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Without vision no transition: exploring the potential of planning design studios



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>> Without vision no transition: exploring the potential of planning design studios

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SUMMARY

>> Representations of the future – plans, visions, scenarios – guide us in taking complex decisions in the present. In our current day and age, we face multiple societal challenges, for example, climate, ecology, and social exclusion. This makes long-term thinking more relevant than ever. However, this core idea of spatial planning as a future-oriented discipline seems to have been eroding over the years. We teach our students to critically assess what is and not so much what could be or should be. The educational format of planning design studios trains long-term thinking and students' imaginative capabilities in an experiential, real-life setting. In this contribution, we evaluate 25 years of planning studios at Utrecht University. This essay reviews the history and discusses adaptations in course design and -objectives, student involvement and -experience, and teachers' evaluations over the years. We position these empirical impressions against a brief comparison of the 'Utrecht model' with studio exercises at planning schools of other Dutch universities. We discuss whether planning studios as a form of real-life, experiential learning still succeed in triggering the long-term thinking abilities of students. We scrutinize to what extent students are still capable of thinking so far ahead and summarize both the bottlenecks and enablers for an educational environment in which long-term thinking can flourish. We suggest that the biggest challenge to fostering long-term thinking is not so much the potential of studios but rather their decreasing importance as an integrative course in the curriculum design, which may limit the efficiency of training the futures literacy of planning students.

Key words: long-term thinking, futuring, planning studio, real-life teaching, experiential learning

Summary in Dutch

Nadenken over de verre toekomst – in plannen, visies en scenario's – helpt bij complexe besluitvorming in het hier en nu. Juist in de huidige context van klimaat-, mobiliteit- en energietransities is dit broodnodig. Toch is het idee van planologie als een toekomstgerichte discipline aan erosie onderhevig. We leren onze studenten vooral om te analyseren wat er is, en niet zozeer wat er zou kunnen, of misschien wel zou moeten zijn. Planologische ateliers zijn een voorbeeld van een cursus waarin het verre-toekomst-denken nog centraal staat. In dit essay nemen we daarom vijftienvier jaar ervaring met atelieronderwijs aan de Universiteit Utrecht onder de loep. We bekijken de geschiedenis en transities van deze module door de jaren heen, in termen van cursusontwerp, beoogde leerdoelen en ervaringen van studenten en docenten. Dit wordt in een breder perspectief geplaatst door een beknopte vergelijking te maken met de andere planologieopleidingen in Nederland. We bespreken in hoeverre deze vormen van levensecht onderwijs en ervaringsgericht leren nog van deze tijd zijn, of juist hun beste tijd gehad hebben. In hoeverre slagen onze studenten er nog in om na te denken over de verre toekomst en wat betekent dit voor het vormgeven van de toekomstige onderwijspraktijk? Onze impressie is dat het steeds uitdagender wordt om toekomstdenken onder planologiestudenten te stimuleren nu planologische ateliers als integratiecursus in het curriculum een steeds minder prominente plek krijgen.

1 INTRODUCTION

>> *“They are ill discoverers that think there is no land when they can see nothing but sea.”* This quote by Francis Bacon used to be the leitmotif for novice undergraduate students in spatial planning at Utrecht University. Although the future is largely unknown, we can still imagine at least one and potentially more possible futures (Witte and Hartmann, 2022). Such representations of the future – plans, visions, scenarios – help to make complex decisions in the present. We face multiple societal transitions, including a climate and ecological crisis, rendering long-term thinking more relevant than ever (Pelzer, 2021). Nevertheless, the core idea of spatial planning as a future-oriented discipline seems to be subject to erosion in recent years. This questions whether or not Dutch spatial planning education still succeeds in facilitating students to apply long-term thinking and articulate desirable and possible futures (Rosier et al., 2016). Several reasons exist for this burgeoning short-termism in our society and within spatial planning (e.g., Caney, 2019; Couclelis, 2005). Our planning education is not free of blame, partly due to our love affair with the disciplinary neighbors of policy science and human geography and our separation from landscape architecture and urban design disciplines. As a result, we teach our students to assess what is (present-tense) critically and not so much what could be or should be (future-tense, analytically or normatively).

Notwithstanding this overall development, some courses try to train planning students' futures literacy as they trigger their imaginative capabilities in real-life, experiential settings. Also, AESOP (the Association of European Schools of Planning) still emphasizes “anticipating future needs of society, including the appreciation of new trends and emerging issues in planning” and points to the requirement of “regular exposure to and interaction with planning practice.” It states that “project work-, confrontation with real-life planning problems, [...] multiple laboratory exercises in developing planning solutions, [...] and “learning-by-doing” are distinguishing marks of a fully-fledged planning education.” (AESOP, 2022). A special way to encourage long-term thinking is by planning design studios, which can be found in different curricula in the Netherlands and beyond.

