

Repositioning planning in a governance context: a technological perspective

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## **Repositioning planning in a governance context: a technological perspective**

Umberto Janin Rivolin<sup>\*</sup>

What governance implies for urban and regional planning is the question that this paper tries to address. Of course, this question is not new, but answers in current debate are often led by prejudicial assumptions: *pro* or *contra* governance, according to what planning is ideologically expected to be.

Generally, being a promoter of bottom-up and more inclusive approaches, governance is appreciated as a driver of innovation in planning practices indeed. Conversely, who embraces a nostalgic idea of planning as a top-down administrative activity tends to refuse governance and innovation as destabilising concepts.

The present paper argues that innovation is necessary to planning as to any technology. In this light, however, to consider governance an external factor inducing innovation may prove to be reductive. Rather, a governance perspective is helpful to cast light on the institutional dimension of planning as a technology. Particularly, to consider planning an 'institutional technology' suggests that social experience, public acknowledgement and institutional codification are interlinked and equally indispensable momentums for the achievement of innovation.

In this framework, the increasing recourse to urban and territorial governance practices may bear witness to a shift of social demand of planning activities from 'conformance' to 'performance' aims.

### **Introduction**

Land use regulation is the government function which, accordingly with established constitutional rights, urban and regional planning is historically asked to achieve: "For the final output of such a process is the act of physical development (or, in some cases, the decision not to develop, but to leave the land as it is)" (Hall, 2002, p. 3). In modern states, land use regulation is therefore exerted locally according to national planning legislations. Since land use regulation relates to complex (and often vital) decisions requiring vertical and horizontal coordination of policies, planning systems are used to assign statutory and not statutory powers to public authorities at various levels (local, sub-regional, regional, national). For the very same reason, land use regulation is certainly a 'special' government function, with clear consequences on the technical nature of planning too. This indeed does not concern a sector knowledge (planning is integrative towards various sector policies) and, coping with

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varieties of policies, it is constantly challenged by necessary relations with social learning practices.

Against this backdrop, the emergence of the 'governance' concept, suggesting a suitable alternative to the idea of 'government' as the dominance of state power hierarchies (Painter & Goodwin, 1995), has been easily welcome by a wide majority of planners. Apart from some nostalgic defenders of an idealistic top-down view of planning systems and procedures, the idea of governance as "horizontal self-organisation among mutually interdependent actors" (Jessop, 2000, p. 15), of whom government is only one and with only "imperfect control" (Rhodes, 1997, p. 8), seems to open new promising horizons for planning theories and practices. Especially in Europe, where Community integration developments have boosted the reframing of urban and regional policies, EU territorial governance is currently considered a driver of innovation in planning practices and institutions (ESPON, 2007).

A concept such as innovation, however, imposes some carefulness. It has been studied for ages with reference to plentiful fields of application (Fageberg, 2004) and its relation to territorial development adds further complexity to the matter (Moulaert & Sekia, 2002). Its possible trigger and evolution process has been analysed especially within the domain of technology, and to answer the question whether and to what extent planning can be considered a technology will be therefore not superfluous. Particularly, this will allow to address the issue of diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 2003) and, consequently, of its social capitalisation.

After this introduction, the present paper prosecutes recalling the main reasons why governance is appreciated as a driver of innovation for planning. A following section will examine the status of scientific understanding of innovation, trying to enlighten those aspects which may be relevant for planning. This will lead to propose that planning operates as an 'institutional technology' and to discuss what this may implicate for possible innovation. An essay of application of the emerging concepts will allow then to propose, in the form of working hypothesis, that the 'governance turn' in planning may represent a shift of the social demand towards more performing (and less conforming) aims. The main findings of the paper will be finally summed up in a concluding section.

## **Governance and innovations for planning**

Although the concept of 'governance' originates from the corporate organisations functioning, in the early 1990s the World Bank defined it in a wider sense, as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (World Bank, 1991, p. i). Particularly, three aspects of governance were pointed out (*ibid.*, p. 23):

- (i) the form of political regime (parliamentary / presidential, military / civilian, authoritarian / democratic);
- (ii) the processes by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources; and
- (iii) the capacity of governments to design, formulate, and implement policies, and, in general, to discharge government functions.

Among these aspects, the former relates clearly to the government nature. The latter two acknowledge new elements in the observation and evaluation of government

activities: namely, the process dimension in relationships between authority and socioeconomic subjects; and the meaning of policies as activities addressed to 'discharge government functions' (rather than to reinforce and to empower them).

