

Handbooks in planning: five theses for teaching across national borders

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DEFINITE SPACE –

*FUZZY RESPONSIBILITY*

# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

**AESOP**  **PRAGUE**  
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## **HANDBOOKS IN PLANNING: FIVE THESES FOR TEACHING ACROSS NATIONAL BORDERS**

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*Handbooks are assigned the task of presenting knowledge in a systematic manner for practical learning purposes. This is less immediate for spatial planning, a complex (and sometimes confusing) field of knowledge, also because of the different legal frameworks and cultural traditions in which it is practiced. Handbooks in planning are indeed used to refer the teaching to a specific national context, but this may lead to confusing the technical nature of planning with its institutional codification. The handbook recently published by the present authors in Italy builds on the assumption that planning education requires, first and foremost, that students understand its value as specific technical knowledge. From this assumption follows the distinction between ‘spatial governance’ and ‘spatial planning’, adopted in the handbook. The proposed contribution summarises the educational choices behind the handbook in five theses, which are discussed as a basis for teaching planning in an international perspective: 1) urban planning is a field of knowledge, teaching its technical aspects means teaching spatial planning; 2) to teach spatial planning we must explain why it is instrumental for the purposes of spatial governance; 3) the technique of spatial planning originated from recognisable matrices, the teaching of which lays the foundations for all subsequent learning; 4) also for teaching purposes, the technique of spatial planning can be traced back to zoning; 5) spatial governance is not a form of technical knowledge, but a political practice that may be taught insofar as it is necessary for understanding the effects of spatial planning.*

### **1. Introduction**

“Spatial governance and spatial planning” is the title, translated in English, of the handbook published in Italy by the authors of this paper (Gaeta, Janin Rivolin & Mazza, 2013). Right down to the choice of title, the handbook was drawn up on the basis of three convictions: i) that teaching spatial planning is about passing on and contributing to the construction of specific technical knowledge, even more so if this is done using a handbook; ii) that for teaching to be effective, the technical nature of this knowledge must be pointed out; iii) that the institutional frameworks of professional practices do not provide a basis for technical knowledge, although they are useful for critically understanding its potential, limitations and moral implications.

With regard to these considerations, handbooks generally have different approaches:

- a) the subject is usually approached in reference to a specific ‘national’ context (e.g. Gabellini, 2001; Cullingworth & Nadin, 2002; Cullingworth & Caves, 2009);
- b) also for this reason, the nature of technical knowledge depends, explicitly or implicitly, on its institutional codification in that given context and, if the context is not given (e.g. Selicato & Rotondo, 2010; Weber & Crane, 2012), the nature of technical knowledge also remains vague;
- c) the knowledge transferred – which comes from a field of knowledge including everything from administrative and procedural skills to urban design, from urban studies to public management – can rarely be described as ‘technical’ and at any rate is almost never ‘specific’.

The above assumptions led to this new handbook being drawn up in four parts, which help to show – using concrete cases, detailed information, examples and exercises – issues that must be taken into



consideration for learning to take place without making exclusive reference to the Italian context, extending the scope to the ancient and contemporary experiences most suited to helping us understand the technical nature of our knowledge. The first part of the handbook shows how the main effect of spatial governance is that it reshapes the citizenship of those who live in the area subject to planning; the second part traces the historical matrices of spatial planning that have contributed to shaping contemporary technical knowledge; the third part sets out the main themes and methods of spatial planning that emerged over the course of the twentieth century right up to the present day; and the fourth and final part is dedicated to the institutional and procedural forms through which spatial governance, making use of spatial planning, currently operates.

This paper gives the reasons, in five theses, for the educational choices behind the handbook and concludes with a few considerations as to the relationship between teaching and civic progress.

## **2. Urban planning is a field of knowledge, teaching its technical aspects means teaching spatial planning**

The political and technical practices used to order space play an essential role in all societies. No matter how many things may change in society in the future, it is certain that the ordering of space will always be necessary. Spatial planning meets this social need, although during certain periods it may not seem up to the task, and may seem like an uncertain and ineffective solution. This must be taken into account before any teaching can take place in our field, to stress the importance to students of the subject they're broaching, independently of the historical circumstances and the national and/or socio-spatial context of reference.

