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Perspective on Planning Theory

Abstract

This essay reflects briefly on more than a dozen decades of planning theory. Planning theory has moved from early confidence in design and progressive improvements, through analysis of needs and reliance on reason, to promoting market like approaches to expand choice, to engaging citizens in active participation in planning, to facilitating consensus building and to actively benefiting the least advantaged. As planning theory has developed it has become more nuanced and sensitive, as well as more thoughtful.

Perspective on Planning Theory

This essay reflects briefly on more than a dozen decades of planning theory. It offers a perspective on our field that is self-critical, interactive and learning. This reflection begins with my budding personal interest in planning and planning theory. Next it presents a chart of planning theory history, divided into five periods. The essay briefly discusses each period. It then examines the evolution of means and ends in planning theory. Finally, it concludes that as planning theory has developed it has become more nuanced and sensitive, as well as more thoughtful.

My interest in planning began in the mid- 1960s. A college summer internship with NY Deputy Mayor for Housing and Community Development enabled me to attend many city agency and community meetings and take notes, which laid the foundation for my undergraduate thesis on Citizen Participation in Urban Renewal in 1966. These experiences helped lead to my career in planning.

A few years later I became an Urban Intern at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This immediate post-riot era was a wonderful time for urban planning and policy, with superb Great Society programs. It was a time of optimism, and belief that society could solve its urban problems. Tremendous resources were dedicated to the inner cities. Even under Nixon[i], urban problems had resources, programs and innovation – including the birth of Community Development Block Grant. HUD's intern program was a fantastic investment in young people committed to solving inner city problems. It included rotational work assignments. Among others, mine included the California Assembly Committee on Urban Affairs, a local model cities office, a city manager's office, and a community –based redevelopment planning committee.

After the intern program I served on the secretariat for the Western Federal Regional Council, composed of the regional directors of U.S. domestic departments. We developed interagency and intergovernmental initiatives

in response to problems (and occasionally opportunities) identified by member agencies and state and local governments.

I first began studying planning when I was given a special assignment to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on a study of planning in the US. A year or so later a HUD friend, Vicki Elmer, introduced me to Prof. Michael Teitz and encouraged me to go to UC Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP), where I earned a Master's and Ph.D. and later became a member of the faculty.

The department I entered was bursting with intellectual riches and debates as well as planning and activism with disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities, such as people with disabilities. Qualitative analysis, such as ethnographic studies, challenged methodological Titans of quantitative analysis, while debates ensued between faculty members. Prof. Judith Innes contested establishment rational[ii] planning. Prof. Melvin Webber argued the merits of market like mechanisms with Prof. Ann Markusen, a Marxist planner. I remember Prof. Webber asking, [when confronting a planning problem] "But, Ann, what do you do?" I was very puzzled in a discussion section when it seemed to me that the answer to every question was "It's historical".[iii]

When I first came to the Department Prof. William Alonso advised me to take a course Prof. Melvin Webber co-taught with Horst Rittel, CP 203, Planning

and Governing. In the language of the then still influential 1960s, the course "blew my mind". Like my classmates, I came to the program enthusiastic about learning planning and the most advanced methods. In CP 203 we learned that we couldn't plan!! As the professors taught it, and as clearly set forth in their "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning", (1973) planning problems were "wicked" and not amenable to treatment by straight forward rational methods.

This realization led me to question the conditions necessary for the rational model to work and the mismatch between those assumptions and the reality of the wicked problems we were confronting. I developed a matrix of conditions appropriate to different ways of planning, subsequently "Coping with Uncertainty in Planning" (1985). My dissertation, Delusions of Certainty in Complex Intergovernmental Systems, tried to make sense of the complicated and often frustrating context for the inter-agency and inter-governmental projects that I had worked on for the Federal Regional Council. (Subsequently my dissertation developed into Cities and Complexity: Making Intergovernmental Decisions,1999.)

Our department had a long tradition of making important contributions to planning theory from John Dyckman, William Alonso, Melvin Webber, Michael Teitz, Stephen Cohen and Judith Innes. Ph.D. students were required to take a three day (and night) exam in planning theory. It was replaced with a

requirement that students take a course in the history of planning theory followed by a course in current planning theory. I taught the theory history course[iv].

As I taught it, planning theory can be understood in its context of historical events and planning practice. The chart on planning thought (Fig. 1, below) reflects the development of planning theory from its modern inception to the present. It separates the development of planning theory into five periods, each titled with its dominant planning theory: 1, Vision and Reform, 2, Rational, Centralized and Scientific Planning, 3, Planning and Markets, 4, Planning and Competing Interests and 5, Planning and Different Voices. Each period contains planning thought shown together with planning practice and national and global events to provide context for the theory.

