

The President's View: On The Uniqueness of Planning Knowledge and the Challenge of its Valorisation

Willem Salet

20st Congress of AESOP

Liverpool, July 15-18, 2009

Abstract

As the President of AESOP, I am very pleased with the privilege to give a reflective view on the state of our profession, in particular on the uniqueness of planning knowledge and the challenges it faces with respect to social and scientific valorization. Planning studies are deeply rooted in practice. Taking this as a point of departure, I will demonstrate the uniqueness of the planning knowledge, which highly differs from all other disciplines. I will further argue that in the present context of governance, the academic organization of planning is getting more and more interwoven with other disciplines. Finally, I will argue that as a result of all this, planning studies face the challenge of double valorization: both in practices and in the scientific world. I will conclude that the planning community qualifies very well for the first part of this challenge but we should make more progress with the second. For this reason, I see it as a crucial mission to put the scientific valorisation more prominently on the agenda of AESOP.

What we learned as a science of practice

In current times of international crisis, planning is called upon again to bring solutions where the prevailing liberalism of the market mechanism obviously appears to fail. As planners we simply do our work, in good times and in bad times, but we are well aware that it makes a difference whether society considers our particular activity as part of the problem or as part of the solution. The actual upheaval of planning does not mean that all solutions have to come from the government. Actually, we left this stage of separating state and society far behind us. The challenge is to organize collective spatial action in legitimate and effective ways, and this challenge includes all sorts of private and public sector initiatives, and manifold combinations. Planning is not a one-sided, government centered activity.

Typically, planning is rooted in practice. Its specific dedication is the *spatial planning intervention*, such as AESOPs Core Curriculum indicates the object of planning studies so precisely. The spatial planning intervention is context bounded, it is heading for a better future of spatial organization, and it mobilizes knowledge and action towards a new stage of spatial organization. These basic ingredients are evident for practitioners of planning. However, *we* do not intervene in practice: AESOP represents the schools of planning. We are not the practitioners of planning, but the scholars. The academic position, however, is not detached from the meaning

of planning in practice. Taking the academic role, the rationale of the planning discipline is to search for ways of improving practices of planning. Our education and research must make sense in practice. Even in the most fundamental or critical scientific explorations, planning studies must make sense in practice. This is not an evocative statement, it is simply a factual observation of what planning studies are about.

The consequences of this basic identity are immense. Our work is highly interrelated with practice. Planning education involves practitioners, planning research is often done in close collaboration with networks in practices. Also the dissemination and the valorization of scientific findings is interrelated with practices. At the same time, but according to completely different methods, scientific outcomes have to be valorized in the world of science. In this latter domain, as I will argue further on, the planning community should strongly improve its valorization but let us first consider some of the typical scientific lessons that we draw from the particular interaction with practice.

The most important lesson is that practices are extremely ambiguous and complex. In adjoining disciplines it is sometimes heard that the focus of planning studies on practice might hinder the real scientific mission of fundamental research: As if planning studies would be more simplistic and more at the applied level than other disciplines because of their pragmatic dedication! I do not agree with the label of 'applied studies' for planning sciences and even less with the supposed simplicity. In my experience, practices are extremely complex, far more complicated, ambiguous and uncertain than any cognitive or 'evidence based' model of science would be able to grasp.

The first lesson that we learned from our pragmatic scientific exploration is:

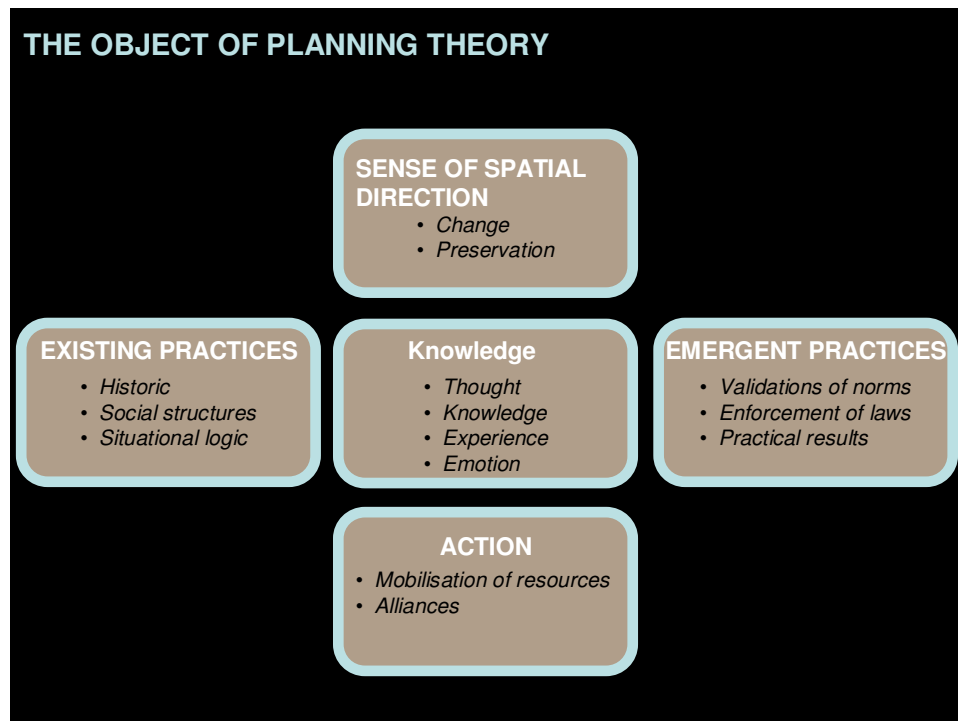
- that we are not living in a planned world. Social evolution takes its own complex ways. This recognition does not make the efforts of planning irrelevant, planning certainly can make a difference but the spatial planning interventions have to be responsive to the social driving forces in order to make a difference. In other words: It is 'active reconstruction' rather than 'free construction', and it is highly context bounded;
- next, planning is about engagement to a better spatial future. It is dealing with values and social and political objectives, with issues of social and spatial transformation. All this is normative and highly interpretative stuff;
- the next learning experience is that spatial planning interventions often work out different than at forehand expected. This doesn't make interventions senseless but it generates a respectful attitude towards real complexity. What we learned is that planning knowledge should not search for certainty but instead it has to find ways to deal with uncertainty and complexity;
- Next: planners have become aware of the multi faceted nature of knowledge. It is not only cognitive knowledge which matters but planning also depends on experience, on emotions and political rationality;

- a final important lesson is that we learned to deal with planning processes as dedicated but open minded processes, as processes of learning.

So, planning studies not only respect the complexity of the world in which interventions take place, but have developed very specific strategies of knowledge and action that enable to deal with problems of complexity and uncertainty.

The unique object of planning studies

On the basis of this learning experience, I will try to define the unique scientific object of planning in five dimensions. If you take the five dimensions together, they mark very precisely the differences with all other disciplines. The fascinating thing is that each of the five dimensions is strongly interwoven with the science object of other disciplines (actually planning is highly interdisciplinary). But I claim that there is no other discipline which shares all in integrative coherence! It will be no surprise that the five dimensions highly correspond with the meaning of planning in practice. Here they are: First of all, there is the normative embarking on a better future spatial situation. I call this the Sense of Spatial Direction. Next, there is a wide and multi layered field of Knowledge. Then, there is the spatial planning intervention, or to define it more encompassing: the Dimension of Action. These three dimensions are contextually bounded to existing practices (the fourth dimension), and finally all planning interventions have to acquire real meaning in new social practices (the fifth dimension). These are the five basic dimensions of spatial planning studies. They may get different expressions and they may be subdivided in more specific themes, such as is outlined in the next figure.



The single dimensions as such are not unique for planning studies. Actually, there is a lot of inspiration in other disciplines, such as urban design and political sciences for instance with respect to the Sense of Spatial Direction; or in economic or geographic studies with respect to positive knowledge, etc. There is a fertile ground for cross-pollination of disciplines. What makes planning really unique, however, is the way in which the five dimensions are integrated. This interconnectivity of the five dimensions is the crucial challenge of planning theories. It is the unique heart of planning knowledge, not only in applied forms of research but also for the most sophisticated concepts. The alternative ways of integrating the crucial dimensions even define the unique meta-theoretical (epistemological) issues of the planning discipline.

Obviously, there are many different planning theories. I only claim that in order to become a complete planning theory the five dimensions have to be interconnected in a certain way. Let's see some different paradigms.

