

Klaus R. Kunzmann and Martina Koll-Schretzenmayr

**The State of Planning and Planning Education in Europe 2015**

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**Abstract**

Since planning has become an academic discipline, debates on the role of planning in the post-industrial society and on the right approach to educate and train planners for this society seem to never end. The community of planners across Europe argues constantly that planning (be it urban and regional or spatial or environmental) is always in a crisis and does not receive the required political support from European, national, regional or local governments. The extent to which planning does address social disparities and can contribute to territorial cohesion is a much-discussed theme among planners. There are continuous debates about the right approach to planning education, between architecture, urbanism or geography and planning as an independent discipline. Finally there are ongoing controversies about the role of the European Commission in intervening into local or national urban policies.

Addressing these debates, the paper presents the outcome of a survey among planners and practitioners on the occasion of the publication of the 200<sup>th</sup> issue of the Swiss planning journal: **disp: The Planning Review**. Randomly selected renowned academic planners and practitioners from 18 countries in Europe have been asked to respond to six questions concerning the state-of-the-art of planning and planning education in 2015. The responses were in English, French, German and Italian the four languages of the only multi-lingual planning journal in Europe. A synthesis of the 34 responses to our questions is given in this paper.



## Introduction and Background

More than a decade ago *disP – The Planning Review* asked planners in Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Canada to reflect on the future of a discipline that seems to be continuously under challenge (disp 148 in 2002: *Zukunft der Raumplanung*). The response was cautiously positive, though planners noticed the widening gap between ambitions and reality, with contradictions between the rationales of planning and the rationales of democracy and participation rising on the horizon. Twelve years later, times have changed and the concerns have certainly changed. Political developments, such as the global financial crisis, the crisis of economic development in Mediterranean countries, the diminishing appeal of the European project, and trends toward re-nationalism across Europe have changed the priorities of the political agenda. Planning, though an important field to maintain liveability in cities and regions, it seems is not (anymore?) a priority, despite the efforts of the European Commission to launch a European Urban Agenda. Social, economic and territorial disparities are growing at all levels of planning and decision-making. The concern for the environment is losing appeal and is often expressed just to sell new technologies. Land consumption is still moving towards building suburban housing and new infrastructures, and the evolving e-shopping culture is causing excessive logistics all around cities and regions. At the same time, many architects and urbanists are raising their voices and dreaming of building resilient, green, healthy, intelligent, digital, smart, compact or even wise cities. But are they all aware of the reality of city building in times of neo-liberal market led economies? Do they really reflect on the economic and political dimensions of urban development, and do they care about the concerns of citizens? What is the state of the art of planning in Europe in 2015? What is the state of planning education? Addressing these debates, the paper presents the outcome of a survey among planners and practitioners on the occasion of the publication of the 200th issue of the Swiss planning journal: **disP: The Planning Review**.

We had asked a total of 50 randomly selected planners in 18 European countries – Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom – to send us their personal impressions about the state of the art of planning and about planning education. We are well aware that some European countries are not represented in this survey. The selection was neither systematic nor balanced. Not everyone approached found the time to

respond. However, we added Turkey to Europe to resonate the strong contributions of the planning community in this country to European research. The participants come from varied institutional backgrounds and include academic planners as well as practitioners. When selecting planners we did not aim to be representative nor did we seek balance between theory and practice. We acknowledge that we received more academic responses than responses from planning practice. Our interest was to receive personal responses from individual planners, who we considered to be representative voices of their country. We did not wish to receive politically correct country reports..

Thirty-four respondents found the time to reflect on our six questions:

- 1. What is the present state of planning, whether urban and regional or spatial and environmental, in politics and in the society of your country?*
- 2. What themes dominate the discourse about planning in your country? Do the national media, e.g. newspapers and television, report on these planning challenges?*
- 3. Is the gap between theory and practice in planning growing in your country? What role does English planning literature play in this discourse?*
- 4. To what extent do planners in your country address growing social, economic and spatial disparities? Do they believe that spatial planning could contribute to reducing such disparities?*
- 5. Are planning students adequately prepared to pro-actively address future challenges in planning in your country? Should planning education return to schools of architecture or perhaps be offered in geography schools?*
- 6. Would you like to see urban and regional planning and spatial planning being regulated top-down by the European Union? Should the European Union formulate a joint European Urban Policy?*

The responses to our questions were given in English, French, German and Italian to reflect the four languages of the only multi-lingual planning journal in Europe. Though the respondents were encouraged to respond in one of disP's four languages (German, French, English and Italian) in order to support the multi-lingual mission of disP: The Planning Review, most responses are in English. This perfectly reflects how much English, as the lingua franca, already dominates the academic European planning community.