[Figure 1 about here]

In this perspective, planning thought can be seen as going through stages of development. Modern planning began with vision and reform, then turned to rational, centralized planning, then emulated markets, then coped with competing interests and then began dealing with different voices and ways of understanding. After brief discussion of each period this reflection draws some conclusions on fourteen decades of planning thought.

Planning Theory in the Context of History and Planning Practice

The first period, Vision and Reform, characterized by the City Beautiful Movement and Progressive reforms, can be seen as planning theory's initial exuberance. Burnham's splendid Chicago lake front and the gorgeous classical drawings of the Plan of Chicago (Commercial Club of Chicago, 1909) exemplify the idea of the artist designing a city (a branch of which persists today as urban design). A similar confidence undergirds Ebenezer Howard's classic utopia, (1898) Garden Cities of Tomorrow.

Whether through thinking or artistically creating, these pioneering city planners and theorists drew their inspiration for their solutions to their era's deplorable slum conditions from within themselves. Other reformers of the Progressive era studied the physical conditions of the buildings the poor inhabited and public health officials studied the poor immigrants' physical condition and other factors affecting their health and wellbeing.

The second period, Rational, Centralized and Scientific Planning replaced vision and reform with reason and analysis. As if examining the foundation beneath planning, planning theorists sought dependable collective knowledge rather than relying on the inner vision of designers. Working for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression, Rexford

Tugwell wrote (1939) The Fourth Power about rational planning. He also believed in research and analysis of needs. The rational model has dominated planning thought and practice and has persisted despite the challenges discussed below and continues to guide many practicing planners today (Dalton, 1986). The rational process seemed to be accessible to and feasible for all planners as it relied upon facts, research and reason.

Nevertheless, planners and planning theorists began to challenge the rational model because practically it was not possible. While practicing planners could develop and examine some alternative courses of action, they could not generate all the conceivable alternatives, nor anticipate all of their potential consequences, nor calculate all the costs and benefits of those potential consequences, let alone assess their likelihood of achieving the goal. Moreover, as noted above, it is logically impossible to plan rationally (e.g. there is no stopping rule) and planning problems are “wicked problems”, not amenable to rational planning (Rittel and Webber 1973).

The third period of planning theory is Planning and Markets, Planning and Systems. From a planning perspective the market is a thing of beauty. It does not coerce people but rather offers them choice.   Within their resource constraints people can choose as individuals according to their own view of their own interests. They are not forced to choose as a collectivity.

As Melvin Webber later emphasized the planner should seek to find ways that expand individuals' choices through "permissive planning" (1978). The planner should try to set up market like mechanisms. Some contemporary examples include the Community Development Block Grant, which enables cities to tailor funds to their own community needs, pollution cap and trade, which allows firms to decide how and when best to reduce their pollution, and housing vouchers which assist low income households to live in market rate housing of the type and location of their choice.

The planner's role evolved in loose correspondence with prevailing planning theory, as well as planning practice and historical context. Preparations for WWII created a need for analysis and systems theory. The War itself called for planning and high technology advancement and even a National Resources Planning Board (1933 - 1943). This was the peak time of the planner as neutral analyst. This model prevailed into the 1960's. RAND was the exemplar organization of analysts aiding the government and the military industrial complex. The post-WWII period was also the height of the cold war and the race to the moon. Computer technology was developing, making it possible for still more ambitious analysis and modeling. This was the period of the planner as technocrat.

The fourth period, Planning and Competing interests, arrived with important, tumultuous events: President Kennedy's assassination (1963), inner city riots, as low-income minority expectations were rising and at the same time thwarted (1964 -1968) and the Kerner Commission (1967) that looked into the causes of the riots. It famously concluded "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, the other white – separate and unequal." The march on Selma (1965) inspired people and further drew attention to the persistent discrimination and segregation in an affluent, post-War society. Then Martin Luther King was assassinated (1968). These events upset the complacency and optimism of post-War analytic planning.

The need to respond to these upheavals generated important Great Society programs, like Model Cities and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which were premised on the ideas of making distressed, impoverished communities into communities of productive employment, decent housing, and good schools and empowering poor communities to plan for themselves. The times drew young people to work on the new programs and to graduate school to learn professional skills to be effective in solving these urban problems.

