

# From Knowledge to Attention: Planning in an Information-Rich World

Ecem Engin<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>İzmir Institute of Technology (Turkey)

This study investigates how debates on epistemology in planning theory can be enriched by integrating emerging discussions and conceptual frameworks related to attention. The methodology adopted is a literature review focusing on epistemological debates in planning, epistemic authority and the politics of knowledge. Building on this foundation, several recent contributions on attention are integrated in order to identify overlapping and intersecting conceptual sets, thereby situating attentional debates within the broader epistemological concerns of planning theory.

In contemporary planning theory, epistemology and knowledge remain central, yet contested terrains, shaping how scholars conceptualize the production, validation, and use of knowledge in planning practice. Across different theoretical traditions, the epistemological debate has sought to address not only what constitutes valid knowledge but also how planners mobilize it in contexts of uncertainty, conflict, and power. Such important contributions as “planning as a practice of knowing”, “feminist-informed naturalized epistemology”, and “hermeneutic perspectives of understanding” illustrate the diverse and evolving ways in which epistemology is rethought in contemporary planning theory.

One perspective challenges the dominant technical-rational view that has long framed planning knowledge as evidence to be collected, stored, and applied. Instead, knowledge is reframed as a practice of knowing, which is recursive, provisional, and contextually situated. By distinguishing interrelated dimensions such as knowing what, knowing how, knowing to what end, and doing, this view highlights that knowledge in planning is not an external resource to be

inserted into plans but something enacted and embodied through practice. This reframing emphasizes the ethical and political dimensions of knowing, showing that planners engage not merely with facts but with situated judgments and collective action. In this way, it contests evidence-based models that privilege quantitative data and instead proposes a dynamic, inclusive, and contested understanding of knowledge.

The emphasis on multiplicity and the epistemic value of marginalized perspectives resonates with calls for epistemic justice in planning. By recognizing that “voices from the borderlands” often reveal blind spots of dominant discourses, this perspective advocates for a plural epistemology that validates not only technical and abstract reasoning but also experiential, embodied, and emotional forms of knowing. This broadening of epistemic legitimacy directly addresses the politics of knowledge in planning processes, showing that inclusion and deliberation require more than procedural fairness; they demand a rethinking of what counts as knowledge in the first place.

A third contribution adds a hermeneutic dimension by arguing that planning should be conceptualized not as an act of explaining but as an act of understanding. Explanation seeks causal, verifiable accounts of the past or present, whereas understanding is dialogical, interpretive, and oriented toward an uncertain future. Planning practice cannot be reduced to the application of abstract explanatory models, since it constantly operates in contingent, situated contexts where meanings must be negotiated. By distinguishing between cognitive, practical, and linguistic dimensions of understanding, this hermeneutic approach demonstrates how planners interpret situations, navigate processes, and engage in dialogue to construct shared futures. Concepts such as the planning constellation and planning situation further capture the evolving contexts in which understanding unfolds, showing how meaning is always co-constructed.

This account also addresses the persistent theory–practice gap in planning. The gap does not arise simply because theory is poorly applied in practice, but because theory and practice embody different epistemic orientations: theory often privileges explanation, while practice operates through understanding. To rebalance planning theory, it is proposed to shift from research about planning, which risks abstraction, to research into planning, which centers the lived epistemic work of planners. In this way, planning can be seen as the co-construction of futures through interpretive practices, dialogical encounters, and the fusion of horizons with other actors.

Taken together, these contributions illustrate complementary but distinct epistemological perspectives in planning theory. While they operate from different

theoretical traditions as practice theory, feminist epistemology, and hermeneutics, they converge in rejecting the technocratic assumption that planning knowledge is neutral, universal, or purely evidence-based. Instead, they foreground multiplicity, situatedness, and interpretation as central to epistemology in planning. Their combined insights demonstrate that epistemology in planning is not merely a background philosophical concern but a practical, political, and methodological issue that directly shapes how planners act, deliberate, and construct futures.

Moving from these epistemological debates, “attention” emerges as an increasingly relevant lens that both complements and complicates existing concerns with knowledge. Attention has gradually become a critical concern across philosophy, organizational theory, and planning, reflecting broader transformations in how societies handle information and visibility. In an ‘information-rich world,’ it is no longer information but attention that emerges as the truly scarce resource, shifting the epistemic challenge from scarcity of information to abundance, where the difficulty lies in filtering, prioritizing, and organizing what is noticed. The emergence of debates on attention, articulated through notions such as the attention economy, attentional capitalism, ecologies of attention, and the politics of attention, signals not only a philosophical shift in how human perception and cognition are theorized, but also offers fertile ground for generating new openings in planning theory. These conceptual developments carry the potential to reframe how planners consider the distribution of cognitive resources in shaping urban futures.

This perspective points to mechanisms necessary to address the imbalance between information flows and limited attentional resources. Planning and management systems should function as attention-conserving devices, condensing and restructuring inputs rather than overwhelming decision-makers with unfiltered data. The critique of a universal “need to know” foreshadowed later debates on selectivity and relevance, anticipating the role of search engines, personalized filters, and algorithmic curation in managing information environments. Attention is therefore not only a cognitive but also an institutional problem, inseparable from the design of organizations and practices.