The outcome of our initiative is an impressive journey across Europe. A synthesis of the 34 responses to our questions is presented in this paper. We are well aware that the records of this journey are not representative, neither for Europe as a whole nor for any individual country. Summing up the individual responses provides food for thought for a timely discussion on the current state of spatial planning and planning education in Europe. Thereby we first state, why we asked this particular question, before we present our brief analysis of the responses from all over Europe.

**1. *What is the present state of planning, whether urban and regional or spatial and environmental, in politics and in the society of your country?***

*At the turn of the century, the ESDP (European Spatial Development Perspective) thrilled academic planners across Europe because governments – and even planners – seem to have gradually lost interest in spatial planning, especially at the regional level. Is this observation correct, and does it differ from country to country? How is planning viewed in 2015? Do neo-liberal policies dominate urban and regional development in Europe? Do citizens appreciate the role of planners, or do they complain about public regulation and intervention, about large infrastructure projects and a lack of democracy? Do investors argue about overregulation and planners complain about insufficient interest in planning matters? Is spatial planning, both urban and regional, finally appreciated for its efforts after so many decades, or still seen as a public sector instrument to control private investment?*

The answers show a bleak picture of the state of planning. Planning in Europe in 2015 seems to be in a state of re-orientation. The majority of respondents complain about the critical state of spatial planning in their countries. More than half of the respondents explicitly expressed the view that spatial planning has a low political profile in their respective countries. Respondents from northern European countries, in turn, seem to be more content with their established planning tradition, which is strongly focused on the community level.

Changing political priorities, modifications in the regulatory system, or organizational changes are seen as the main reasons for the gradual decline of the status of planning in Europe. The responses from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece refer to the effects of the global financial crisis of the year 2008. They observe that the crisis has favoured deregulation policies in order to promote market-led economic development. Planning regulations are seen as the cause of time-consuming and cost-intensive urban and regional development processes. Most respondents report that the negative implications of this re-scaling of planning for cities and people are seldom assessed systematically. Though policy documents in most European countries show well-worded support for sustainable and resilient urban and regional development, planning as a national government responsibility and the use of space as a regulated public task seems to have further lost importance in society and day-to-day politics. Only in Switzerland, where challenges of spatial development in cities and regions are widely discussed in the media, does spatial planning seem to have a more positive image.

The predominant political focus on economic growth in a range of European countries has put spatial planning under pressure. Growth at any price – and if necessary, even on greenfields – seems to have priority in many places. As a rule, the financial interests of investors are placed well ahead of the efforts of planners to bring about a sustainable and resilient development of living spaces. In many countries in Europe policy-makers seem to be increasingly convinced that social, economic and ecological challenges can be better solved through sector politics and approaches rather than through overall sector coordination of spatially effective activities. Responses from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, where planning has a long tradition, state that deregulation in the realm of spatial planning, which is linked to the recent political re-orientation, has to be seen as a dramatic step backwards. Moreover, respondents from Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary report that spatial planning is still suffering under the negative connotation of decades of socialist planning economy, 25 years after the political transition. Nonetheless, in post-socialist countries, spatial planning is expected to pave the way for receiving EU subsidies and to orchestrate the spatial

prerequisites for economic growth and public infrastructure development to prepare the ground for private investors.

One issue reported by many respondents is alarming. It is the observation that in most EU countries, in contrast to *urban* planning, the traditional importance of *regional and national* spatial planning is declining. Cabinet shake-ups in Germany and the Netherlands, for example, recently demonstrated the low political interest in spatial planning at the national level of planning and decision-making. Also on the regional level, spatial planning seems to have lost its former significance.

