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Louis Albrechts — Belgium

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Louis Albrechts is Professor Emeritus of Strategic Spatial Planning in the Department of Architecture, Urbanism and Planning at the University of Leuven, Belgium. His current research focuses on the practice and nature of strategic spatial planning, diversity and creativity in planning, public involvement in planning and bridging the gap between planning and implementation.

Back to Square One or Seeds for a New Start?

From the 1980s onwards, Belgium shifted away from a tight central state towards a new form of government in which the three regions, Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, each have considerable autonomy. Each region has its own legislative body (parliament), a government and its own administration. Spatial planning, housing, transport, the environment and regional aspects of economic policy are now the exclusive responsibility of the three regions.

My reply concerns Flanders (13521 km² and a population in 2014 of 6.4 million), where a three-tier planning system was adopted with structure plans and spatial implementation plans at each level, which in this case are: the Flanders region, its five provinces and its 308 municipalities.

1. Present Status of Planning

The planning system adopted in 1996 replaced a statutory multi-layered system of planning that involved compulsory land-use plans at the sub-regional level and the local level. Most of these statutory plans were designed for situations of stability and predictability in which plans serve as blueprints offering investors (including local residents) and developers the kind of certainty they want. These kinds of plans are guided by what planners would normatively like to see happen, rather than being a fine-grained analysis of what actually takes place. The interpretation of land-use plans in terms of form and content, e.g. comprehensive, detailed, covering every single square meter of land, etc., is in effect a negation of change, dynamics, and uncertainty. Such plans soon become outdated, are often utopian, are seldom based on sufficient and correct data, do not take resources or a time factor into account and sometimes not even the possibilities for their implementation. In short, they focus on legal certainty, which makes the plans far more rigid, inflexible and less responsive to changing circumstances. As such, they are not suited for dealing with the dynamics of society, changing issues, changing circumstances and a changing context. Moreover, they force planners and politicians to make choices before the time is right and the mainly comprehensive nature of land-use plans is at odds with increasingly limited resources. Even under the new planning system, the land-use plans are still the legal basis for permits. They can only gradually be replaced by implementation plans.

Against this background, overall spatial frameworks were developed for the Flanders region, its provinces and municipalities. These spatial frameworks became an important element in the process of “nation building” and envisioning the Flemish territory in a broader context. In 1992, when the

Structure Plan Flanders (time horizon 2007) was started, spatial planning had a very low profile as a discipline. The process for the Structure Plan Flanders put spatial planning back on the political and social agenda and created a new élan and a new spirit in the planning department and in the community at large.

From 1999 to 2004, planning was the responsibility of conservative ministers. However, these ministers also had responsibility for other policy fields, e.g. budget, employment, etc., that they considered more important. This had a negative impact on the status of planning, not only in political decision-making, but also in society at large. At the Flemish level, this provoked tension between the political level and the planning administration. The center of gravity shifted from Flanders to some of the leading municipalities: Antwerp, Ghent, and some regional cities. However, the 2002 municipal elections and a new austerity policy brought about a conservative turn.

In 2004, the new minister of planning became responsible for the environment and was eager to reactivate planning. Her focus is on the integration of spatial planning and environmental planning. She proposes policy plans to replace the structure plans and aims to focus on a more concrete area-based planning. Questions remain on the real meaning of a policy plan, how to shift from the old to the new system and how the integration of a “softer” spatial planning will work with the more technical environmental planning.

2. Dominant Themes and Media Coverage

Increasing ribbon development, unplanned industrialization and a general fragmentation of both green zones and agricultural areas dominated the planning discourse in the 1960s. The discourse surrounding the Structure Plan Flanders focused on: the ad hoc adjustments of sub-regional (land-use) plans to changing circumstances, the use and abuse of rural land, urban decay, daily reports on traffic jams, and neglect of the local public transport network. Moreover, the government gradually realized that all these problems, i.e. urban decay, road congestion, filling up open spaces, irreconcilable spatial demands for housing, nature and the economy, were revealing structural shortcomings in the overall planning framework. What caused the discourse to turn was a realization of the enormity of the planning challenges. Located at the nerve center of Western Europe, Flanders feels the full force of the spectacular restructuring of economic, political, ideological and social relations. While sustainability, subsidiarity, networks, spatial quality, projects, and the integration of key actors in the planning process dominated the discourse in the 1990s, nowadays, the economy, flexibility, legal

certainty, and climate change start to dominate the discourse. The debate in the media on planning issues, which was lively in the 1990s, has disappeared completely.