Such new perspective has rapidly found a central place in social and political sciences debate, leading to suppose even a shift or transformation "from government to governance" (Heere, 2004). It is true, however, that a governance perspective has allowed to observe and to understand the emergence of new overlapping and complex relationships involving 'new actors' external to the political arena, as this was understood previously (Kooiman, 1993; Painter and Goodwin, 1995).

Overall, the governance concept has been understood in the light of the wider process of socioeconomic change towards a 'post-Fordist' flexible regime, featured by the fiscal crisis of western democracies, the need for public-private coordination, economic globalisation, the deep restructuring of state and the growing importance of transnational political institutions (Jessop, 1995, 1997). Therefore, the growing interest for governance reflects the widespread idea that governing contemporary societies is becoming more and more difficult and demanding (Sassen, 1996; Pierre, 1999, 2000).

So, in a normative sense, governance leads to the need of co-ordinating economic and social behaviours through the involvement and participation of multiple actors, thus modifying both policy and intervention objectives (from growth control to development promotion), and action procedures (from authoritative imposition of choices to negotiated consensus building) (Stoker, 1998). This pertains both to the vertical organisation of government powers and to the horizontal relationships between governing and governed subjects. Governance shows indeed to have a 'multi-level' dimension, consisting in the emergence of "continuous negotiation among governments at several territorial tiers – supra-national, national, regional and local – as the result of broad process of institutional creation and decisional reallocation that has pulled some previously centralized functions of the state up to the supra-national level and some down to the local/regional level" (Marks, 1993, p. 392; see also: Swyngedouw, 2000). And governance has also a multi-actor and cross-sectoral dimension, because in any specific policy area all the actors need the others, since "no one has all the relevant knowledge or resources to make the policy work" (Rhodes, 1997, p. 50; see also: Madanipour *et al.*, 2001).

A governance perspective is therefore crucial to land use regulation (and conversely), being local choices of spatial development positioned at the crossing point between the vertical axis of power and public administration and the horizontal axis of partnership between government, private and civil sector. Particularly in the context of new governance processes triggered by EU integration (CEC, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2001), a specific attention to urban and territorial governance has so taken place in the international planning debate (Healey *et al.*, 1995, 2002; Le Galès, 1998, 2002; Brenner, 1999; Bagnasco & Le Galès, 2000; Sellers, 2002; Janin Rivolin, 2005; ESPON, 2007).

Overall, various aspects and effects of EU territorial and urban governance are identified as factors concurring to determinate innovation in planning practices and institutions. After all, it was soon possible to acknowledge that "the current configuration of a spatial planning policy at a European level manifests a recourse to new policy processes, instruments and techniques" (Giannakourou, 1996, p. 608; see also: Williams, 1996). EU territorial and urban governance was therefore

supposed to foster a “creeping material innovation” in domestic planning too (Janin Rivolin, 2003, p. 55). Nobody would be in general adverse today to consider EU territorial and urban governance “as a basic driver of planning innovation” (Janin Rivolin & Faludi, 2005, p. 212). Since resources, rules and ideas are the main drivers for transforming governance frameworks (Healey, 2006), it seems acceptable that “the introduction of such drivers at the EU level may start new processes of domestic policy transformation and innovation” (Waterhout, 2007, p. 312).

According to Colomb (2007, p. 363), innovation through EU territorial governance can particularly “come from two processes: 1. from working in cooperation with other actors who are perceived to possess specific knowledge, innovative or ‘good practices’ in a given policy field; or 2. from the very fact of problematizing and addressing certain policy issues at a new transnational scale (i.e. the rescaling of the frame of reference used to address specific policy issues towards a transnationalization of the problem setting and agenda)”. So, governance would tend to innovate planning systems on the long term, involving the transformation of administrative and social traditions, as it shows “to be leading to a measure of convergence or harmonization of systems, although this creates tensions as changes in administrative systems run ahead of changes in the social model” (Nadin & Stead, 2008, p. 45).