In contrast, many respondents, particularly from Switzerland, Poland, Turkey, Denmark and Germany, assert that in addition to urban planning and the design of the immediate living environment, which is still widely accepted, planning in wider functional city regions has become a new arena of integrated spatial planning. This shows that despite the weakness of a probably methodologically outdated traditional physical regional planning, strategic inter-communal development in functional city regions is seen as an important field of public policy. Their inflexible administrative borders are often replaced by soft functional borders allowing for better management of regional spatial and economic development. Some respondents expressed an additional challenge: the difficulty in implementing large-scale infrastructural projects in city regions when faced with opposition from civil society, such as airport extensions, railway stations like Stuttgart 21 or inner city investment projects. Whether the opposition to such projects reflects a lack of public involvement in planning processes or perhaps democratic deficits, or not-in-my-backyard attitudes, remains open.

All in all, despite all the concerns expressed about the decreasing importance of planning, many respondents still believe in the positive role of planning in local development and hope that planning can positively address socio-economic and environmental challenges. However, it has become ‘common sense’ that planning processes will be more political and less and less technocratic. This in turn will require more strategic thinking and management and much mediation competence to moderate between the interests of political and economic stakeholders and the requirements and expectations of the people.

**2. What themes dominate the discourse about planning in your country? Does the national media, e.g. newspapers and television, report on these planning challenges?**

*The discourse on planning in the European Union is expected to differ from country to country. Our assumption is that it depends largely on the economic conditions of the country, its mainstream national policies, and on the amount of attention planning receives in regional and national media. The availability of jobs, land for development, accessibility by public and private transport, resource conservation, the integration of migrants, the provision of affordable housing in inner cities are all concerns that planners have to address these days. The respective discourse in a particular country reflects the concerns and values of its citizens and their satisfaction with the political system, as well as the impact of influential books on the zeitgeist. However, is the media concerned with or interested in spatial planning? Does the media offer an opportunity to inform people about emerging planning issues or launch debates about the impact that planning has on our living space? Is spatial planning largely ignored by the media except in cases in controversies over of high profile infrastructure projects?*

Planning faces a broad spectrum of challenges and this is similarly true for the many fields of action. Challenges mentioned by the respondents include:

- Implementing large, environmentally-compromising and cost-intensive infrastructure and investment projects
- Managing sustainable development
- Protecting nature and scenic landscapes
- Containing urban sprawl in city regions
- Responding to the erosion of public services, mainly in rural regions
- Addressing social disparities that result from market-led economic policies
- Coping with the implications of growing planning deregulation
- Handling planning failures
- Dealing with gentrification processes in inner cities Providing affordable housing
- Dealing with democratic deficits caused by insufficient citizen participation and insufficient invitations from government
- Reversing declining building cultures
- Providing good design of public spaces
- Anticipating the spatial implications of new smart technologies

In their answers, most respondents confirmed that spatial planning does not play a significant role in the public media of their countries. As a rule, spatial planning seems not to be a concern of radio and television channels or regional newspapers except in a few media, both print and radio, that only target a small group of informed listeners or readers. Most popular media report on planning themes only when it is about particularly controversial local planning projects, complaining about planning failures or related corruption cases. Switzerland seems to be an exception. There, after two decades of absence, spatial planning recently returned to the media when it covered a series of direct democracy votes on several spatial planning initiatives and the revision of the spatial planning law. In Switzerland, recent disasters caused by natural hazards raised people's concerns for the need for building-bans in high-risk zones through spatial planning regulation – an observation that was also reported in Italy.