In this contribution, we focus on a critical evaluation of twenty-five years of teaching experience with planning studios in the ‘Utrecht school’ of spatial planning. This essay reviews the history of the planning studios in Utrecht, discusses adaptations in course design and -objectives, student involvement and -experiences, and teachers’ evaluations over the years. The ‘Utrecht Model’ is positioned against a brief comparison with studio exercises at planning schools of other Dutch universities. We will discuss whether planning studios as a form of real-life, experiential learning still manages to trigger the long-term thinking abilities of students (cf. Hoffman et al., 2021). As such, we scrutinize to what extent students can think far ahead and summarize both the bottlenecks

and enablers for an educational environment where long-term thinking can flourish. In this, we will also consider the position of studio modules in the broader design of planning curricula.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING SPATIAL PLANNING

>> In this section, we briefly outline some theoretical notions on teaching spatial planning. We consider the confrontation and integration between the academic and professional realms in studio teaching, the experiential learning element of planning design studios, and the notion of long-term thinking and imaginative approaches. From this, we aim to distill some key considerations regarding the position of studios in planning curricula and their function in training the futures literacy of planning students.

We first look at the course design and the studios' position in the curriculum. Studios are 'real-life projects' that students perform on behalf of a client from practice (usually a local governmental body). Such experiential learning involves active and purposeful processes contextualized in direct or stimulated 'real world' activities in which students have the opportunity to construct and regulate their own personal and professional learning (Rosier et al., 2016). The assignments revolve around urban design issues at various spatial scales yet also consider the governance dimension.

Studios are not lecture-based. Instead, studios include tutorials, workshops, fieldwork, and interaction with practitioners or related communities (Higgins et al., 2009). According to Kolb and Kolb (2009), experiential learning shifts the learning design from being teacher-centered to a semi-structured approach requiring students to collaborate, interact and learn from one another through direct experiences connected to real-world problems. The teacher is a facilitator instead of directing the student's progress. Studios provide the opportunity to integrate and apply learning from numerous previous courses and basic spatial planning concepts, such as planning theories, planning methods, and knowledge of the legal aspects of planning systems. Planning studios facilitate students' creativity and engagement in collaborative problem-solving (Higgins et al., 2009). They stimulate the development of professional competencies, such as negotiating, leadership, teamwork, public engagement, planning and policy-making, urban design, oral and graphic communication, and management of time, self, and others. Skills such as collaboration, negotiation, teamwork, and interaction, can be acquired during the studios (Table 1). Studios enable teaching and learning new skills and knowledge in informal and flexible ways. They facilitate iterative learning: students get the possibility for feedback to improve their work during the lifetime of the studio (Kolb and Kolb, 2009).

TABLE 1
Skill development in the
planning studios

Source: Higgins et al., 2009

Learning outcomes	Pedagogical approach	Learning and teaching methods	Assesment methods	Skills commonly development
Application of theory and knowledge to a practical problem	Experiential learning	Project-based, often in groups	Individual or group or a combination	Urban design
Development of professional skills emulating practice	Problem-based learning	Informal and flexible, not lecture based: may include tutorials, workshops, field work, interaction with practitioners and communities	Formative assessment: feedback informs final outcome	Plan and policy making
Emphasis on both process and product and inter-relationship between te two	Student centred, active engagement		May include oral presentation	Teamwork
	Reflective learning		Not exam-based	Negotiation
				Managment: time, self, others
				Public engagement
				Oral and graphic presentation, including IT
				Critical analyses
				Creative thinking

Planning studios train the ‘reflective practitioners’ who have experience with issues like community development, citizen participation, or conflict resolution that contemporary urban and regional planning practices demand (e.g., Kotval, 2003). They help students familiarize themselves with the increased changes and complexity within the planning field (e.g., societal sustainability transitions) and develop “*skills and capacity to work with change, to confront it and to shape it to achieve better futures*” (Budge, 2009, p. 9). As such, planning studios have the potential to develop precisely the skills and capacities that are important. Such as a more profound understanding of the needs of the private sector, urban design skills, and knowledge of specialized areas of planning, such as environmental planning (Slade et al., 2014); time management, independent learning, problem-solving and effectively working with others (Baldwin and Rosier, 2017; Kotval, 2003).

Long-term thinking in planning contains several institutionalized practices, such as scenario planning and visioning (e.g., Goodspeed, 2019), which can stimulate students to investigate daily manifestations of the future in the present. A reflective engagement with future-oriented practices helps students to understand how the future is already present in the “here and now” and to imagine radically different futures. Long-term thinking entails the risk of not

being taken seriously and of being called fictitious. However, the added value of planning studios is to connect the imagination of a possible future to real-world engagements, for instance, materializing in an active interaction between students, policymakers, and other societal stakeholders. Students must be aware of their contribution to societal and policy debates potentially influencing an actual future course of action. They do not just deliver a university assignment.