In this respect, it is helpful to avoid falling back on the Italian term *urbanistica* ('urban planning', see: CEC, 1997), which is still very much used in professional and academic jargon. This term – like *urbanisme* in France or *town and country planning* in the United Kingdom – is commonly used in Italy, because it was adopted by the national technical culture developed at the beginning of the twentieth century by the first disciplinary institutes (universities, journals, conferences etc.). The problem is that, due to the wide variety of subjects that have involved the ordering of space in the last century, these national denominations of the same technical practice have ended up covering a vast field of knowledge and disciplines with no real clarity as to where to draw the line; they describe bodies of knowledge that do not fit into a single framework due to the many objectives pursued and the differing jargons used. No teaching programme, even one extended over a long period of time, could satisfactorily cover the multiple subjects encompassed, for instance, by the field of 'urban planning'. Even if it were possible, such a teaching programme would end up evading or confusing, with an overly vast set of questions, the specificity of the technical knowledge that planners apply or should apply, that is to say spatial planning.

For these reasons, we decided it would be preferable, in drawing up the handbook, to use two interrelated terms that help to convey, more effectively than others, the political and technical functions of the ordering of space: spatial governance and spatial planning. By spatial governance, the handbook means the political decision-making processes through which choices about the ordering of space, i.e. defining and controlling the uses of the land, are made. By spatial planning, the handbook means the main technique that is available to and supports spatial governance. This terminological pair introduces order into the multifaceted field of 'urban planning' (or whatever term is traditionally adopted in distinct national contexts) and allows us to distinguish between techniques that actually do order space and the political processes that decide this order. Furthermore, the pairing of terms is a tool that can be applied to any socio-administrative and cultural context. That said, it must be stressed that the use of the term 'governance' should not conceal in any way the fact that only the 'government' has the ultimate power to dictate how land is to be used (i.e. to assign rights of transformation).

Whilst the traditional terminology takes both political decision-making processes and analytical and planning techniques into account, distinguishing between spatial governance and spatial planning allows us to separate two practices that have different characteristics and present different didactic issues, making them an effective combination for teaching. Given that spatial planning is a form of technical knowledge taught for practical purposes, this handbook describes it by tracing its theoretical and practical origins back to ancient times and above all through the last one hundred and fifty years of European and North-American history. This gives us the profile of a form of technical knowledge with deep and far-reaching roots, the main use of which is to assign and control the use of land, clearly demonstrating how this ultimately translates into social control and the re-establishment of the material conditions of citizenship in the area subject to planning.

### **3. To teach spatial planning we must explain why it is instrumental for the purposes of spatial governance**

To pass on any technical knowledge, its technical nature must be defined and justified. In other words, a convincing answer must be given to the question ‘what human practices gave rise to the need for such skills and why? Without this – as we will see – it is (more) difficult to teach how specific technical knowledge can or must be used and, above all, with what aims and responsibilities. In contemporary handbooks on spatial planning the question is usually avoided. The implicit answer these give thus tends to place the origin of technical knowledge in the institutionalisation of professional practices in the modern age, “as a technique used by the public authorities” (Maresscotti, 2008, p. 1) to pursue aims “which are set out in legislation or in some documents of legal or accepted standard” (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2002, p. 2), ending up inverting the causal relationship between practical reason and institutional codification. In cases where efforts are made to define the technique outside a specific institutional context, the following ideological statement holds true: if spatial planning can be freely defined as “a process of formulating goals and agreeing the manner in which these are to be met” (Cullingworth & Caves, 2009, p. 6) or “an institutionalized social technology for systematizing knowledge pertinent for a particular kind of collective action and for marshalling the power required for its implementation” (Weber & Crane, 2012, p. 8), then it is also legitimate to deny its technical nature, teaching students that “the urban project – faced with an ever-changing local context – moves forward by trial and error, and (...) is not easily confined to a deductive logic established by a general plan” (Selicato & Rotondo, 2010, p. 2).