***3. Is the gap between theory and practice in planning growing in your country? What role does English planning literature play in this discourse?***

*In the international community of planners, there are growing concerns about a widening gap between theory and practice, as there are fewer and fewer bridges between academia and professional practice. In this context, language also plays a key role. While the quest for more participation in planning requires the use of the local language to communicate with citizens, English has become the language of the international scientific community. It would be worthwhile to explore how this gap could be narrowed again. Another observation should be mentioned: depending on regional traditions, planning theory has quite different roles in planning cultures across Europe.*

All over Europe, a growing gulf between theory and practice is being reported, between planning practitioners and planning academics and researchers respectively. The answers suggest that in at least some European countries two processes apparently play a role. One explanation given is that practitioners are less and less involved in teaching at planning schools, thus the exchange between educational institutions and professional practice is dwindling. In the last two decades, the practice of

bringing in professionals to teach at universities has declined enormously. Practitioners are not appointed as planning chairs or have no interest in entering the world of theory-dominated academia. Accreditation and internal university evaluation processes seem to add further to the theory or practice controversy in spatial planning. However, there are exceptions to such observations: voices from countries such as Italy and Poland, where architects still dominate the planning profession and many planners at universities are involved in planning practice as policy advisors and consultants, are less concerned about the drifting apart of theory and practice.

Some respondents have expressed the observation that theory and practice in planning education are drifting further and further apart as a consequence of the growing importance of publishing scientific articles in international, refereed journals, preferably in English, in order to secure appointments to academic positions. The necessity to publish in high-ranking specialized journals, which are mainly in English, while the political arenas communicate in a local language, and the necessity to participate in the international discourse, is distancing planning academics from the planning milieus of their own country. There are two views on this issue. One is to understand that planning processes in more and more complex political, social, economic and ecological environments requires further explorations into the theoretical dimensions of spatial planning. The other is that coping with local planning challenges, calls for more practical experience and managerial and communication competence.

The language barrier as regards the influence of predominantly English-language journals is frequently named as a problem. Planning practitioners among the respondents criticize the strong position of international academic journals and the limited relevance of these articles to planning practice in countries such as those in Eastern Europe, where the challenges are different to the experiences reported in journal articles, and where, moreover, English is not widely spoken in professional planning milieus. Only in countries with a high affinity for the English language, such as Sweden, Denmark or the Netherlands, are planning practitioners actively interested in the English discourse. In other countries, for example, Germany, France, Switzerland and Austria, a high resistance to drawing on English planning literature, especially by planning practitioners, is reported. While individual planners working in larger city administrations might be interested in selected English planning literature, practitioners in small cities and communities mostly have no interest in English planning literature. Or have no time or inclination to read such publications.

The growing pressure to publish in international journals in English was frequently criticized. This pressure deters researchers from publishing their research results quickly in their own national professional journals, which would make their research results accessible to planning practitioners. One more challenge in bridging theory and practice is the fact that in some countries, such as the Czech Republic or Slovakia, there is no scientific planning journal available in the national language, making the continuous exchange between theory and practice difficult, even in their own language. Overall, planning in Europe seems to be divided by this language issue. Around half of the respondents state that English language literature has no thematic relevance for the respective national planning practice. They assert that the international world of theoretical planning discourse is mostly irrelevant to the planning reality of their own countries.

***4. To what extent do planners in your country address growing social, economic and spatial disparities, and do they believe that spatial planning could contribute to reducing such disparities?***

*Numerous research projects have documented empirical evidence of social, economic and spatial disparities. Concern is being expressed in many talks and reports all over Europe. Based on this empirical evidence, more planners are postulating increased political action to reduce such disparities in cities and regions, as well as between countries of the European Union, e.g. through transport planning or labour policies. The European Union is spending 25 per cent of its expenses to reduce disparities. Germany, after reunification in 1990, is shifting considerable public money from West to East Germany. Southern Italy has benefitted from more than fifty years of financial support from the North to the South, though disparities have not narrowed. The cohesion policy of the European Union includes contributing to the reduction of spatial disparities, but will such policies actually be able to narrow the growing gaps between countries and regions and within cities? Do different planning cultures across Europe see quite different solutions to such concerns?*

The majority of the answers report that planners are confronted with increasing social, economic and spatial disparities in their planning work on a daily basis. However, not all are convinced that spatial planning can actually contribute to eliminating these disparities, and about half of the respondents believe that the goal to eliminate disparities should not even have priority in planning practice. Actually, in many European countries growth policies, at (nearly) any price, prevail over the elimination of social, economic and spatial disparities, although the general political rhetoric claims on all levels and in many words that this is not true. This position is especially noticeable in post-socialist countries, where the political powers are convinced that the key to eliminating regional disparities lies exclusively in making economic growth possible. Nevertheless, numerous respondents are still convinced that social disparities can be better eliminated or reduced at the local level than through regional or national spatial planning. This is in line with the responses to the first question above stating that, in contrast to well-established urban planning, regional and national spatial planning is becoming weaker and weaker in Europe. The unanimous trust in local planning is reflected by the answers pointing to the special importance of planning for improving the quality of life at the local or even the neighbourhood level.