In summary, we argue that planning studios provide the opportunity to integrate and apply knowledge and skills from numerous previous courses offered in the curriculum to a real-life context. Studios offer a combination of integrative, problem-based projects and an emphasis on professional skill development through creativity and teamwork. Studios happen in an experiential setting that requires students to collaborate, interact and learn from one another through direct experiences connected to real-world problems. Imaging solutions to such problems in a planning studio is, by definition, aimed at fostering an environment of long-term thinking for students. Once having gained the necessary knowledge and skills throughout their studies, the real-life projects in the studios should be the 'proof of the pudding' of the futures literacy of planning students.

3 PLANNING DESIGN STUDIOS AT UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

3.1 Learning objectives, course design, and student involvement

The planning design studio courses ('Planning Studio 1' and 'Planning Studio 2') at Utrecht University in many aspects resemble the typical studio characteristics described above. Students make a real plan for an actual client and think creatively about the long-term future. The planning horizon of their assignments often spans from 10-15 (Studio 2) up to 20-30 years (Studio 1) in the future. Clients (municipalities) typically ask students to think 'out of the box.' The studios provide for the integration of previously acquired knowledge and a challenging assignment concerning content (i.e., creating a desirable, long-term vision for a municipality) as well as the process in terms of teamwork and group dynamics. In line with this, training soft and transferable skills are explicit learning outcomes of the courses. Within the curriculum, the studios follow the modules 'Introduction to Spatial Planning', 'Legal aspects of Planning', 'Planning Theory', and 'Planning Methods.'

Even though some minor changes in learning objectives are visible over time, the studio exercises have typical characteristics and scopes consistent throughout the years (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Scope of the studio exercises

Source: authors' work based on
the planning studios' course
manuals

Planning Studio 1	Planning Studio 2
Strategic	Problem solving
Local/regional level	Local project with regional importance
Long term (20-30 years)	Short or medium term (5-15 years)
Focus on analysis and integration	Focus on the process, and public support
Conceptual/visionary/imaginative	Partly strategic, partly operational
Process is given, the product is open	Process is open, the product is 'given'

The key learning objective for both studios is the application and integration of previously acquired knowledge in a practical setting to stimulate an in-depth internalization of that knowledge. Next, there are additional learning objectives for mastering teamwork and group dynamics and further familiarizing students with the discipline and practice of spatial planning. In addition, each studio also has specific learning objectives. For Planning Studio 1, this is the ability to convert a spatial analysis into a strategic plan for the long-term future at the local scale, with particular attention to the use of spatial concepts and visions that support the integration of diverse (stakeholder and sectoral) interests in the problem analysis and proposed solution. For Planning Studio 2, this is the development of a (re-)development plan at the local scale, but with regional importance, with a strong focus on the operational characteristics and feasibility (administrative, political, societal, financial) of the proposed solutions and governance approaches.

The Utrecht planning studios are a clear example of real-life projects. In planning studios, conditions are as realistic as possible. Students work in project teams with professional names, and the tutors address them as if they are professionals. Moreover, a plan is developed and presented, considering its public support, political feasibility, and financial viability. Teams of 7-9 students start their own 'consultancy firm' with a name, a logo, and sometimes even a website. A medium-sized municipality in the Netherlands gives each 'firm' a real assignment with conditions and sometimes a small budget to compensate for material costs. Ten weeks after the start of the course, each firm presents the highlights of their plan in the form of a pitch presentation, usually in the city hall in the presence of a mayor or alderman, a jury, administrative officers of the municipality, their fellow students (i.e., the competing 'firms') and the university group supervisors. The jury, consisting of academic and professional panel members, selects a winner and the hosting municipality offers a real prize to the winning team.

Also, from the perspective of experiential learning, some elements are integrated into the course design of the studios. Students have a minimum of guidance from the university supervisors. The assignments of the studio projects typically are cases for which there are no simple or standard solutions.

So, the students must use their knowledge and insights into planning theory and methods to create a unique solution for a unique situation. Even though the intended learning outcomes are more or less similar over time, the actual learning experience is always unique to the particular local context studied. The university supervisor, usually one dedicated person per team, mainly controls the process, time planning, and group dynamics within the team. Concerning (inside) local knowledge, students can use a special supervisor from the hosting municipality who occasionally is available for a quick 'reality check.' Students can spend half of their time a week (20 hours) on a studio project; with eight students in a team and ten weeks, this translates into 1,600 hours (=1,0 fte) invested in one single plan. The competition effect and the real practical experience usually stimulate the students to do their utmost.