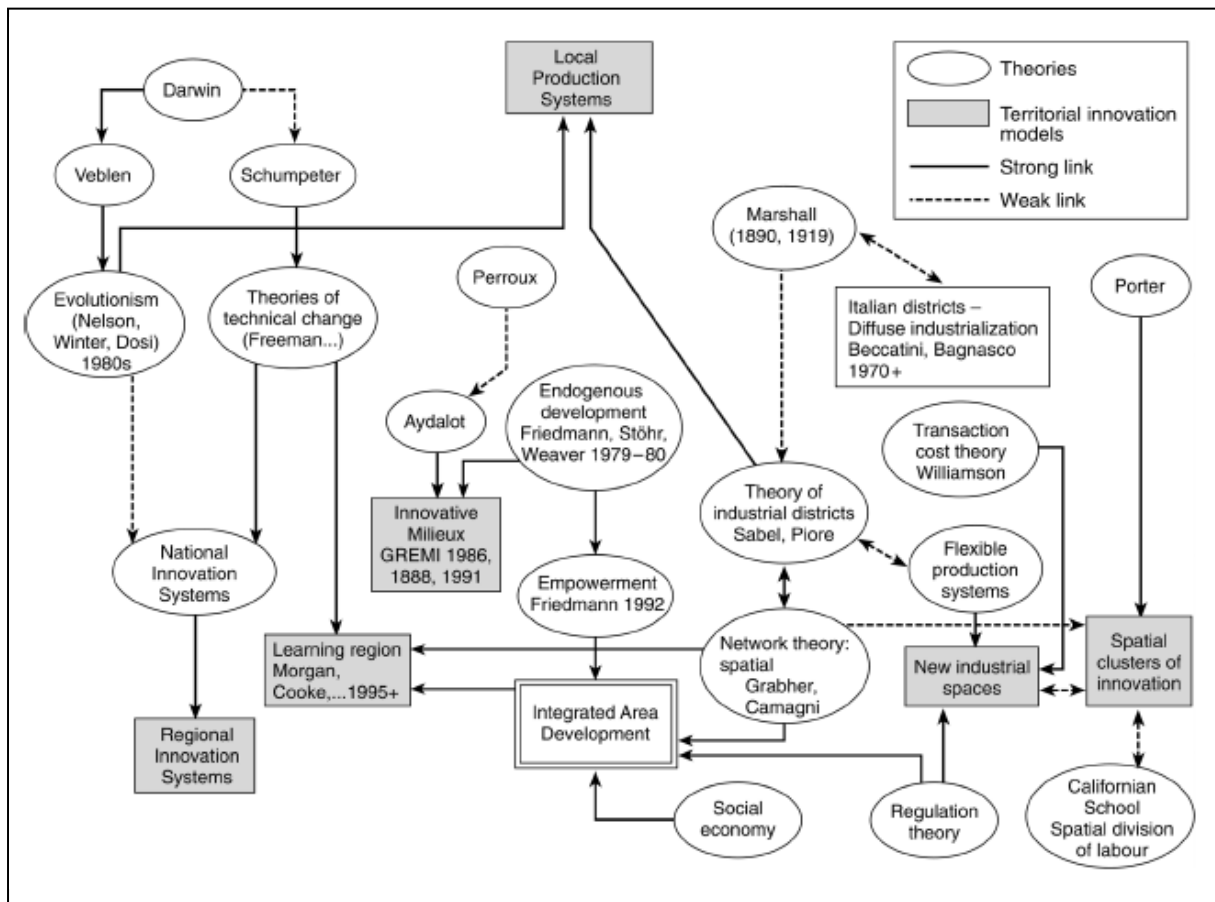
### **Focusing innovation**

Innovation, however, is a wild animal not easily tameable (Fagerberg, 2004). It has been studied for ages in a variety of contexts, such as technology, commerce, social systems, economic development and policy construction, through a wide range of approaches and conceptualisations. Innovation theories have been related to regional and urban development also recently, trying to cast some light on the high conceptual complexity featuring the idea of “territorial innovation” (Figure 1).

Generally, innovation is understood as the successful introduction of something new and useful. While technological innovation is especially focused on the production of new tools and techniques, improving the human capacity to control and adapt to the environment, social innovation refers rather to new strategies, concepts, ideas and organisations that meet social needs of all kinds and that extend and strengthen civil society. Therefore, it also overlaps with innovation in public policy and governments activities. As for both technological and social progress, however, innovation encompasses the entire process, from idea to implementation, for the development of new products, services, methods, management practices and policies (Gardner *et al.*, 2007). Even if individual creativity is typically seen as the basis for innovation, the latter can finally occur in organisational contexts, because innovation implies a management process and requires specific tools, rules and discipline (Davila *et al.*, 2006). So innovation is distinct from ‘progress’ in that it permeates society and can cause reorganisation, modifying existing patterns of behaviour and cognitive scheme, and changing how people organise themselves, how they conduct their lives and, more generally speaking, how the world works.

Therefore, according to Schumpeter’s theories of ‘creative destruction’ (Schumpeter, 1949), while innovation typically adds value, it may also have a negative or destructive effect as new developments clear away or change old organisational forms and practices. This means that organisations that do not innovate effectively may be destroyed by those that do and that innovation typically involves risk.