Planners were engaged in the issues of the time and realized they were not neutral analysts, but rather should become advocates (Davidoff, 1965) for the disadvantaged. Others deferred to the affected parties –the stakeholders

or the interest groups, especially the least advantaged, often the poor residents of the affected community – through citizen participation. Sometimes planners developed alternative means that the community could select from to achieve the goals established by the citizen groups. In this way the planner worked for the affected citizens[v]. This arrangement was sometimes explicit, as I recall when I worked for a local Model Cities office in 1969.

Whether planning for citizen groups or government agencies, planners tried to follow the rational model, beginning with the goals and examining alternative courses of action to achieve the goal. Next, they would calculate all the costs and benefits of each alternative – long range, short range, tangible and intangible. Then they would choose the best, the one with the highest net benefit and implement it in the real world. Next they would monitor and evaluate the results, anticipated and unanticipated. Based on this evaluation they would then adjust the goal, or alternative or implementation.

Then the rational planning cycle would go around again. When the planner modifies the goal and course of action a bit more for the next round, and then refines the goal and course of action a bit more again, rational planning has become incremental (Hirschmann and Lindblom 1962). It adjusts in response to what it learns from implementation in the real world; that is, planning responds to feedback from the environment.

The planning environment consists of other actors, agencies and institutions acting in their interests, pursuing their goals. Thus planning takes place in a real world setting through a process of partisan mutual adjustment (Hirschmann and Lindblom 1962).

The fifth period of planning theory, Planning and Different voices, recognized that different affected actors had not only different interests but different ways of understanding. Disadvantaged groups, ethnic and immigrant groups and women have different ways of knowing than the establishment. Holston (2009, cited in Fainstein and DeFillipis 2016), for example, has written about insurgent planning. Dolores Hayden (1980), for example, has written about feminist planning theory.

As planners began to facilitate this process of engaging stakeholders in planning both the means and the ends, planning theorists became attuned to the power inequities in planning (Forester, 1982) and tried to make the deliberations undistorted (Forester 1989). Innes and Booher (2010, 36) refer to Habermas's ideal speech conditions (that claims are legitimate, accurate, comprehensive and sincere) as necessary to collaborative rationality. In this way planners become facilitators of the planning process, and in doing so

and becoming explicitly conscious of how they do so, make the planning process, itself, the means to the ends.

Thus such planners and planning theorists either tacitly or explicitly assume that the outcome of a good process is a good end, even as the goals are "likely to change during the course of deliberation. Hence the criterion for success is the realization of collective action and the capacity to adapt to change." (Innes and Booher, 2010, 203). However, as Zellner and Campbell (2015, 460, 461) observe, "A productive and fair collective process can still lead to environmental and social deterioration if participants cannot jointly make sense of the complexity they are dealing with and plan accordingly. When complexity overwhelms common sense and expertise, untested beliefs and political mandates override good judgement, even if consensual."

Others focus on outcomes. As Susan Fainstein writes, "Among planning theorists rather is debate between those who emphasize communication, negotiation and democratic decision making as the principal normative standard for planning and those who instead opt for a substantive concept of justice (2010, 9). "For just-city theories the principal test is whether the outcome of the process…is equitable" (2010, 10).

Means and Ends in Planning

Over the decades of planning theory assumptions about means and ends[vi] have changed in multiple ways. In the rational model, planners assumed rational planning would find or create the correct set of actions to achieve the given goal. In contrast, incremental planning assumed that planners had to learn what would achieve the goal by trial and error, cautiously trying small changes, and seeing how these steps interacted with the physical, social, economic and political environment to approach the goal.

In these approaches the goal was assumed to be the elusive “public good” or a more beautiful city (or waterfront or civic center) or the solution to a more concrete immediate problem, such as traffic congestion or the salinity level in the delta. In contrast, partisan mutual adjustment opened up earlier assumptions about the goal, to problematize the goal. In this theory there are multiple competing understandings of the goal.

Both Judith Innes and Susan Feinstein view this assumption as driving their concerns about planning theory, but they deal with it in different ways to yield different conclusions about good planning. Innes and Booher (2010) concentrate on misunderstandings, and how they can be clarified and re-articulated and framed through processes of communicative rationality and consensus building to eventually reach understanding and agreement, a “Win-Win” solution (Fisher and Ury 1981).

In contrast, Fainstein focuses on the competing goals of the multiple interest groups in the community affected by the planning, with special emphasis on the disadvantaged, so that the eventual plan will be just (2010). She writes "planners…should aggressively press for better outcomes, especially as they benefit those who are least able to defend themselves" (2014).

