

## Using Planning Theory in a PhD in Planning: Plugging into Paradigms

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### *Introduction*

It is not easy to do PhD research in spatial planning! And one of the main reasons is that there is not one, not even several competing, paradigms which can be used as a framework for the PhD research. The result is either that the researcher has to spend a lot of time searching for a theoretical framework for his/her research, or that the researcher carries out the work without being able to put it into such a framework, whereby the relevance of that PhD research (what it contributes to knowledge) cannot easily be assessed.

More experienced researchers have fewer problems: and the reason is illuminating. It is that they / we have built up over the years our own theoretical framework that we use as a basis for our research, refining it, testing it critically, only very rarely rejecting it and starting out on another one. We have that great advantage. But we tend to keep it for ourselves, for we seldom make it explicit (not even to ourselves) whereby other people (and in particular those with less experience) cannot benefit from it.

My message is that we - the senior researchers - have a responsibility to make explicit the theoretical framework that we use for research into spatial planning, so that others can use it, improve it, tell us why it should be rejected. That will help PhD researchers. And it will help also

to build up cumulatively a body of knowledge, for it will help all researchers to relate their research to the research of others.

Here I want to outline the theoretical framework which I use for my work. Obviously, you are not obliged to accept it, and I would enjoy it if you were to criticise it sharply. I put it forward partly to show how it can be helpful to have a very broad framework for one's work (for me, it is the framework which I have used for research into a wide range of problems in spatial planning over many years). But I claim more for it. For I have a very strong suspicion that it is the framework used - often implicitly - by very many others also, both researchers and practitioners (it is for that reason that I use the term 'paradigm' in the title<sup>1</sup>). If that is so, then putting our research explicitly into that framework helps others to see how they might be able to use our research for their own practice or research.

### *Rationality as a starting point*

Rationality was THE paradigm for planning: but it has to be abandoned (Alexander, 1984). And nothing has arisen which can take its place as a 'philosophy / theory / methodology on which planning practice could be based' (Muller, 1998). This explains why PhD students have so much difficulty in finding a theoretical framework for their research. Yet, I argue, abandoning rationality is not necessary. The 'classical' exposition of rationality (Davidoff and Reiner, 1965) has to be rejected: yet no one dares to argue for a methodology of planning in which people should act IRRATIONALLY. What I put forward here is a version of rationality which can serve as a starting point for a theory of spatial planning.

The reason I do this is the following:

- we can theorise about spatial planning from two different motivations. One is that we want to understand the social activity of spatial planning better: this has been called the

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<sup>1</sup> We should be careful how we use the term 'paradigm'. Muller (1998) thinks that it is inappropriate to use it in connection with planning theory, but Wormhoudt (1981) sees no objection to doing so. Considering that many other authors apply the idea of paradigms to planning theory (e.g. Galloway and Mahayni, 1977; Faludi, 1982; Alexander, 1984; Innes, 1994; Neuman, 1998) we shall do so too.

'objective' approach to spatial planning theory. The second motivation is to improve the practice of spatial planning: the 'normative' approach<sup>2</sup>:

- it is useful if the objective theory and the normative theory (which is the same as a methodology for spatial planning<sup>3</sup>) can be related to each other. If a normative theory (how spatial planning SHOULD be carried out) bears no relationship to how spatial planning is ACTUALLY carried out, then practitioners will take little notice of the recommendations. And if the positive theory cannot be translated into recommendations for a better practice, then the only people who benefit from the positive theory are the academics (a form of 'art pour l'art'):
- recommendations for practice derived from a normative theory of spatial planning inevitably assume reasoned behaviour by those to whom the recommendations are directed. For an argument is presented in the form: 'if you want to achieve this, then according to my argument you should do this and that'. The practitioner is assumed to use his/her reason in linking cause and effect, in taking account of contextual variables, in weighing pros and cons, in plotting tactics. (The alternative would be to suspend rationality and to practice augury, as the ancient Romans did, deciding on policy by examining the entrails of a hen or observing the flight of birds.) This assumption of reasoned behaviour is the basis of all policy and administrative sciences which aim to improve practice, not only of normative theories of spatial planning;
- if the normative theory assumes reasoned behaviour, and if we want to be able to relate positive theory to normative theory, then for developing a positive theory of spatial

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2 For the duality objective / normative applied to another sort of activity - namely real estate studies - see Diaz 1993. See also Faludi (1986 section 1.2) for a discussion of the distinction empirical / normative applied to planning theory.