However, the impression remains that planners tend to overestimate the influence of their discipline on social and economic development. The recent economic crisis in Europe has clearly shown that economic and social development in a market-driven society, where planning has a low profile, can neither be promoted nor controlled by the comparatively very weak instruments of spatial planning.

***5. Are planning students adequately prepared to pro-actively address future challenges in planning in your country? Should planning education return to schools of architecture or perhaps be offered in geography schools?***

*For half a century, 'appropriate' planning education has been a controversial issue in Europe. Though the planning community agrees that the challenges of urban and regional development require special competence and skills, acquired in a special trans-disciplinary education, the discourse is also influenced by regional traditions, institutional conditions and personal biographies. Each participating discipline is said to have its shortcomings, such as design competence, action orientation, economic shortfalls or methodological or communication deficits. Planning has become a field of action that requires quite different skills and training, such as dealing with the public, being part of a team and solving new kinds of problems, all of which also depend on local, regional and national strategies and traditions. Educational systems and perspectives vary from country to country,*

*as well as professional organisations. AESOP is a bridge-builder in this context, through exchange and communication to understand other national traditions. The Bologna agreement increases mobility and encourages more mutual learning, but it cannot create a common curriculum, as some people had hoped. Moreover, e-learning proposals are knocking on the door. Once introduced by influential planning schools, they will have a considerable effect on planning education in Europe. However, do we know what the expectations for future planning education are?*

Europe has quite diverse planning cultures and different regional traditions when it comes to educating planners. In fact, the very definition of planning still differs across Europe, and the required skills and capabilities necessary in planning differ from level to level, hence from local to regional and to national levels of planning and decision-making. The countries in southern Europe, e.g. Spain, Italy and Portugal, and to a certain extent Germany too, have a long and distinct tradition of training planners as part of an architectural education. In these countries, there is an unbroken dominance of architects in planning practice. Hence the education of planners is very much quality controlled by institutions representing professional architects in the country. In contrast, for example in the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, planning education is offered with a strong emphasis on social sciences and geography.

Completely independent from traditional orientation, all respondents agree that a geography-based planning education that provides skills in analyzing and explaining spatial conditions and development does not sufficiently emphasize teaching action-oriented, strategic and creative competences and skills. This certainly explains why many respondents still see schools of architecture as the preferred and best possible location for a planning education. In contrast, respondents in planning schools that are independent from traditional disciplines, emphasize the advantages of this concept. They believe that only this comprehensive combined undergraduate and graduate education prepares planners sufficiently for future challenges in spatial and urban development. Respondents overwhelmingly agree on the importance of studios and workshops in real world planning problems in planning curricula. Almost every fourth respondent pointed to real estate development as a new challenge and as a new subject embedded in planning education. This certainly reflects the diminishing importance of public sector investments in urban development. The last two decades have seen a complete professionalization of the real estate sector and the increasing awareness that real estate professionals are strong players in urban development processes.

The future of planning education in Europe seems to remain a controversial arena. Rooted in national traditions and controlled by national institutions, there does not seem to be much willingness to agree on a best approach to planning education. Only one respondent could imagine that a few universities in a particular country could offer comprehensive planning education at bachelor's and master's degree levels, while other universities would provide, as in the past, combination models for the education of spatial planners in architectural schools.