Building on this insight, attention has also been situated within broader cultural and political contexts. The proliferation of cultural goods, such as texts, images, and digital content, has reconfigured the dynamics of cultural value, with attention becoming the scarce commodity. Economic framings have emphasized efficiency and profit, yet critiques of attentional capitalism reveal how corporate infrastructures systematically capture and monetize attention, reducing human capacities to objects of exploitation. An alternative is found in the notion of

an ecology of attention, which highlights attention as relational and collective, embedded within cultural and technological infrastructures. This ecological framing emphasizes how attentional practices can either degrade or sustain the quality of shared life-worlds, extending the politics of attention beyond efficiency to care, sustainability, and democratic life.

Within planning, attention functions as a contested resource that structures inclusion and exclusion. It is not a neutral background but actively shapes which issues are highlighted, whose voices are amplified, and which concerns are marginalized. Through communicative tools such as reports, maps, and deliberative processes, planners organize visibility, framing problems in ways that privilege certain perspectives while silencing others. This indicates that planning is fundamentally political, as choices about what to attend to already shape agendas and outcomes. The monopolization of attention by dominant actors excludes marginalized groups, not because their knowledge is irrelevant but because it fails to capture institutional visibility. Reflexive planning therefore requires expanding attentional horizons and redistributing visibility, aligning with broader concerns of epistemic and spatial justice.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a multilayered framework for understanding attention in planning. Attention can be seen as a scarce cognitive and organizational resource, a cultural and ecological phenomenon tied to capitalist logics, and a political practice that mediates whose knowledge enters public agendas. Integrating attention into epistemological debates highlights that the production and validation of knowledge cannot be separated from the dynamics of visibility, selection, and recognition. This opens up a twofold inquiry: on the one hand, how planners themselves allocate and conserve attention in the face of unlimited information; and on the other, how shifting attentional dynamics transform shared life-worlds in ways that reconfigure planning practices and possibilities.

In conclusion, this study argues that epistemology studies, as an ongoing and central debate in planning theory, can be further expanded through the emerging lens of attention-related concepts. By analyzing how epistemic concerns intersect with attentional dynamics, it becomes possible to explore new openings as well as limitations for planning theory and practice. The contribution of this literature review is to highlight the potential of bridging epistemology with attention, thereby expanding debates on knowledge, justice and theories in planning while pointing to new trajectories for future research.

## References

- Behrend, L. 2024. Understanding is what planners do: towards a hermeneutic perspective on planning practice and research. *Planning Theory* 23(2). 219–240. DOI: [10.1177/14730952241279633](https://doi.org/10.1177/14730952241279633).
- Campbell, H. & R. Marshall. 2002. Utilitarianism's bad breath? a re-evaluation of the public interest justification for planning. *Planning Theory* 1(2). 163–187. DOI: [10.1177/147309520200100205](https://doi.org/10.1177/147309520200100205).
- Citton, Y. 2017. *The ecology of attention*. Translated by B. Norman. Original work published 2014. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Davoudi, S. 2015. Planning as practice of knowing. *Planning Theory* 14(3). 316–331. DOI: [10.1177/1473095215575919](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095215575919).
- Fainstein, S. S. 2000. New directions in planning theory. *Urban Affairs Review* 35(4). 451–478. DOI: [10.1177/107808740003500401](https://doi.org/10.1177/107808740003500401).
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2001. *Making social science matter: why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forester, J. 1981. Planning in the face of power. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 47(2). 231–246. DOI: [10.1080/01944368108976564](https://doi.org/10.1080/01944368108976564).
- Healey, P. 1997. *Collaborative planning: shaping places in fragmented societies*. London: Macmillan.
- Innes, J. E. & D. E. Booher. 2010. *Planning with complexity: an introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy*. London: Routledge.
- Porter, L. & S. Davoudi. 2012. The politics of resilience for planning: a cautionary note. *Planning Theory & Practice* 13(2). 329–333. DOI: [10.1080/14649357.2012.677124](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.677124).
- Rydin, Y. 2007. Re-examining the role of knowledge within planning theory. *Planning Theory* 6(1). 52–68. DOI: [10.1177/1473095207075161](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095207075161).
- Saarikoski, H. 2002. Naturalized epistemology and dilemmas of planning practice. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 22(1). 3–14. DOI: [10.1177/0739456X0202200101](https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X0202200101).
- Sandercock, L. 1998. *Towards cosmopolis: planning for multicultural cities*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Simon, H. A. 1971. Designing organizations for an information-rich world. In M. Greenberger (ed.), *Computers, communications, and the public interest*, 37–72. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Watson, V. 2003. Conflicting rationalities: implications for planning theory and ethics. *Planning Theory & Practice* 4(4). 395–407. DOI: [10.1080/1464935032000146318](https://doi.org/10.1080/1464935032000146318).

*Ecem Engin*

Yiftachel, O. 1998. Planning and social control: exploring the dark side. *Journal of Planning Literature* 12(4). 395–406. DOI: [10.1177/088541229801200401](https://doi.org/10.1177/088541229801200401).