3 This is argued in Faludi, 1981 and in Needham, 1998.

planning also we can assume reasoned behaviour. But then only in the form of an hypothesis which can be tested empirically; and rejected if found to be wanting<sup>4</sup>.

*Who is being rational and how*

Two problems (at least!) remain if we take rationality as a starting point for a theory (positive or normative) of spatial planning.

One problem is: whose activity are we observing and/or wanting to change? There are very many people and agencies involved in spatial planning! My answer is: we posit that there is a planning agency. This is a public body which has, and takes, the responsibility for trying to ensure that the spatial disposition of buildings and spaces and of the activities which take place within them, also the activities on the unbuilt land, in a specified geographical area, meet certain specified objectives. (This uses the idea of a planning agency as put forward by Alexander and Faludi, 1996 and applied to a description of the activity of spatial planning which is to be found in and justified in Needham, 1997).

This is, of course, not the only actor involved in spatial planning. My reason for concentrating on this is the wish to be able to develop a methodology for spatial planning. This must produce recommendations for practice. But whose practice? And the most important practitioner is the agency which has the responsibility for initiating and trying to realise spatial planning policy in a particular area. So the normative theory assumes a planning agency, to which advice for better practice is directed. From the wish to be able to relate normative and positive planning theory, it follows that the positive theory also should assume that there is a planning agency. But once again, the assumption has the status of an empirically testable hypothesis, that can be rejected.

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4 This argument is, I think, completely compatible with the argument of Alexander. He said in 1984 that rationality as a paradigm has to be abandoned. Yet he said in 1986, 'The attempt to exclude deliberative rationality from a comprehensive view of planning is futile'. The gap he identified in 1984 he suggests (in that same article from 1984) filling up with a 'contingency approach' which has the possibility of 'synthesizing research findings with normative prescriptions'.

The second problem is: what do we mean when we assume that someone (in this case, a planning agency) acts rationally? Nothing more, and nothing less, than that the person / agency makes choices (in this case, about spatial planning) taking account of what it is desired to achieve and what is known about the best way of achieving that. This is far from rationality in the classical sense (see e.g. Davidoff and Reiner, 1965): it is a form of critical rationalism such as defined by Faludi (1986).

My solution to both problems is: I posit that there is a planning agency which tries to fulfil its responsibility by acting rationally. This means using reasoned argument to find the best way of meeting specified objectives, taking account of the circumstances in which it has to act. In doing this, the planning agency takes account also of certain general administrative and political norms, such as effectiveness, efficiency, openness and democratic control.

The fact that for one geographical area there can be several planning agencies (e.g. a municipality, a regional government, a national government) all with spatial planning responsibilities and policies for the SAME area, makes it more difficult for each one of these agencies separately to act rationally in the above sense. But it is not necessary, nor sensible from the point of view of an agency trying to achieve its aims, to conclude: therefore we need not attempt to behave rationally.

An important consequence of focusing on a planning agency as the actor which acts (or tries to act) rationally is that we abandon the idea that there can be one best plan/policy for an area. For if there are several planning agencies for one area, each with a different responsibility, and each acting rationally in its own lights, then each can produce a different plan/policy for the one area. The problem for practice remains: there can for that one area be only one plan/policy realised, how can that be chosen? I have no answer!

Another important consequence of focusing on a planning agency is that it is that agency which is assumed to behave rationally, not an individual planner. It is the task of the planner - I would argue - to help the planning agency to make its choices rationally. This is worked out below, using the idea of the design discipline.

The statement that there is a planning agency which tries to fulfil its responsibility by acting rationally can be regarded as a description of reality, in which case it can be empirically investigated critically. It can be regarded also as a prescription: that if there is a planning agency, then it should act rationally. This prescription can be worked out as a methodology for spatial planning.

### *The role of knowledge in the design disciplines*

If we take the normative approach, then the role of knowledge in spatial planning needs to be specified, for your research might very well be directed to improving spatial planning. (As an aside, even those PhD theses which claim to describe and analyse practice so as to understand it better can rarely withstand the temptation to close with a chapter on 'the implications for practice'!). How can one achieve that? In working this out I follow Aken (1994). He sets out what he describes as the paradigm of the design disciplines. This is, very briefly, the following.