Figure 1 – Theoretical roots of territorial innovation models (source: Moulaert & Sekia, 2002)



Whether innovation is mainly supply-pushed (based on new technological opportunities) or demand-led (based on social needs and market requirements) has been a hotly debated topic. Although what exactly drives innovation in organisations and economies remains an open question, more recent theoretical work shows rather that innovation happens through complex processes that links many different players together (Sarkar, 2007). Particularly, much of the most successful innovation proves to occur at the boundaries of organisations where the problems and needs of users and the potential of technologies can be linked together in a creative process that challenges both.

In this light, the innovation process, usually understood according to a technological perspective, can and should take account of social behaviours as well, including constraints and opportunities given by public policy and government systems. According to Rogers (2003, p. 5), "[d]iffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system". Basing on Kondratieff's theories on long wave market cycles (Figure 2), innovation would spread through society in a 'S-curve', as the early adopters select the technology first, followed by the majority, until a technology or innovation is common (see also: Solomou, 1986). Innovation diffusion would therefore occur over time through five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation. Accordingly, the innovation-decision process is the cycle through which any decision-making unit passes (1) from first knowledge of an innovation, (2) to forming an attitude toward the innovation, (3) to a decision to adopt or reject, (4) to

implementation of the new idea, and (5) to confirmation of this decision (Rogers, 2003, p. 161).

Figure 2 – Simplified Kondratieff wave pattern (source: www open source, 2008)

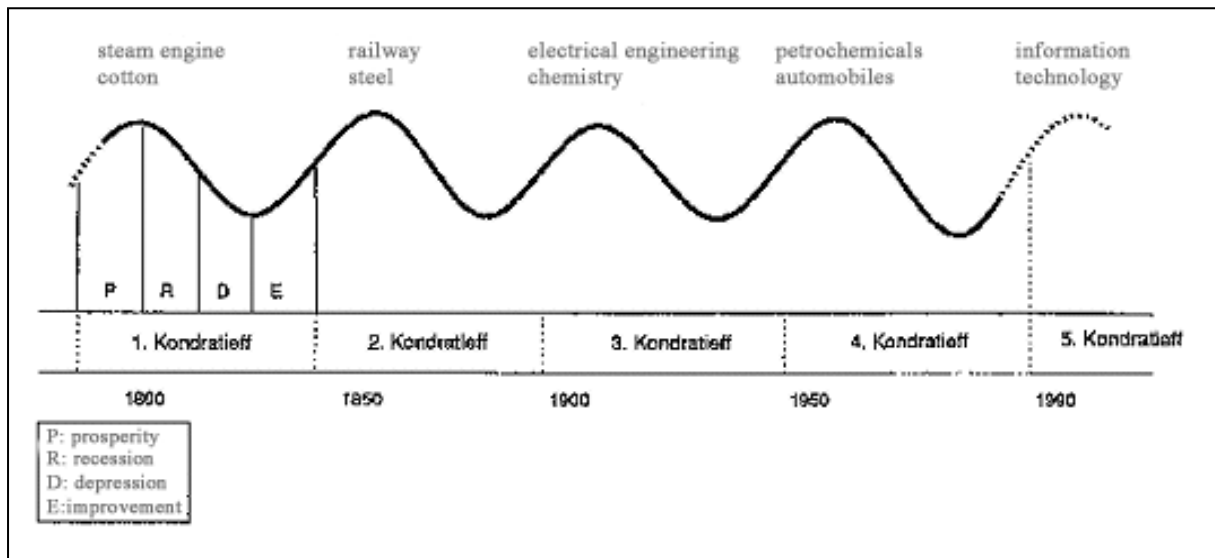
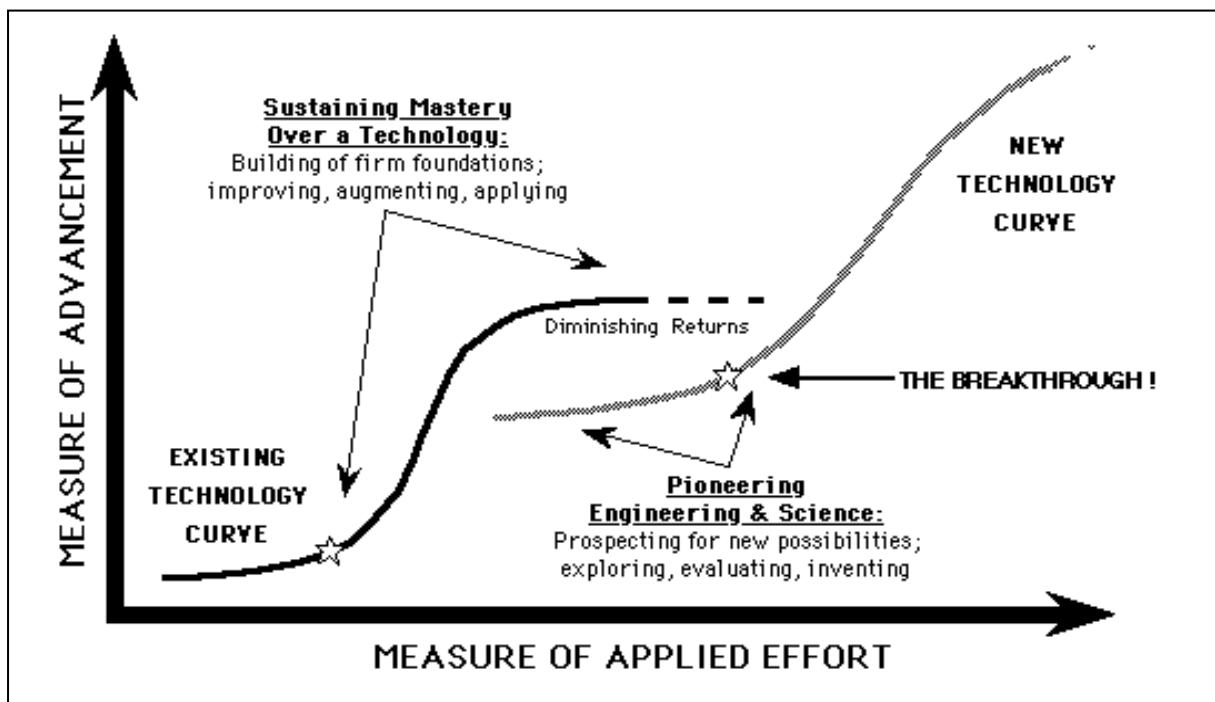