In actual fact, the need for spatial planning came about well before its institutional codification in the modern age, and referring back to the first experiences of it is essential to be able to correctly illustrate its technical nature. Plans have existed ever since human societies, in learning to permanently settle in a place, have needed to organise and control space, enclosing the area under their sovereignty and distinguishing, first and foremost, between space for public use and space for private use. Leaving the confirmations provided by archaeological finds dating back to the end of the Stone Age to one side, the first literary account to confirm the existence of spatial planning is notably given in Aristotle’s *Politics*, in which the figure of Hippodamus of Miletus associates the application of the orthogonal grid with political constitution (Mazza, 2009). This association is made based on the political effects of the technical act of dividing land; in other words, on the “rights” this technique assigns or revokes.

In this respect, substituting *urbanistica* (urban planning) with *governo del territorio* (spatial governance) in the Italian Constitution under the 2001 reform has the undeniable, although probably accidental, merit of distinguishing political and executive responsibilities from the technical contribution that supports them, in the well-structured process that today regulates – 2,500 years on from the Hippodamean grid – the assignment of rights to the use and transformation of land by the State. Defining ‘spatial governance’ as the decision-making process by which political power assigns rights to the use and transformation of land, whatever the institutional context – ancient or

contemporary, of one State or another – in which this process is organised, is therefore necessary for defining ‘spatial planning’ as the technical tool for doing so.

#### **4. The technique of spatial planning originated from recognisable matrices, the teaching of which lays the foundations for all subsequent learning**

Any disciplinary knowledge, if it is to be consolidated, must establish an intellectual and professional genealogy. This is a task generally taken care of by the history behind the discipline in question, which is usually outlined in the introductory chapter of a handbook (e.g. Benevolo 2009; Cullingworth & Nadin 2002). By “inventing a tradition”, in the words of Hobsbawm (1983), our handbook links the construction of technical knowledge with the aims pursued by spatial governance in the modern age, whilst also acknowledging its autonomy. Spatial governance changed between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in response to the spatial effects of the industrial revolution, which made it necessary for the modern State to organise urban development with institutional ways of regulating land. Contemporary spatial planning culture took shape, in this context, through the application of models for ordering space established over time, i.e. by updating the original focal point of technical knowledge.

Recognising the matrices of spatial planning and understanding its aims is essential for learning technical knowledge. The matrices identified in the handbook correspond to the technical knowledge developed by three figures who pre-empted, in different ways, the characteristics and flair of the contemporary planner: Catalan-born Ildefonso Cerdá, Scotsman Patrick Geddes and Englishman Ebenezer Howard. These men were highly committed in their day and determined to take action; they pursued interests and occupied positions in multiple fields of social practices. This did not stop them from contributing a specific set of theories, models and rules to our understanding of spatial planning that is still largely used to this day, albeit not always consciously.

Cerdá was the only one of the three who was educated in a technical school and integrated into a professional body, but took on administrative and political roles at different stages of his life. The focal point of his technical teachings, obviously more wide-ranging, was the design of the orthogonal road grid applied to the expansion of Barcelona, a design which he made into the cornerstone of a “general theory of urbanisation” (Cerdá, 1867). Placing the design of the grid and rules for building city blocks at the centre of his theory allowed Cerdá to provide technical solutions to the hygiene, economic and transport problems of urbanisation. Nonetheless, Cerdá’s use of the design and rules, integral components of the plan, highlights his awareness about the effects of these on material rights of citizenship. Drawing on the rich repertoire of orthogonal urban roads (Malverti & Pinon, 1997), Cerdá associates them with an ideal of liberal and progressive governance, in which the very form of the city limits the accumulation of positional revenue and favours all forms of communication between citizens.

Geddes was a heterodox biologist, an advocate of the Spencerian concept of evolution who did not hesitate to make himself a social operator and then a planner without ever giving up on his intention to found a new science. His contribution to the technique of spatial planning was not the “survey, analysis, plan” formula that he himself, moreover, did not put into practice, but the way in which he demonstrated, using the examples of Scotland, India, Cyprus and Palestine, the close relationship between every process of spatial planning and the history and geography of a place. Geddes’ technique was adaptive, sensitive to the unique characteristics of every urban culture, and focused on reinstating the harmonious development of nature and culture that was jeopardised by the industrial age. For him, the plan was above all part of a process of renewal of space and society simultaneously or, more precisely, of the evolutionary relationship between a community and its surrounding environment. In spatial planning, Geddes sought a way out of the dissipative development model that had prevailed up until then.