TABLE 3
Student involvement in the
planning studios (2004-now)

Source: authors' work

Cohort	BSc students	Planning students	% Planning students	Studio 1 students	% Studio 1	Studio 2 students	% Studio 2	Studio location
2004-2005	145	72	50%	45	n/a	33	n/a	Deventer
2005-2006	199	153	77%	51	71%	39	87%	Ede
2006-2007	254	126	50%	93	61%	46	90%	Enschede/Hengelo
2007-2008	212	112	53%	78	62%	99	100%	Almere
2008-2009	206	109	53%	53	47%	75	96%	Lelystad
2009-2010	256	107	42%	62	57%	49	92%	Amstelveen
2010-2011	284	84	30%	47	44%	49	79%	Alkmaar
2011-2012	193	80	41%	49	58%	53	100%	Amersfoort
2012-2013	197	45	23%	52	65%	44	90%	Nieuwegein
2013-2014	186	67	36%	37	82%	48	92%	Hilversum
2014-2015	190	73	38%	46	69%	36	97%	Gouda
2015-2016	173	44	25%	42	58%	42	91%	Den Bosch
2016-2017	178	59	33%	26	59%	35	83%	Utrecht (municipality)
2017-2018	199	82	41%	45	76%	28	100%	Haarlemmermeer
2018-2019	190	72	38%	53	65%	37	82%	Utrecht (province)
2019-2020	194	106	55%	40	56%	36	68%	Apeldoorn
2020-2021	238	90	38%	55	52%	36	90%	Netherlands (national)
Total	3494	1481	42%	874	59%	785	90%	
Average	206	87	42%	51	61%	46	90%	

As an integrative, experiential exercise in long-term thinking and real-life application, the planning studios have consistently attracted high numbers of students over their existence (Table 3). We could only use data from 2004-2005 onwards (roughly since the introduction of the Bachelor/Master structure in the Utrecht planning curriculum). In the first five years (1996-2000), the studios, on average, attracted 20-30 students per studio per year. This number increased

to 40-60 students per studio per year in the 2000-2004 period. The studios in these years were hosted by, chronologically, the municipalities of Hilversum (twice), Amersfoort, Zwolle, Breda, Den Bosch, Eindhoven, and Apeldoorn. Table 3 reveals that through the studio exercises, students become increasingly engaged with the discipline of spatial planning. Generally, about 1/3rd of a cohort continues in the planning curriculum. More than half of these 80-100 students per year participate in the first planning studio. On average, 9 out of 10 students also follow the second planning studio the year after. This repetition within the curriculum has a strong learning effect and is also appreciated by the students.

3.2 Course development over time

The planning design studios at Utrecht University date as far back as the mid-1990s (Zoete et al., 2005) when they were introduced as an experiment to integrate practical knowledge into the planning education curriculum. The studios were established following Kolb's learning cycle and the core curriculum requirements (AESOP, 2022).

For the first five years (the mid-1990s to early 2000s), the planning studios have been characterized by trial and error. Lecturers identified several points for improvement: the oral language and length of the final presentations, the size, and composition of the groups, the choice of the hosting municipality and agreements about their involvement, and the expectations and level of coaching of the university supervisors. In short, students discussed minor details of a plan at length during presentations that lasted over 45 minutes each. The course language (English) was at the expense of the plan's quality since students were unfamiliar with the jargon in English.

In contrast, the early 2000s to the mid-2000s are characterized as a period of professionalization. For instance, the budget for material costs and the real prizes were introduced, the jury was extended with an academic panel member, and the groups were offered a professional workshop on oral presentation skills. After ten years, in 2006, a structural change in the curriculum led to some practical problems in the size and scope of the studios; the course attracted too many students for municipalities to host them properly. Also, the choice of municipalities shifted to a newer generation of municipalities (e.g., Almere and Lelystad, see Figure 1). This trend of selecting 'young' municipalities continued for several years and is reported as a purposeful intervention to synchronize the assignments of the planning studios with urgent real-life challenges in planning practice. In light of the economic collapse of 2008, the assignments focused more intensely on the management and redevelopment of neighborhoods instead of 'building for growth.' From the students' perspective, this was experienced as complex, as the rest of the curriculum prior to the studios did not offer them much guidance on approaching this new reality. Alignment is

a continuous bottleneck: it proves challenging to adapt an entire curriculum to a changing societal context flexibly. Substantial change can only be done incidentally through a structural and systematic curriculum renewal, as is currently happening at the Human Geography and Planning teaching institute of Utrecht University.