Figure 3 – Innovation life cycle (source: www open source, 2008)



Basically, such a S-curve originates as responding broadly to Kondratieff's phases of 'improvement' and 'prosperity'. A 'recession' phase may determine or be determined by the emergence of successive S-curves, insofar as new technologies can come along to replace older ones and continue to drive growth upwards (Figure 3). Of course, the length of life may depend on several factors. According to Rogers (2003), the speed of technology adoption is determined however by two characteristics: the speed at which adoption takes off, and the speed at which later growth occurs,

specially due to network effects. Lastly, while disruptive technologies may radically change the diffusion patterns for established technology by starting a different competing S-curve, path dependence may also lock certain technologies in place.

### **Innovation in planning**

What recalled in previous section suggests that, progress in planning induced by governance processes notwithstanding, a discussion on possible innovation created requires more careful reflection. The government function of land use regulation, and particularly of planning as its fundamental 'service technology', within the supposed innovation process needs further clarification. According to Sager (2007, p. 18), "planning can be seen as a technology for collective action aimed at improving the physical environment" indeed. Planning theories are aimed, after all, at improving techniques and methodologies for good land use regulation.

Since land use regulation operates according to established constitutional rights, planning is different from other technologies in that it is strictly related to institutional frameworks and processes. In this view, institutions should be intended in their anthropologic meaning of social constructs by which communities of individuals spontaneously organise their life in common, through structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing their behaviour. To consider planning an 'institutional technology' seems therefore to fit the opportunity to look at territorial and urban development as a process "based on a multi-dimensional view of innovation, economic dynamics and community governance" (Moulaert & Sekia, 2002, p. 299). More precisely, the idea of planning as institutional technology may contribute both to recognise "the key role of institutional dynamics in innovation and territorial development" and to reject, at the same time, "the narrowly defined instrumentality of institutional dynamics for the improvement of market competitiveness of a territory" (*ibid.*; see also: Gualini, 2001).