3. *Theory vs. Practice*

University policies and a publisher's market dominated by journals in English make it hard for academics to publish in Dutch. This implies that most of their publications (if there are any) are not accessible to the Flemish planning community. I witness a widening gap between the universities and practitioners, research and practice, and systematized thought and practical action. This gap is related to the relationship between the kinds of knowledge honored in academia and the kind of skills, competence, and attitude valued in professional practice.

4. *Addressing and Reducing Disparities*

Traditional land-use planning is not able to ensure that desirable developments actually take place where and when they are needed and it entails false assumptions of certainty and static context. In this way, land-use plans often abstract from real, historically determinate parameters of human activity and gratuitously assume the existence of transcendent operational norms. The approach to planning via a single policy field, i.e. spatial planning, has met fierce opposition from other and usually more powerful policy fields. Indeed, although land-use plans have formal status and serve as official guidelines for implementation, when it comes down to the actual implementation, other policy fields, which are needed for the implementation because of their budgetary and technical resources, are easily able to sabotage the spatial plans if they want to. As these land-use plans have a predominant focus on physical aspects through providing physical solutions to social or economic problems, it became increasingly clear that a number of planning concepts, e.g. compact cities, livable cities, smart cities, creative cities, multi-cultural cities, fair cities, just cities, and learning regions, cannot be achieved solely through physical "hard" planning. In academia, voices are being raised to link spatial planning with socio-spatial innovation. This would have to allow raising governance issues that go beyond established discourses and practices of technical and legal regulation and a mere technical-rational use of instruments. There is a plea to structurally embed socio-cultural and political contexts in planning annex social innovation, e.g. process, content, and instruments used. This refers to changes in governance relating to current and historical relationships of dominance and oppression.

5. *Future Challenges and Education*

What planning students need is a curriculum that supports and stimulates a mindset or attitude that is intuitive, insightful, creative, and with which they can challenge assumptions, break habits, change

mental models, and escape from old paradigmatic ways of thinking. Planning programs need to be open to new categories of thought, the creation of new patterns and new languages (spatial quality). They need to unify, to integrate and to see the whole picture, as well as being open to seeking out new paths when rule-bound and habit-bound thinking can't cope. Geography, as a social science, provides tools for analyzing and understanding structural issues in society, but it falls short in providing answers. Architecture has a clearly focused creativity, but lacks a deeper understanding of the structural issues at hand (diversity, climate change, social justice etc.). Hence my plea for "independent" planning schools which provide links to, among others, architecture, social sciences and geography.

6. *Role of the European Union*

Due to increasing complexity, planning processes need to be adaptive to changing circumstances and need to evolve with new information and new knowledge, such as scientific and local findings, and changing contextual conditions, such as scale or time horizons. As both a bottom-up approach rooted in the conditions and potential of local assets (interpreted in their broadest sense) and a complementary multi-level top-down approach aimed at introducing fundamental and structural changes are indispensable, I am in favor of a mutually beneficial dialectic between top-down structural development and bottom-up local uniqueness. Indeed, a mere top-down and centrally organized approach runs the danger of overshooting the local, historically evolved and accumulated knowledge and qualification potential, while a one-dimensional emphasis on a bottom-up approach tends to deny – or at least underestimate – the importance of linking local differences to structural global tendencies. This dialectic constitutes for me the bare essence of multi-level governance. Thus, the issues at hand should be the deciding factor as to what should be dealt with at what level (networks at European level?). Spatial planning could benefit from an evaluation of the effect that environmental legislation and policy at a European level has had on some member states.