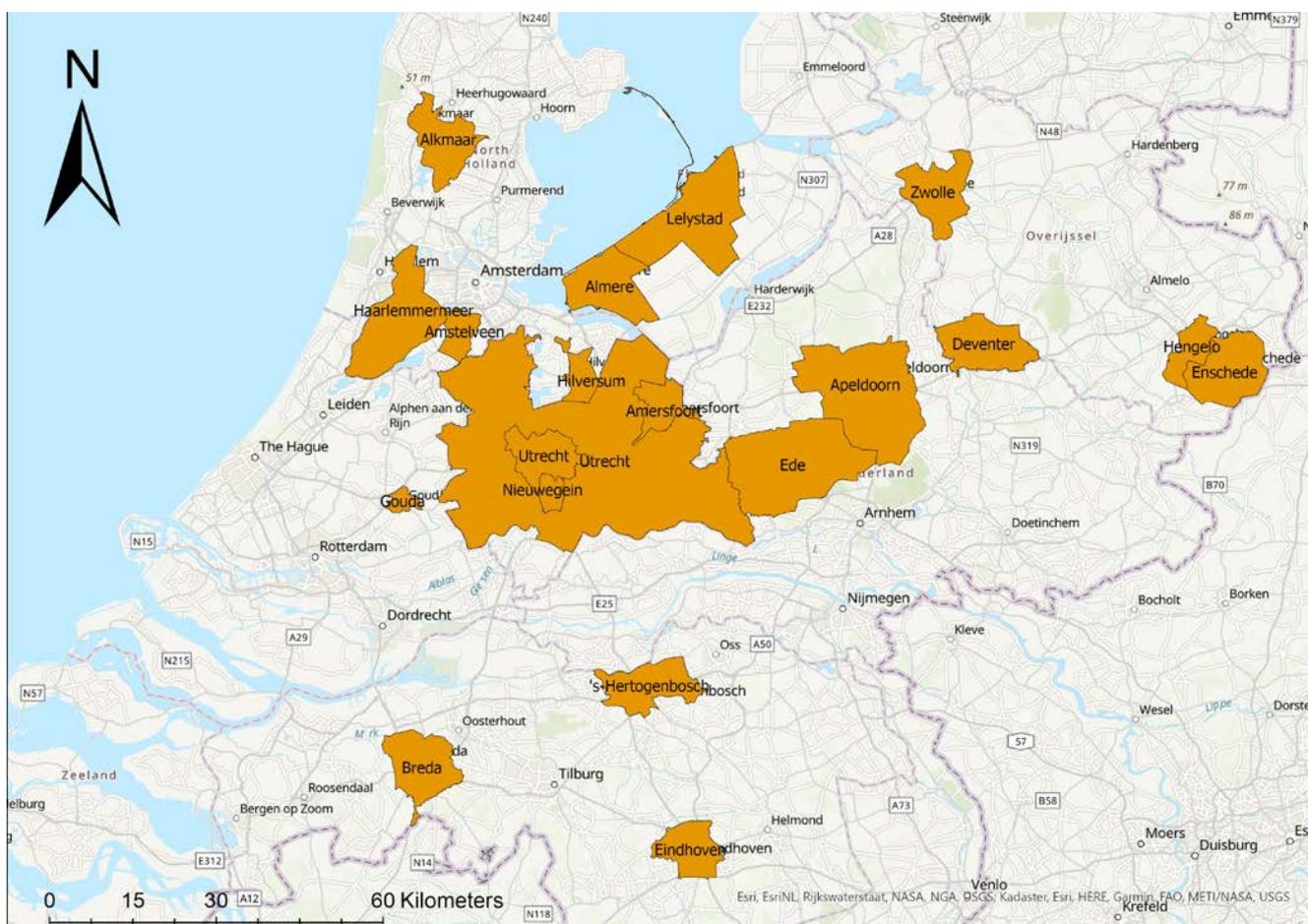


FIGURE 1
Hosting municipalities of the
Utrecht planning studios
Source: authors' work

During the early 2010s until roughly 2015-2016, two other essential developments emerged that led to new challenges. Hosting municipalities called for new land use planning (inner-city densification, temporary rezoning). They were concerned about how to position themselves as actors in wider governance networks relative to other private and civil stakeholders. We conceive this as a reorientation of the client's perspective, from a desire for long-term visions towards more short-term managerial concerns. Students, in turn, devoted less and less time and attention to site visits and stakeholder interviews and became less aware of and familiar with the particularities of the local context. This is an undesirable development from the perspective of long-term thinking and urban management.

The gap between a growing call for innovative forms of land use planning and modes of governance and a declining students' investment in contextualization is also manifest in the most recent years of the planning studios. This has resulted in two particular challenges for the course design and learning experiences. First, students are tempted to repeat or reiterate the hosting municipalities' more tactical and operational desires rather than think creatively about inspirational, long-term future visions and concepts that could benefit this municipality. Second, students become less sensitive and less eager to investigate whether and to what extent societal transitions (e.g., sustainable development, climate adaptation) apply to the particular context they study.

In response to these challenges, some specific interventions have been implemented. First, to move beyond the tendency to formulate solutions at the tactical or operational level, more attention is paid to notions of visioning and futuring to challenge students' creative and imaginative capabilities. This is more prominently stressed in the course design of the planning studios. Moreover, it is more specifically trained in the curriculum through courses such as planning methods or new electives such as 'Futuring for Sustainability.' For instance, in the Planning Methods course, ample attention was devoted to planning concepts (metaphors). Second, to make students more aware of the scalar issue and the importance of contextualization, for some editions, the scale was shifted to the provincial or even national level to force the students to consider the areas they plan for in the broader setting. The combination of both interventions was not always successful. Students had more difficulty articulating desirable long-term futures in the editions with assignments on a larger spatial scale, as the scale was too abstract to properly contextualize their strategic visions on themes such as sustainability, revitalization, or greening of the city.