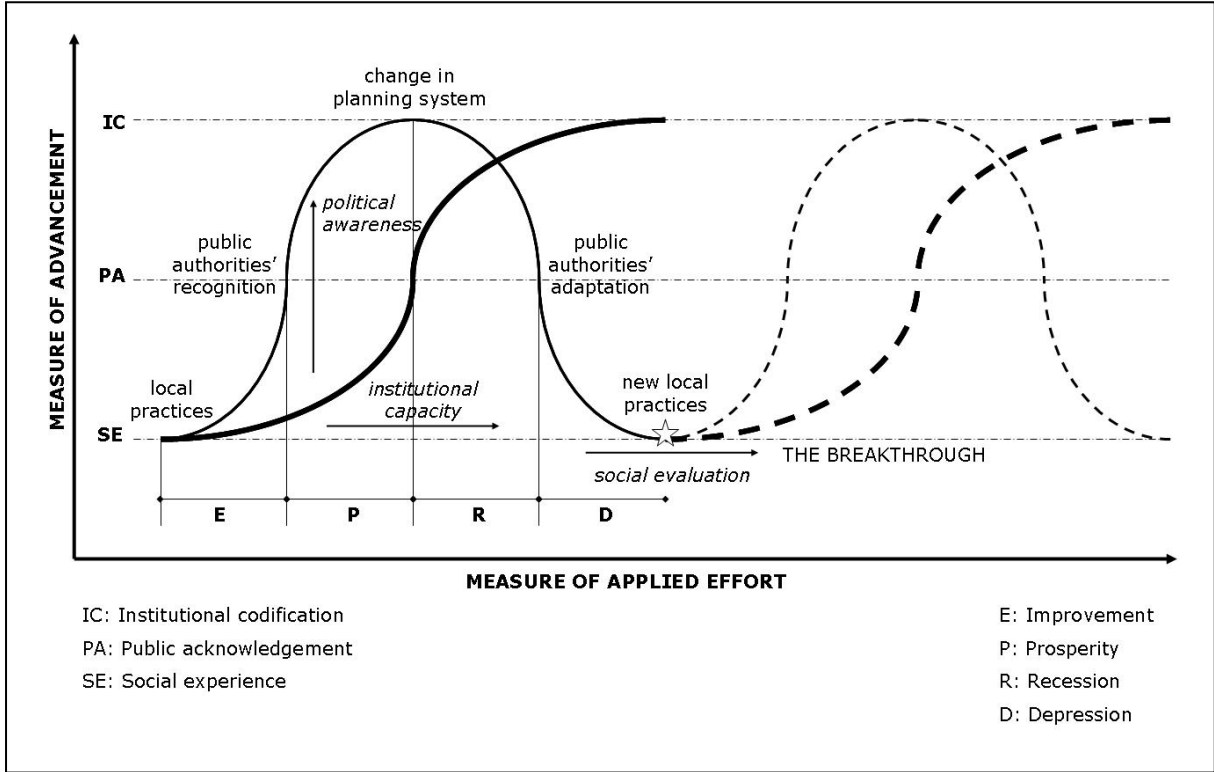
This definition and indications derived from a governance perspective suggest that, as far as planning is concerned, the above described innovation life cycle passes through a more complex process of *social experience* (SE), *public acknowledgement* (PA) and *institutional codification* (IC). These are, in other words, necessary momentums allowing innovation to spread over time through the five stages of knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation (Rogers, 2003). With some acceptable simplification, such process might be represented as a sort of insider cycle, variously pivoted on these three momentums during its course, altogether triggering and enhancing the innovation S-curve (Figure 4).

In general terms, an ascending phase (E + P) is triggered by practical experiences of problems and solutions for land use regulation, emerging in particularly affected local circumstances. This may convince the concerned public authorities to acknowledge problems and to apply solutions. Effectiveness of experienced solutions may lead, on its turn, to legitimise new aims and tools for land use regulation in planning systems. The adoption of a new technology occurs at this point, and the diffusion of innovation can start along with its later growth, through widespread application and network effects. This corresponds to a descending phase of the insider cycle (R + D), in which new legislation is applied more systematically by public authorities at various levels, often requiring reinterpretations and re-adaptations at various extents, according to local specificities. New local practices, problems and possible solutions may emerge



therefore in new operational contexts, thus leading to the possible start of a new cycle (the breakthrough).

Figure 4 – Innovation life cycle applied to planning as institutional technology



Beyond conceptual simplification, this process should be imagined in fact as a continuous and selective interaction of multiple cycles, parallel or intersected in each institutional context, because ‘trigger places’ and cyclic dynamics of innovation are potentially endless and not predictable (as it happens, after all, to any technology). However, as markets’ competitiveness and openness tend generally to favour innovation in products, the organisational quality of institutions tends to frame the innovation opportunities of planning. In this view, a governance perspective is helpful to consider that, not only “the form of political regime”, but especially “the processes by which authority is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources” and “the capacity of governments to design, formulate, and implement policies, and, in general, to discharge government functions” (Word Bank, 1991, p. 23) influence the organisational quality of institutions and innovation opportunities.

Basically, political awareness and institutional capacity may influence respectively the measures of ‘advancement’ and of ‘applied effort’ in the innovation process. As shown in figure, they both exert a fundamental role in the cycle ‘top’ phase (P + R), which is pivoted on the ‘institutional codification’ of expected changes in planning system. If this crucial provision is missing, occurring for instance when path dependence prevails, it seems clear that the innovation curve will not be able to turn to its phase of major spread through society, and that the (potential) innovation process will abort sooner or later.