Howard was a self-taught man who moved from one profession to another, from one side of the Atlantic to the other. He was able to tap into the most varied of intellectual stimuli and bring them together in an ambitious programme for social reform. His contribution to the technique of spatial planning lies in the way he functionally deconstructed the industrial city, putting it back together according to a cooperative, balanced and hierarchical system for the use of land and mobility extended over the entire area. Using diagrams of the garden city, Howard maintained that the unbridled use of urban land was a source of conflict that disrupted peace in society. By establishing spatial planning as a tool for civil society (Hall & Ward, 1999), he contributed in a decisive way to its success in the twentieth century in the context of the welfare state.

In a nutshell, the technical knowledge of spatial planning was born from a combination of matrices that can be defined as regulatory, procedural and systematic respectively (Figure 1). Although they don't necessarily combine to form a consistent and exhaustive whole, these three matrices give students the essentials on which to build further learning.



Figure 1. Cerdà, Geddes, Howard: three matrices of spatial planning (sources: Aa.Vv., 1991; Ferraro, 1998; Hardy, 1991).

## 5. Also for teaching purposes, the technique of spatial planning can be traced back to zoning

Benveniste (1976) teaches us that the Italian word for rule, *regola*, comes from the Indo-European root *reg-* (the same as *rex*), which means to draw in a straight line, establish a right, in clear reference to the division of land. This founding etymology, so important to civil society, is useful for understanding that the rules for spatial planning can be seen above all in the boundaries it produces, and its technique can be seen in zoning. Whilst still in its infancy, the planning culture confused zoning with functional and social segregation, ignoring or forgetting that above its possible uses and effects, the division of land was the focal point of the technique. This handbook puts the student in a position to understand that the specific skill of spatial planning starts with and depends on the tracing out of boundaries.

Highlighting this paves the way for two considerable pedagogical opportunities. First of all, it shows that every technique that falls under spatial planning (e.g. sizing the extent of development, establishing and circulating standards, transferring volumetric rights, checking population density) is a specialisation in the technique of tracing out boundaries, combined with specific ways of regulating the use of land within the perimeters established by the plan, whether these already exist or are being created. The terms 'area', 'parcel', 'sector', commonly used in technical documents, all refer to the definition of boundaries without which indices and parameters would have no set meaning or be legally binding. Secondly, it helps us to understand that any technique that cannot be attributed to the tracing out of boundaries does not belong to the specific knowledge of spatial planning. This

distinction on its own is not enough to build systematic and communicable knowledge, nor does it mean that spatial planning should ignore the contribution of social and environmental sciences. The distinction is, nonetheless, useful for establishing the technical specificity of spatial planning, also preventing the student from mistaking it for a purely analytical skill. Obviously students should not be misled into a ‘corporative’ thinking (which is a risk that should be borne in mind), but to convey the real social utility of spatial planning it is important to allow students to recognise who we are, the technical culture we come from, and the knowledge we have.

Zoning, which is understood as a way of regulating the use of land through the tracing out of boundaries, is the most solid point of departure for the technical training of planners, regardless of the country and culture they come from. There’s no one zoning model, this is actually a flexible technique that can be adapted to wide array of aims and situations. Indeed, it is applied in all cities, in the most varied political regimes, economic systems, climates and cultures, not without the support of the most radical liberals who, where in power, could not do without it. An ancient technique that is still used to this day, zoning bears the traces of the indissoluble relationship between land and citizenship. It is necessary, however, to learn to distinguish between the emancipatory use of boundaries, as authentic tools of citizenship, and their use for segregatory and discriminatory purposes (Jacobs, 1961; Somma, 1991; Chiodelli, 2012). In this sense, the moral implications of zoning are a lot more important than the aesthetic implications, and must be heeded in training students, because the autonomy of technical knowledge does not mean that it is without responsibility.