3.3 Teachers' and students' evaluations of the planning studios

In 2005, a systematic evaluation was made of the experiences of students, teachers, and planners who acted as clients (Zoete et al. 2005). The evaluative survey on the 2000-2005 period reported a teachers' self-assessment, an assessment by the practitioners involved, and a students' assessment. Teachers evaluated the relevance with an average mark of 8,7. They praise the function of the studios as a motivator for the entire program. From a practitioner's perspective, the modules were evaluated with a 9,3 mark. They highlight the relevance of the module as a synthesis between academia and practice. A sample of 55 students evaluated the modules with a mark of 8,6. They appreciate the relevance of the studios in terms of real practical experience and teamwork. The studios act as a motivator for the entire program.

In 2012, a critical evaluation of the course design and intended learning outcomes was made, with suggestions for future improvements. This evaluation revealed that even though the studios continued to be successful elements of the curriculum, some structural trends should be considered to ensure that the modules would remain relevant. First, it is noticed that over the years, students tend to neglect or less prominently integrate methods and techniques they have learned earlier in the curriculum in the final products of the studio. These are methods like problem - and contextual analysis or visioning. Second, it is acknowledged that the nature and complexity of planning challenges structurally change and that this needs to be incorporated and addressed in the curriculum.

Qualitative information in the comments sections in student evaluations sheds light on the enablers and bottlenecks for a stimulating educational environment for the studios. The enablers include the practical orientation of the assignments, freedom, independence in learning, guidance and feedback by the university supervisors, challenging real-life assignments, collaborating in teams, thinking about the long-term future, and stimulating creativity. The bottlenecks include increased clarity of the assignments in terms of structure, guidelines and conditions, a reconsideration of the group size, and more attention to professional competencies and skill development related to graphical design and layout (e.g., GIS, InDesign) through tutorials. Many students stress the learning effect of a repetitive studio exercise (i.e., doing Planning Studio 2 the year after doing Planning Studio 1). Even though the learning objectives of the second studio exercise are different, students indicate that the cumulative build-up of the curriculum allows them to finally properly understand what exactly they are doing in the second studio exercise. This learning effect is also visible in the high-quality products in Planning Studio 2, which are often indistinguishable from commercial consultancy products.

4 COMPARISON OF STUDIOS IN DUTCH PLANNING SCHOOLS

4.1 Overview of planning studio exercises

The Utrecht model of teaching planning in a studio setting is not unique. Most bachelor or master programs in spatial planning in the Netherlands include studio-like courses (Table 4). These courses have a common focus on developing future-oriented plans in a real-life setting, often with governmental bodies as real clients. Also, the planning studios are generally considered flagships of planning education, integrating skills taught in other courses (problem analysis, visioning, group dynamics, report writing), following Kolb's learning cycle. Nevertheless, different teaching programs put different accents in their studios, depending on the position within the curriculum, theoretical and thematic

foci of other courses, and the number of studios within a curriculum. We compare the Utrecht model with two other schools of planning: Wageningen University (offering five studio courses) and Radboud University (that recently transformed their studio course into an Urban Futures lab). Table 4 summarizes the different courses, including the University of Amsterdam, the University of Groningen, and Delft University of Technology.

University/study	Studio courses Bachelor level	Studio courses Master level
Utrecht University Human Geography and Spatial Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning Studio 1 2. Planning Studio 2 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Techniques of Futuring (mixed classroom)
Wageningen University Landscape Architecture and Spatial Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Studio Planning Basics 2. Studio Participative Planning 3. Studio Strategic Planning 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Atelier Landscape Architecture and Planning 2. Foodscapes, Urban Lifestyle, and Transition (optional) 3. Planning for Urban Quality of Life (optional)
Radboud University Geography, Planning, and Environment	-	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Urban Futures Lab. Vision and Strategy Building for Cities and Regions
University of Groningen Spatial Planning and Design Master Society, Sustainability and Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spatial Design Atelier 2. Urbanism Atelier 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Living Lab Sustainable Places
University of Amsterdam Human Geography and Spatial Planning Master Urban and Regional Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spatial Programming and Design 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Master Studio of Future Cities
Delft University of Technology Master City Developer TU Delft Master Management and Built Environment TU Delft	-	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Redesign of Complex Projects 2. Urban and Infrastructure (Re)development Game

TABLE 4
Overview of planning studio exercises at Dutch planning schools
authors' work based on course guides and interviews