Besides, social evaluation of local outcomes of planning is fundamental for triggering and addressing further innovation through technological change. This means that

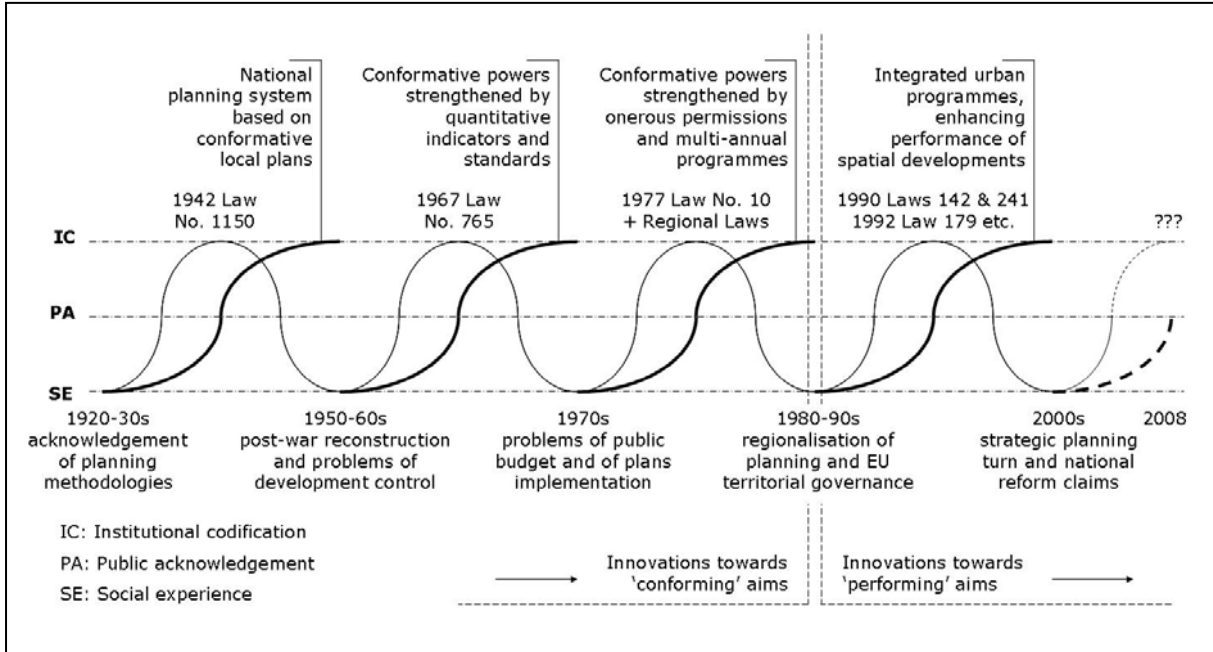
planners responsibility is not limited to apply their expertise in making plans according to current theoretical trends, but regards especially their contribution in guiding, as the technology depositaries, the social evaluation of planning outcomes. In other words, based on Schumpeter's (1949) concepts, planning as institutional technology cannot simply exert an 'adaptive response' to change, but is continuously required to find a 'creative response'.

Social evaluation, political awareness and institutional capacity are, however, all equally indispensable ingredients for the full achievement of innovation in planning. The cyclic shape of the process requires an adequate and continue presence of these ingredients in order to make innovation widely applicable and, therefore, socially useful.

**Essays of application and working hypotheses**

The reliability of what above supposed would of course require a wide and attentive verification with reference to several planning systems' functioning. Taking the Italian planning system (being more familiar to the author) as one possible application example, a brief and simplified historical review of its evolution may lead to argue that at least four cycles of innovation have been accomplished since the establishment of a national planning culture during the 1920-30s, while a fifth one appears to be currently in course (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Innovations by planning as institutional technology in Italy



Apart from previous experiences of partial and specific legislation, the first even institutional codification of the Italian planning system was indeed the 1942 national framework Law No. 1150, still currently in force (CEC, 2000). This established, by the others, that land use regulation had to be pivoted on a conformance local plan (*Piano regolatore generale*), based on prescriptive zoning design of future developments. Various problems of public regulation aroused in applying the law during the post-war period, in which building activity recorded an unprecedented 'boom' trend in Italy.