***6. Would you like to see urban and regional planning and spatial planning being regulated top-down by the European Union? Should the European Union formulate a joint European Urban Policy?***

*The European Commission, represented by DG Regio, convinced that the future of Europe is based on the future of cities in Europe, is increasing its efforts to promote a European urban policy. Cities in*

*Europe, and their regional, national and European lobby institutions, who are expecting financial contributions from the EU for their urban policies, do not openly reject such policies – though they are concerned that guidance of EU regulation from above will intervene in their freedom to build and follow their own development paths. Do they fear that a Europe-wide policy will not respect their specific cultural conditions? Are they afraid that they will have to change their own local priorities and adopt European policy guidelines? Are they comfortable with the administrative requirements they will have to follow? Will it be easier for larger cities and city regions than for small and medium-sized towns to meet the requirements? Are cities in the South, for financial or other reasons, more willing to accept the guidance from Brussels than cities in Germany, France or the Nordic countries?*

All respondents vehemently rejected a top-down regulation of spatial development by the European Union. The majority of answers were sceptical about the increasing regulation and homogenization of spatial planning and urban development in their countries through politics and strategies of the European Commission. However, some respondents from France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and post-communist countries of Eastern Europe definitely see some sense in European policies. They seem to accept EU top-down policies even when assessments show that the positive effects of a EU urban policy remain unclear. EU urban policies, in turn, are mainly rejected to a large extent with reference to the diversity of local city cultures in Europe. Some respondents, however, would like to see and accept more EU influence on insufficient urban policies of national governments. They even pointed to the danger that politicians in national and local governments in Europe are tempted to make superficial adjustments to local and regional conditions when applying for financial funds from the European Commission. Generally, European regional policy is viewed as a spatial strategy with strong social and cultural dimensions. That is why opinions were expressed relating to the fact that European regional policy should have a stronger impact on sector politics, e.g. economics, energy, transport, and competition.

The great importance of mutual learning through European projects and cross-border co-operation was emphasized in many answers. Many respondents stressed the importance of a cross-fertilizing exchange of experiences in the complex multi-level system of planning and decision-making in Europe. They would also accept some European guidelines on social and sustainable urban development.

## **Conclusion**

The Europe-wide exploration has given a broad spectrum of answers to our questions. They give a good overview of challenges and problems planners are facing in their countries. And they show some of the concerns they have when doing their work in universities or planning practice. The answers tell much about the present mood of planners towards their discipline. They reflect the enormous path dependency of planning in the different countries of Europe. Planning in the North differs from planning in the South or in the East of Europe. Planning at the local level is fully accepted all over Europe, even though the public sector is losing gradually its former dominance over urban development, while sharing the power with private investors and developers. Traditional regional (spatial) planning, in turn, seems to be losing out. The field has no more political support, it has no strategic alliances, nor influential supporting lobby groups, apart from environmentalists and water authorities. Why?

The respondents could not elaborate on the reasons for this decline, and it is unclear whether it is just a temporary phenomenon, or the expression of a time, where most public infrastructure has been built and neo-liberal policies dominate the society and political milieu. Maybe regional planners themselves have contributed, too, to this decline having gradually lost contacts to people and investors, when writing their planning poetry loaded documents. Though there is some hope. Focussing on the future of polycentric city regions, regional spatial planning may soon experience a renaissance. In these city regions, where most households live, and most jobs are offered, the responsible political leaders will soon realize that development can only be guided by strategic spatial planning dealing with all the emerging challenges and with the conflicts between people, stakeholders and nature. Such strategic planning would have to be totally different from the traditional land-use-focussed regional planning of the past. It has to be strategic, both visionary and rooted into the city region's territorial potential. It has to be communicative and carried out in close co-operation with all the stakeholders in the city region. Planning for and in such city regions requires a broad range of planners, with quite different competences. Some have to be general and visionary, others have to be specialists in one of the many areas, where action has to be taken, whether in planning for mobility, social inclusion, creative industries or energy conservation, or in urban design and conservation or in other fields, where specialist planning competence is required. In such regions conflicts have to be moderated. Particularly there city region development aims and compromises have to be continuously communicated to policy makers, citizens, investors and media.

This makes clear that planning schools have to prepare for a diversity of challenges in their professional field. They have to build bridges from theory to practice, and from practice to theory. They have to bring practice back to universities to enrich education and research. In the recent past, many disciplines have explored the spatial turn in their research. Their competence is needed as well to raise the knowledge of city building, to create liveable and affordable spaces for cosmopolitan citizens in city regions., and to sustain an endangered environment.