the ethnocentrism and the connected power relations are in place, they form an obstacle for change. Since a certain image of the world and a certain understanding of society underpin the power of the minority, every attack on that image and that understanding are interpreted as undermining the power positions.

The proximity of organisations within the Dutch planning system (a model), the strong and traditionally strong interdependency of these participating organisations there (universities, institutes, parts of the administration, companies) forms a special obstacle. The bonds were made and reinforced in a period where cooperation was useful, when a common task was easily defined and required coordinated action. (after WWII) (Dijk and Bergeijk, 2002)

However, after a while the shared signification of the world, the common organisational culture that grew within this symbiosis, made it almost immune for criticism, made it extremely difficult to alter. A symbiosis that was ideally placed to respond to a certain difficult environment, tackled the difficulties but evolved in such a way that new adaptations became less and less probable and feasible. (Hernes and Bakken, 2003)

# Positive signs

## Introducing the layperson...

There are also positive signs though, of a gradual shift in the systems perception of self and the world, a shift that could allow for a better position of post- modern planning, its sources, its insights. First, there is a growing awareness of a lot of the mechanisms just described in parts of the relevant administrations and disciplines. In every country, the situation is slightly different, but in every country, one can find a growing group of practitioners and scientists that become familiar with post- modern ideas, and with the darker and –or utopian sides of the modernist planning enterprise. (Jacobs, 1961)

Still, they often fear that anarchy will prevail if the planners don't hold ground. Or they think that planning systems are impossible to alter. A quick look at other countries could learn that a lot of different configurations are imaginable, realistic, and that configurations can be changed. The post- modern analytical planner can help to broaden the view.

Secondly, and connected with the first positive sign, we see the emergence all over Europe of participatory, interactive, communicative planning approaches, most of the time implying that the ideas of the inhabitants of a planned area are taken into account more than before. (Healy, 1997) In some countries, this means more planning than before, in other countries less. In each case, there is a new system of interactions between parts of the administration and the inhabitants. Mostly, the inhabitants, as well as the other interest groups, are represented in councils, organs, project groups, in whatever kind of organisation that embody a new kind of arena for struggles between different interests, between different truth claims, between different systems of knowledge.

## ...changing planning and society

Local knowledge is present to a higher degree than before, the confrontation between the bureaucratic and expert- knowledge present in the traditional planning system, and the local knowledge in the area, cannot be avoided anymore. It can be ignored for a while, but not completely. It can be reinterpreted in such a way that the old truths are reaffirmed, it can be set aside with positivist and technocratic rhetoric, but at least there is an arena,

there is a confrontation, and there is a possibility to reintroduce complexity in the planning system and its view of the world. (Scott, 1998)

The study of the group cultures present in the new arenas, as well as the study of the new interactions and their consequences can form an excellent extension of the planning science domain, a highly relevant one, a new domain that is intellectually rewarding in the sense that new meanings, new groups and new organisations are created simultaneously. Indeed, the new types of planning induce change in society too. If interactive planning wants to be effective, every one has to represented in the new arenas. And if one individual wants to be influential, he can join one of the existing organisations present in the arena, he can force an organisation to enter the arena, he can create a new organisation. Sum of all these possible strategies is a rearrangement of organisations in society, and a rearrangement of the power configurations associated with the organisational networks. (Foucault, 1994)

So, enough interesting things to study for the refashioned planner. And, compared with older centralist types of planning, more entries. In several countries, among others Holland and Germany, we see an increasing awareness on the part of the planners, of  differences between their own perceptions and valuations and the ones from the other interest groups in a participatory planning process.

One of the leading Dutch planning professors even suggested that one needed to create 'political anthropology', definitely a useful invention had it not been invented a century before. Interesting for the post- modern planner, more and more accessible for study, and still very much in need of recent humanities' insights to be enabled to transform itself into something more democratic; such is the present state of spatial planning in Europe. Roughly speaking of course.

## An invitation to post-modernism

We hope that planners will respond to this invitation, for science's sake and for society's sake. Despite the obvious obstacles for change. We think that post modern planners are presently well- equipped to do the job. Because of the evident subject matter, and because of the theoretical and methodological developments in the humanities in the last 30 years they draw upon. Also because of the gradual decline of silent a- historic paradigms, the gradual recognition of historical anthropology e.g.

Even if man can reinvent himself in infinite ways, this does not imply the absence of history in present- day social structures and significations. A thorough study of the worlds of spatial planning, as embedded in societies and institutions, can only be done while taking into account the various workings of history and tradition, the innumerable chemins de l' histoire, to use De Certeau's wording. (De Certeau, 1987) Conversely, the study of planning systems can deepen the insight in these workings. Last but not least, there is the contribution to be made by post- modern planning to a more democratic and better performing administration.

Truly applied science! Spread the word.

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