Why do masterplans fail?

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Landscapes of Planning
Guessing What It Is All About...

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Public participation in response to some problems of regional planning in the Czech Republic
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Formal planning system vs. informal planning: three cases from Slovenia
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"Yet Another Plan?"
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Institutionalising insurgent claims....Towards ´good´ planning?
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Toward Joint Relationship of Green Infrastructure and Urban Regeneration in Historical Urban Quarter
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The landscape as a planning issue.
Landscape perception as a tool: limits, perspectives and potentialities through an experimentation in a contemporary mountain landscape
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Planning for Sustainable Development after Earthquake (with overview of Bam Experience)
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Knowledge – the key element for “good” planning
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Complex hazardous events: which challenges for future urban planning policies in Italy?
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Creating a theory for effective citizen action in plotically challenging landscapes
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The Future of Historical City Centers in the Globalization Era
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Voting on Good Transport?
Just Sustainability after the Greater Manchester TIF Referendum
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Integrated urban development strategies
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Planning without Plan: Process Design and Participative Urban Development at Musicon
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Integration of urban planning and transportation planning under the canopy of a holistic plans?
An argument for procedure over plans
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Exhibition center development in Europe: a multidimensional historical analysis
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Is there an effective way to preserve and develop China’s urban landscapes in contemporary China?
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In 1979 Aaron Wildavsky found evidence enough to assert: "If planning were judged by results, that is, by whether like followed the dictates of the plan, then planning has failed everywhere it has been tried. Nowhere are plans fulfilled. No one, it turns out, has the knowledge to predict sequences of actions and reactions across the realm of public policy and no one has the power to compel obedience" (Wildavsky A.B., Speaking Truth to Power: the Art and Craft of Policy Analysis, Transaction, London 1979, p. 8).

Thirty years later we have to admit that planning systems are in general still addressed to make spatial projects conform to a plan, by assigning use rights in land through legally binding zoning maps and implementation rules, as it was possible to predict and impose sequences of actions and reactions in the realm of urban development. The cultural ideals of hierarchy and of dirigisme, based on the assumption that the State is the keeper of the collective interest, lie at the root of such ‘conforming’ setting of modern planning systems. Neither the reiterated evidence of failure nor the acknowledgment that collective interest is usually the primary victim of planning ineffectiveness have led to conceive true alternatives so far.

However, the exception of few countries where plans are non-binding and public authorities can evaluate which specific development projects are deserving new land use rights (the UK is one rare but prominent example), on the one hand, and the increasing experience of EU urban and spatial development programmes implying responsible evaluation mechanisms for co-funding projects, on the other, might let reflect about a possible model of ‘performing’ planning system.

Whether and how the public power has the right to ‘compel obedience’ across the realm of spatial development remains questions crucial to this track topic.