Analyzing interviews of 119 exemplary practicing planners, I found them to be both process-oriented facilitators and outcome –oriented. They tailored their strategies to political, bureaucratic and resource constraints, reconciling the debate by using processes to achieve valued outcomes (Christensen, 2015).

Conclusions

Considering the periods of planning theory it seems that each successive period has looked back on the prior period self-consciously to examine it more deeply and critically. In doing so the planners and theorists seem to have found the foundation of planning more complicated and rich than previously appreciated. The planners of the vision and reform period seemed to take their self-confidence for granted. Once examined, planning theorists sought a more secure grounding through surveys and analysis of needs. In the next period planners seemed to question the presumption that they would know best how to plan for others. Accordingly they seemed to seek ways people could satisfy their own view of their needs. Using the market as a model they tried to develop market-like mechanisms to address

planning problems and increase choice. This perspective and orientation relied on a more sophisticated and diversified understanding of need.

Then it seemed that the theorists subsequently examined the basis of the market model more deeply and found the polity contained different political and social interests – interest groups – that went beyond the individual self – interest of the market. The theorists of the fifth period, planning and different voices, seemed to analyze the various interest groups and to find that they have not only different interests, but more fundamentally different ways of knowing and understanding.

Thus planning theory and practice became more nuanced, sensitive and advanced as it became more self-reflective (Schon, 1983). Both theorists and practitioners have developed and refined the planning process to be more inclusive, fair and transparent and have honed their skills as facilitators (Innes and Booher, 2010, Christensen 2015). At the same time planning theorists and planners recognize that practitioners work within power constraints, are directed toward outcomes (Fainstein, 2010, Christensen, 2015) and grapple with complexity (Zellner and Campbell 2015, Innes and Booher, 2010).

As Prof. Webber said "There is nothing so practical as a good theory." A good planning theory should imply something to do. For example, communicative planning implies that the planner must attend to the discourse, ensuring that all affected stakeholders participate and that the

deliberations meet the ideal speech conditions referred to above. Mixed scanning (Etzioni, 1967) implies that the planner sometimes goes beyond everyday muddling through (Lindblom, 1959) to take the big picture to clarify major goals and alternative ways of achieving them. Even the Marxist theory that planning is a tool of the state can imply that the planner examine the distributional consequences of proposed plans and mitigate the effects on disadvantaged groups.

In this view, planning theory is not only descriptive of what planners do, but also normative. In most academic scholarship, the researcher strives to remain detached and not be prescriptive, in order to maintain a high standard of intellectual rigor. In contrast, the field of planning aims at “Doing good and being right” (Hoch, 1984). Unlike the scientist, planning tries to change – improve -- the initial conditions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Accordingly, planning theory aims at not only critically examining planning practice, but also helping to improve planning practice. As Fainstein and DeFilippis (2016, 3) argue, “theory can and should inform practice and should do so in explicit ways that are reflective and emerge from a dialogical relationship between theory and practice.”

In conclusion planning theory has reflected on both planning practice and planning thought, critically assessing the assumptions of the past. Planning

theory has moved from early confidence in design and progressive improvements, through analysis of needs and reliance eon reason, to promoting market like approaches to expand choice, to engaging citizens in active participation in planning, to facilitating consensus building and to actively benefiting the least advantaged. Planning theory seems to have refined the foundations of planning in response to both critical self-assessment and feedback from planning practice. Moreover, planning theory has not only described planning practice, it has unabashedly prescribed good planning practice.

Reviewing fourteen decades of planning theory, it seems to have become not only more nuanced and sensitive, but also more humane. In earlier decades its confidence seemed to border on arrogance (e.g. Tugwell's Fourth Power) and then dwindle in deference to citizens (Fainstein 2014, 274). As it grappled with power imbalances and tried to facilitate more fair deliberations and outcomes, planning regained a seat at the table, contributing both quality information and just processes.

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[i] January 1973, Nixon put a moratorium on a wide range of domestic programs, including many of HUD's and practically the entire Office of Economic Opportunity.
[ii] This comment refers to the course of the Marxist revolution.
[iii]
[iv] Prof. Judith Innes taught the contemporary theory course. Today the planning theory requirement is a course on urban theory.
[v] In this regard Fainstein (2014, 274) notes in her study of Minneapolis's Neighborhood Revitalization Program "I was struck by the passivity of planners, who interpreted citizen participation as meaning that they should not proffer opinions unless specifically requested to do so. My view….is that they should aggressively press for better outcomes,…"
[vi] In "Coping with Uncertainty in Planning" (1985) means was termed technology, or the "know how" in vernacular, and the ends was termed goal.