The paradigm refers to disciplines such as technical sciences, medicine, business studies, law, and the aim of these disciplines is to develop knowledge for designing artefacts or for improving existing situations. The test of that knowledge is the pragmatic one of whether, when it is applied under the specified circumstances, it leads to the intended results. This knowledge is meant to be used by professionals (e.g. architects, aeroplane designers, psychotherapists) in order to solve a normative problem (c.f. a 'truth' problem).

The professional is asked to solve a unique and specific problem, as defined by the 'client'. He or she analyses the problem (perhaps redefining it), designs measures for tackling it, takes the measures (or they are taken by the 'client'), and evaluates the results. As part of this work, the professional designs:

- the situation to be aimed at (the end situation);
- the process for realising that (the steps that must be taken);
- the process which the professional and the client must follow in order to design the end result and how to realise it.

The professional must be able to justify his/her work to the 'client'. To do that, he/she has to be able to make use of a store of ready knowledge (e.g. the doctor making a diagnosis).

The academic aim of a design discipline is to develop and spread the knowledge which the professional can incorporate into his/her store of ready knowledge. This knowledge can be developed by the 'reflective cycle':

- class of situations is selected;
- one example is chosen;
- the application of a measure (or measures) is studied;
- the results are 'reflected upon';
- this is repeated for a second example from this class;
- this is repeated until no more improvement or refinement in the knowledge is made (convergence).

### *Spatial planning as a design discipline*

It must be recognised that there are very important differences between the design disciplines which Van Aken (op.cit.) names (medicine, architecture, aerospace design, law, psychotherapy: Van Aken himself comes from business studies) and spatial planning. One difference is that the agency which wants to bring about the change (being a public agency which commissions and adopts spatial policy for a particular area) is usually not able to implement it directly. For in most cases, the spatial disposition in a particular area is created and changed by very many actors (public and private, individual and corporate) acting both in their own interest and in what they see as the interest of others. As a result, most public bodies which practise spatial planning have only a small and indirect influence on the spatial disposition.

For that reason it can be misleading to think of spatial planning as being mainly the designing of the spatial disposition of activities, buildings and spaces (e.g. making a spatial plan, although that is indeed part of the activity). 'Designing' the spatial disposition is mainly a question of deciding what measures to take in order to influence the actions of those who **do** shape the spatial disposition, so that the way they do that shaping results in a **desired** spatial disposition. So, in most cases spatial planning is an **intervention in**, or an **influencing of**, the creation and use of the physical environment by others. Then it is better to think of spatial planning as the **designing**

**of a policy** for realising a desired spatial disposition of activities, buildings and spaces. That places special demands on the way the policy has to be 'designed'.

Another important difference concerns the multiplicity of aims which the planning agency might be pursuing. A 'client' going to a 'design professional' asks for advice on how to solve a problem: the 'design professional' might think it advisable to redefine that problem. A planning agency wanting to shape the physical environment in its area will want to do that because of a number of problems, which might be affecting each other. In that case, it might be necessary for the 'design professional' to advise between competing 'ends/means packages'. Nevertheless, it is (in theory at least) the political organ of the planning agency which makes the choices.

In spite of those important differences between spatial planning and the design disciplines such as architecture, business studies, law, I still consider it useful to apply the paradigm of the design disciplines to spatial planning. The main reason is that in many countries there are public agencies which have been given the responsibility of carrying out the activity as described above. In that case it is desirable that it be carried out better. In connection with this, there are many people interested in the practical implications of your research!

### ***Plugging into paradigms***

When you are carrying out your research, you will be helped greatly if you can 'plug into a paradigm'. Every PhD student has the right to ask his/her supervisor, at the beginning of the research, to make explicit which theoretical framework is being used or assumed.

Thereafter, the responsibility is yours. Are you going to work within that, accepting it provisionally as a 'given' within which your research is placed? (That is, in my opinion, a quite legitimate way of limiting the scope of your research.) Are you going to try to refine or improve it? Or are you going to test it critically? Is it a framework for understanding better the practice of spatial planning? Or for improving it? If the latter, to whom are your recommendations directed? By describing 'implications for practice', are you assuming some sort of rationality? You probably are (in the sense of 'using one's reason'): how does that fit in with the theoretical framework.

You are right to look enviously at PhD researchers in other fields, who can choose (or are given) a clearly defined problem to solve within a generally accepted framework (a puzzle within a paradigm, in Kuhnian terms). The task of challenging that paradigm is, quite correctly, left to more experienced researchers who have a much better overview of the whole discipline. And you are right to criticise senior researchers in spatial planning if they cannot offer you such a general framework. Here, I have tried to describe the framework that I can offer you.

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