4.2 Wageningen University: a cascade of design-oriented studios

Wageningen University offers a cascade of planning studios. During the first year, students get a glimpse of the field of spatial planning, not so much focused on practicing specific planning methods but on experiencing planning in a real-life context through experiential learning. The studio assignments became more complicated and less guided in the following years. At the same time, students acquire more skills regarding problem and landscape analysis and visioning in aligned courses that need to be applied during the studio courses. The Wageningen approach to spatial planning is characterized by design thinking (i.e., the long-term vision essentially is a map accompanied by a policy document) and a strong emphasis on the physical landscape. In the second year, 'Studio Participative Planning': "the students are confronted with a vision for the long-term future of the area, which consistently has to be operationalized in the successive

phases of the course" (course manual Studio Participative Planning, 2021). In the third year, emphasis is put on developing a strategic vision at the regional scale and for a more distant future. The aim is to integrate theory and planning methods for scenario development and strategic decision-making. Over the years, the studios have offered more guidance in structuring group dynamics and delivering products.

Though Wageningen attracts a substantial number of international students, like in Utrecht, the bachelor studios are only offered in Dutch. This is due to practical constraints: the assignment is focused on Dutch planning practice and developed in consultation with Dutch municipalities. For the studios taught in the Master's program, students work in mixed groups with Dutch and international students. Knowledge concerning Dutch regions, policies, and spatial plans are increasingly available for non-Dutch speakers. Language is not necessarily an obstacle as long as Dutch students take up the responsibility to translate or contextualize specific Dutch planning aspects. Here, course coordinators experience that the quality of products that mixed groups of students deliver does not differ much from Dutch groups, but the diversity of outcomes has significantly increased: international students bring different types of knowledge. In contrast, the Dutch students are forced to reflect and explain Dutch planning from an outsider's perspective.

Since Wageningen offers a two-year master's program, there is ample room to deepen either professional or academic competencies. Nevertheless, students doing a bachelor's and master's program at Wageningen University sometimes experience repetition in the planning studios (similar to the Utrecht experience). The experimental learning environment studios offer is open and renowned for practicing many soft skills and acquired methods within one course. At the same time, it is difficult to differentiate and diversify skill development between the diverse studio settings: Kolb's learning cycle is repeated for every studio course. While studios focus on specific elements (e.g., level of autonomy, group dynamics, presentation skills, or strategic visioning), integrating all elements is also one of the key characteristics of studio learning. Therefore, in a recent renewal of the master's program, students are offered more options for specialization, including a (rarely chosen) research track without studios.

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4.3 Radboud University: reflective practitioners in a technology-supported urban living lab

Other than Wageningen and Utrecht, until 2021, Radboud University offered an integrated bachelor program for Geography, Planning and Environmental Studies. Students could only opt for the specialization of spatial planning in a one-year Master's program. Until 2018, this MSc curriculum also offered a traditional planning studio in which students would develop a long-term vision for the redevelopment of a pre-selected area. Nevertheless, the coordinators chose a living lab set-up in a course renewal, offering specific skills, theoretical deepening, and room for experimentation in one course. Students are free to choose their case study area and problem definition but have to complete a series of subsequent assignments. These group assignments include serious gaming, agent-based modeling, and mapping. The assignment also includes individual reflection, in which students are challenged: *“to act as ‘Reflective Practitioners,’ who are not afraid to experiment with new instruments and to speak and report openly about sensitive issues, in the tradition of educational objectives for ‘reflective’ planning professionals.”* (course manual Urban Futures Lab. Vision and Strategy Building for Cities and Regions, 2021).

Though the Urban Lab approach no longer fits the criteria of a classical planning studio, experiential learning still lies at the heart of this course. Also, in an in-depth interview, one of the course teachers indicated that it was necessary to make choices concerning the efficiency of teaching planning. In the master's program, only 30 study credits (ECTS) can be spent on instructive courses. Combining problem-oriented assignments with new methods reflecting state-of-the-art digital planning techniques made it possible to achieve all desired learning outcomes in one course. Another reason for renewing this course was the increasing influx of international students: acquiring specific knowledge for developing a plan within a particular Dutch context no longer matched the objectives of the master curriculum. The cases students choose now range from post-Katrina New Orleans to applying floating infrastructures in Nijmegen.

5 THE FUTURE OF LONG-TERM THINKING THROUGH PLANNING STUDIOS

>> This essay has considered transitions in teaching spatial planning from the perspective and experiences of planning design studios offered at different Dutch planning schools. We discussed the history and transitions of 25 years of studio teaching at Utrecht University. The 'Utrecht model' of planning studio teaching highlights many aspects of studio teaching that are also central to academic literature. This includes a clear emphasis on studios as integrative courses of cumulatively build-up knowledge throughout a planning curriculum. It also includes studios functioning as real-life projects, focusing on experiential learning following Kolb's learning cycle and fostering long-term thinking through triggering the imaginative capabilities of students (i.e., 'futuring'). This model, albeit in somewhat different forms, is also practiced at other Dutch universities in their planning curricula. We questioned whether the studios could create an environment for long-term thinking and to what extent the teaching approaches of experiential learning and futuring approaches contribute to that. In this final section, we present some conclusions and points of concern.