## **6. Spatial governance is not a form of technical knowledge, but a political practice that may be taught insofar as it is necessary for understanding the effects of spatial planning**

In the first two theses we distinguished between the technical contribution to the control of space and the decision-making and executive responsibilities of political power. The two subsequent theses summarised the substance of the technical knowledge of spatial planning which, in theory, could be passed on even without referring to the nature of spatial governance in various institutional contexts. It is true, on the other hand, that the varied and significant issues and problems spatial governance finds itself up against – looking at just the last century this includes urban containment, the recovery of historical centres, the organisation of mobility, the protection of the environment and the landscape, reinforcing social cohesion and guiding local development, etc. – throw up just as many questions on method for technical knowledge, so much so that it is recommended that planning techniques be taught alongside decision-making processes and the ways in which the stakeholders involved participate in these.

Unlike that which is usually confirmed or implied by contemporary handbooks, however, it is important to emphasise that the national and regional characteristics of systems of spatial governance (more commonly labelled as the ‘spatial planning systems’), the institutional forms and procedural tools through which this is developed in practice, the different types of plan for different administrative areas and the policies addressed do *not* constitute the technical knowledge of spatial planning. If this were the case, the need for contextualisation would risk obscuring the distinction between technical and political responsibilities. Rather, contextualisation is necessary to show that the aims and political effects pursued through planning are never ‘absolute’, but always linked to the characteristics and objectives of the system of spatial governance within which technical knowledge is applied.

Spatial governance is not a form of technical knowledge, but a political practice involving different types of knowledge, which more specifically takes procedural knowledge and the analysis of decision-making processes as its main points of reference. In practice, spatial governance consists in defining planning problems and deciding how to resolve them. An effective way of ‘teaching’ spatial governance to students is through case studies, insofar as these make it possible to describe and analyse decision-making processes. The handbook goes down this path, using concrete examples to

show the stakeholders involved in the processes, their actions and roles, their powers, and their links with active forces and interests involved in decisions of spatial governance in a given area. The case studies can be turned into ‘games’ in which the students take on the roles of the various stakeholders and try to find shared solutions other than those to have actually come out of the decision-making process. Among various other stakeholders, planners participate in the decision-making processes of spatial governance, as persons with a form of technical knowledge that sets them apart from the other participants. This knowledge must remain central to teaching, even though it is to be found in the context of the political processes in which it is used or represented.

We should add, to avoid any doubt, that it is useful to keep the distinction alive between technical and political responsibilities – more than to play down or downsize the responsibility of technical knowledge in influencing processes of spatial governance – to clarify that this responsibility does not end with the drawing up of plans, but extends to the contribution of technical knowledge, consciously or unconsciously, to the social construction of a system of spatial governance. Defining the technical nature of spatial planning also contributes, in this respect, to training professionals to be aware that systems of spatial governance are not formal, inanimate structures through (or against) which to unleash their individual creativity to improve the physical environment and human and social wellbeing (Healey & Hillier, 2008). Understanding that the control of space for the purposes of political, social and economic control does not follow, but pre-exists the formation of spatial governance systems, and is the founding purpose of these, is in other words essential for building technical knowledge that is conscious of its role in the progressive design of citizenship.

## 7. Conclusions

These last considerations allow us to conclude with a brief reflection on the specific institutional and political value of teaching in our field of knowledge. Indeed, the disappointment of political decision-makers and public opinion over the weak or contradictory response of spatial planning is well known. The economic and social crisis of recent years, in particular, has led to public opinion becoming strongly detached from the idea of collective action and responsibility and from the idea of pursuing aims of public interest, which lie at the heart of the notion of spatial governance. The fiscal crisis and the further weakening of public power took away a clear and important part of the authority of spatial governance, which was not just to “do business” with urban transformations. So far, attempts to simplify spatial governance to make it more effective and transparent have often failed because public and private professional corporations take advantage of complicated and not particularly specialised procedures that increase the discretion of decision-makers but confuse responsibilities and facilitate collusion.

It is our conviction that, even without getting to the point of confusing roles and responsibilities, the difficulties referred to above are also the long-standing outcome of an uncertain method of teaching technical knowledge that lacks much-needed stability. Indeed, since spatial planning contributes to the progressive design of citizenship, it is not hard to believe that citizens who are confused or distrustful of planning are, in the long run, also the result of our specialists being trained in a way that is not targeted or selective enough. In conclusion, in the words of Beauregard (2005: 206), “a bridge exists from the technical knowledge that planners embrace to the institutional change that seems necessary for planning to be effective”, and its foundations lie in university lecture halls.

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