This led to a partial and provisional reform of national planning system by 1967 Law No. 765 which, coherently with the adopted conforming approach, introduced precise zoning typologies, quantitative indicators and minimum standards for public services and infrastructures provision. Similarly, problems regarding public budget shortage and plans implementation in the 1970s led to 1977 Law No. 10, establishing that development permissions should be onerous and providing local plans with a 'multi-annual implementation programme' (*Piano pluriennale di attuazione*). In the same years, however, a major change regarding the Italian planning system was also the extension of legislation powers in planning to regions, as late application of 1948 Italian Constitution.

So, a progressive regionalisation of territorial and urban policies in the 1980s (Putnam, 1993) was the scenario welcoming the first hints of EU territorial governance after the 'cohesion' objective adoption in 1986 (Husson, 2002; Janin Rivolin, 2005). As for Italy, these had a major impact through urban development and local practices, as experienced since the pioneer initiatives of Integrated Mediterranean Programmes and of Urban Pilot Projects (Janin Rivolin, 2003; Governa & Salone, 2005). The introduction of urban 'integrated intervention programmes' (*Programmi integrati d'intervento*) as of 1992 Law No. 179 was therefore the institutional provision allowing national authorities to coordinate urban development in cooperation with regions through various ministerial programmes based on the Urban Community Initiative model during the 1990s. In the emerging multi-level governance context, also multi-actor and cross-sector activities were enhanced in order to improve the performance of proposed spatial developments. This was codified by new tools of inter-institutional partnership, such as the 'programme agreement' (*Accordo di programma*) as of Law no. 142/1990, and the 'conference of services' (*Conferenza dei servizi*) as of Law no. 241/1990, promoting negotiations to co-ordinate actions taken by administrations or public agencies; and such as the 'framework programme agreement' (*Accordo di programma quadro*) as of Law no. 662/1996, addressed to provide an advanced contractual model for public/private partnership.

More recent proliferation of 'strategic plans', spontaneously elaborated and adopted by various Italian cities and local communities (despite the lack of any kind of legislation on this matter), and recurring claims and law proposals for some substantial reform of the planning system may suggest that a further cycle of innovation may be in course. Whether and how it will succeed are, of course, matters of possible discussion. Current trends of urban and regional planning would seem however to confirm an increasing acknowledgement of the need of performance in planning practices, with a progressive removal from the traditional conformational approach of Italian and European planning (Janin Rivolin, 2008). Of course, path dependence and attachment to traditional approaches are also playing a major role in the evolving scenario, insofar as the achievement of a shared technical consciousness is proving difficult.

Although deserving further scrutiny and possible critiques, the above account on the Italian planning system's evolution supports basically a conceptualisation of planning as institutional technology. Moreover, it suggests that governance, if understood as a new experiential context, has posed the conditions for a 'change of sign' of planning innovations from the aim of 'conformance' (an "action in accordance with some specified standard or authority", as defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica Online)

to the one of 'performance' ("the fulfilment of a claim, promise, or request", according to the same source).

In this light, a wider application of the same concepts to other planning systems might provide with a common frame for analysis current debates on EU territorial governance as well as on new possible directions for planning (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Needham, 2005; Spaans, 2006; ESPON, 2007; MUDTCEU, 2007; Faludi, 2007; Nadin & Stead, 2008; Waterhout, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

According to what discussed in previous sections, to consider governance as an external factor of innovation for urban and regional planning may be reductive. Such belief is led by – and contributes to foster – the idea that planning, being an integrative activity towards various sector policies and constantly challenged by social learning practices, can exert nothing but a 'weak knowledge', adaptive to change and, after all, destined to support socioeconomic and cultural trends. The same may induce, as a reactive consequence, to reject innovations in planning, in the name of an idealistic hierarchical view of land use regulation, which planning is constitutionally addressed to.

A more careful reflection about the meaning and implications of innovation suggests that planning should be considered all in all a technology, but that its specific institutional nature has to be recognised and understood too. This means that planning as 'institutional technology' can and must be driver of innovation for land use regulation, and that governance should be seen, in this light, rather as an experiential context contributing to explain and to evaluate possible innovations.

A provisional and simplified application of the proposed concepts to the Italian planning system showed, for instance, that a governance context may have posed social and institutional conditions to address planning innovations towards aims of performance, against the conformative nature of traditional planning system. Whether it may be verified as a more general and widespread trend remains an open question and a possible working hypothesis.

Be that as it may, what argued leads to conclude that, as the service technology for land use regulation, planning cannot exert a static knowledge, nor simply be supposed of deriving innovations from emerging trends. To deserve its social usefulness, it has rather to innovate land use regulation capacities. Especially when such capacities appear to be blunt, planning is called to find a 'creative response' to change.

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