First, there is a strong acknowledgment of the continued relevance of studio teaching. Studios offer the ability to solve complex planning problems in a real-world setting and force the students to create visions for the future and shape their current actions accordingly. Such experiential learning requires a mixture and integration of academic knowledge and professional skills. Second, studios are one of the few remaining elements of planning curricula that still offer experiential learning experiences. Students actively develop and practice soft and transferable skills, and reflection is directly stimulated through formative assessment (Higgins et al., 2009). This way, they can adapt to increasing changes and complexities within planning practices, including the many transitional challenges our society currently faces. Third, we have seen that studios' goal is "*problem-based, collaborative learning by design in a real-life context with public and private components*" (Zoete et al., 2005).

The goals described above are not something that students can learn overnight. Students need to use insights and knowledge of earlier subjects and modules, such as planning theory or methods, to re-engage theory to practice and to develop professional skills and behavior. However, when looking at the developments in curriculum design at Utrecht University and incorporating the experiences of the other programs, there is cause for concern here. Transferring theory, methods, and professional skills related to long-term thinking in the planning studios is not always done well. Long-term thinking skills are less present in the rest of the curriculum, making transferring such knowledge and skills increasingly problematic. Repetition in the curriculum is important, as was also stressed by the students' experiences in the studios. Studios cannot

work as stand-alone parts of a curriculum. They will become less effective in long-term thinking when the connection to other parts of the curriculum is not safeguarded.

Concerns regarding the future of planning studios mostly relate to the question of whether studios can embrace the transitions that planning curricula are currently in, while at the same time staying true to the initial goal of fostering long-term thinking in an experiential, real-life setting. There are three points worth mentioning. First is the question of to what extent the latest innovations in planning practices can be fully incorporated. For instance, planning schools already have attempts at introducing 'games' to practice new digital spatial planning skills such as agent-based modeling and processing big data. The question is whether this is necessary or even desirable. One of a planner's core characteristics is the ability to internalize knowledge from other disciplines in the planning process. Should not synthesis between different knowledges and between what is and what *ought to be*, be at the heart of planning? (cf. Campbell, 2012; Rydin, 2007).

Second and related is the question of to what extent practicing skills through 'learning-by-doing' (such as imaginative techniques) can still be properly accommodated in planning curricula. Studios are integrative exercises of previously taught knowledge and techniques. Through this repetition, learning is improved. However, due to curricula renewals, this is often no longer possible. The connection between bachelor and master programs is becoming less fixed, and studios tend to move from the bachelor to the master programs. In several programs, the studios have been replaced by more focused assignments and integrating specific types of knowledge, such as planning methods or theoretical lenses. We value the integrated and deepening learning experiences that multiple studios within one curriculum offer. Nevertheless, the position, learning objectives, and necessity of sequential studios also deserve careful consideration within the planning curricula to preserve this unique learning experience. The learning benefits of a repetitive studio exercise should not be underestimated.

A third concern is the ongoing internationalization of teaching practices at Dutch universities. Studios focus on Dutch planning practices and often require local engagement with Dutch municipalities and their stakeholders. Alternatively, experiences in the international and intercultural classroom can stimulate creativity and bring new visions and perspectives, as experiences from Wageningen and Nijmegen point out.

The transitions mentioned above are forcing planning design studios to also apply long-term thinking to themselves. The future spatial realities we are planning for, the future planners that we are educating, and the wider university

teaching environment are in constant transition. Planning teaching, like the discipline of spatial planning itself, should mirror these societal developments (see Witte and Hartmann, 2022). Planning teaching should proactively develop normative frameworks in light of these new challenges (Gergen, 2015) and be reflective enough to adapt teaching practices to the new realities it is facing. This implies educating a generation of practitioners about the long-term challenges we currently do not completely grasp ourselves (see Pelzer, 2021). This includes, for instance, a revision of the learning objectives of planning studios that is more sensitive to and explicit about fostering and rewarding creativity in thinking about the long term. Learning objectives should also explicate taking responsibility in collaboration and teamwork, triggering imaginative capabilities and techniques of futuring, and dealing with the complex and integral nature of current and future planning challenges. It should also consider the studios' position in the curriculum and a cumulative build-up of the program. We suggest that the biggest challenge to fostering long-term thinking is not so much the potential of studios as such but rather their decreasing importance as an integrative course in the curriculum design, which may limit the efficiency of training the futures literacy of planning students. At the same time, spatial planning should also not forsake its roots; as long as we can still inspire and fascinate students about the spot on the horizon, the future of teaching spatial planning is not lost.

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