- Some planning paradigms take the point of departure above in the figure: their thinking starts with the senses of spatial direction. The normative ideas about a better spatial organization in the future (which might require change of the existing situation or preservation of well-appreciated qualities) are taken as a lead to knowledge and action. The fascinating thing of this perspective is that these researchers claim that 'all action goes through the interpretation of the world and the commitment to a new future'. See the pivotal concepts of framing of Martin Rein and Donald Schön, or the use of policy discourses by Maarten Hajer. In epistemological terms, this is the 'interpretative meaning' of the senses of direction, knowledge and action.
- Other researchers, in contrary, start at the bottom of the figure: the dimension of action. They focus on the way in which the world of action is organized in structures of power and alliances and explain interpretation and knowledge out of organized action. Here, action does not follow the interpretation of the world, but precisely turned upside down the interpretation follows the ways in which action and power are organized. See how Bent Flyvbjerg explained the rationality of planning out of power. In epistemological terms one might label this as 'structuralism of knowledge and action'.
- Again other planning paradigms take the point of departure at the left side of the figure: in the prevailing context. They claim that the senses of direction, knowledge and action are essentially contextualized in social driving forces. We only have to remind the prolific work of John Friedmann, elaborating on the principia media of Karl Mannheim. In epistemological terms, this is called 'relationism of knowledge'.
- Again other paradigms take the pragmatist point of view. Here the senses of direction, knowledge and action have to get real meaning by experimentation. Here, the proof is in the eating of the pudding. We have to consider what comes out of it, if we want to see which norms, which knowledge and action strategies are valid. In epistemological terms, this position of knowledge and action is known as 'consequentialism'. Patsy Healey reminded us last year to the roots of pragmatism with some fine papers.

All paradigms represent the unique essence of planning knowledge. It is pragmatic but at the same time highly sophisticated in its own way. It is far more sophisticated than 'models' or so called 'evidence based planning'. There is nothing against finding evidence, in contrary, but what is mentioned by evidence based knowledge is simply cognitive and positive analysis of actual trends. Without any doubt, this positive knowledge is relevant *to* planning, it is always necessary to know where things are and to monitor what actually is changing, but it is not the most sophisticated knowledge *in* planning studies. Look at the highly isolated position of evidence based knowledge in the figure. Evidence based knowledge takes a particular stance on positive cognitive knowledge, it is separated both of the 'senses of spatial direction' and of 'action', and it is not contextualized. It does inform us about where things are, but it gives no clues to move from the present to a future situation. It is heading on the traditional ways to certainty while we know that the real planning challenges are in dealing with uncertainty and complexity. From a planning point of view – I just recall the meaning of the 'spatial planning intervention' as the crux of planning studies – the so called evidence based knowledge of planning is a relatively poor form of scientific knowledge.

However, in current practices this evidence based planning is widely spread and it appears to be considered as plausible and prestigious form of knowledge. In the last decade, the national planning office in my home country The Netherlands (and I dare to say in quite a few more countries), adopted the evidence based knowledge as its sole mission. As a result, the national spatial planning was almost killed. I am glad to say that planning practices in this particular country presently take a new turn towards planning again.

However, we also have to address the academic platforms of valorization. I investigated the five scientifically highest ranked planning journals and all of them appear to publish by far more the evidence based stuff of knowledge than the real planning knowledge. I don't want to blame the planning journals, I don't want to blame at all. I consider this as a prime responsibility of us, as the planning community. Sometimes I wonder, what the hell is going on? Why do we let this occur? The journals are completely right in taking an interdisciplinary approach and in their requirement of evidence but let it be more frequently our own well qualified planning evidence... We have to invest in the scientific valorization of the unique and real planning knowledge and - in order to make this feasible – in sound research methodologies.

The dynamic position of the planning discipline

Thus far, I argued that planning studies have a unique object, closely interrelated with practice. Why not just validating it in its own practice related ways? Some colleagues have argued that we should opt for our own way of scientific validation which pays more tribute to the appreciation in practices of planning sciences. Personally, I find it

very important to valorize knowledge in practice but with regards to scientific valorization I highly doubt whether it would be useful to take a separate route. First of all, we should not get isolated in our ways of scientific validation. Planning studies have a lot to win with interdisciplinary cross pollution. Secondly, the academic context has become extremely dynamic since the start of the Bologna process, and as a result planning got increasingly interrelated with other disciplines. Actually, the Bologna process itself was only one of the stepping stones in a much wider process of globalization, liberalization and also increasing competition between academic schools in an internationalizing context. We may observe two paradoxical tendencies: The reduction of scale and at the same time the enlargement of scale. Scale reduction is visible in the active game to frame new master and other education courses with a fashionable profile. The label planning is not always visible (not even in master courses of planning schools), it may change in 'urban management', urban design', 'urban development', 'environmental policies', 'governance', etc. At the same time, there is a tendency of enlargement of scale. Large interdisciplinary schools are believed to be better equipped for taking positions in the competitive international arena. Here, the scale of the planning discipline is too small at most universities and the planning discipline amalgamates with adjoining disciplines.

The increasingly interdisciplinary organization of local schools has both advantages and disadvantages. The new multi actor governance context of planning schools offers opportunities for enrichment. There are also risks, of course, in particular of losing autonomy of planning in both processes of rescaling. It is important to note that the processes of reorganization shape the conditions for joint programs of research and teaching with other disciplines. Large local schools increasingly develop joint evaluation programs and joint procedures of evaluating the performances of education and research. In short, the dynamic context of planning schools generates a high changeability of external conditions with a severe impact on daily practices of teaching and research.

I believe there is no reason for a defensive attitude in this changing context of governance. The best remedy to the increasing uncertainty on the external position of planning studies, seems me to invest in the own meaning of planning knowledge and from this self-confident position to keep an open mind for opportunities of enrichment via external relationships. This requires that planning knowledge is valorized at a high level which enables open contacts in larger academic configurations.

Facing the challenge of double valorization: The agenda of AESOP

The need of double valorization -in practices and in science- is challenging, as the ways into validation are so different. It requires that the same output of our findings has to be valorized in two completely different ways, including different languages and different platforms of dissemination. Often, the requirements of scientific valorisation are criticised as being biased to the cultures of exact sciences and as being selective to anglicised - in particular North American - dominancy. We all

know the biases of ISI citation indexes, and we know the biases of rating the research funded by official scientific organisations above research funded by professional organisations of government and market. However, the world is not fair and this also goes for the world of science. Furthermore, for a small discipline it would not be easy to change the dominant rules of scientific recognition.

Should we really aim at running our own competition? Actually, I strongly believe, we don't need the defensive arguments at all. Planning studies have developed an impressive body of knowledge and experience via the probing and testing of planning practices. Without any doubt, this body of knowledge is highly scientifically rooted. I consider the vast body of planning knowledge and experience as a goldmine waiting for further scientific exploration. We never should get rid of our particular academic mission to make sense in practices of our profession. The nature of our knowledge is rooted in practical experiences but we should be able to bring this on the highest platforms of scientific recognition.

Well, these are the challenges all of us are facing in our daily work. Planning studies are in stage of transformation. Such like all other disciplines, we have to meet new external conditions but as long as we manage to capitalize on the unique essence of planning knowledge and experience, I am very confident that planning studies will qualify excellently in times of change. The transformation of culture and organization will need some time. The mission of double valorisation will be prominent on the agenda of AESOP for a number of years. The ambition to create a prolific scientific climate belongs to the evident culture of AESOP and will become more visible in all activities:

- It will be visible in the way we organize the conferences with a serious focus on papers as draft publications in journals;
- it is already visible in the prizes of excellent performance of research and education;
- It is visible in the platforms and dialogues of annual head of school meetings; in the further promotion of international research networks in the thematic groups. In our mission to integrate the upcoming Central European schools in our community.
- An extremely important platform for fulfilling the mission of quality assurance is in the pro-active group of Young Academics. They are exemplary instituting the new expectations to perform both in pragmatic contexts and according to the highest scientific norms;
- It will become visible in the new quality assurance policies of AESOP. AESOP starts new initiatives enabling local schools to be advised by a pool of international experts (which will focus on both sides of valorisation);
- AESOP has to find additional ways to stimulate the investment in planning research methodologies. Today, I shortly addressed the issue of the identity of planning journals but we will find ways to continue this debate and to further stimulate the unique planning knowledge.

Speaking on behalf of EXCO and COREP we are very well aware that we depend on the cooperation of our full community and we are looking forward to any useful suggestion from your side to elaborate on this ambitious mission and to make it fully operational in next coming years.