Whither regional planning?

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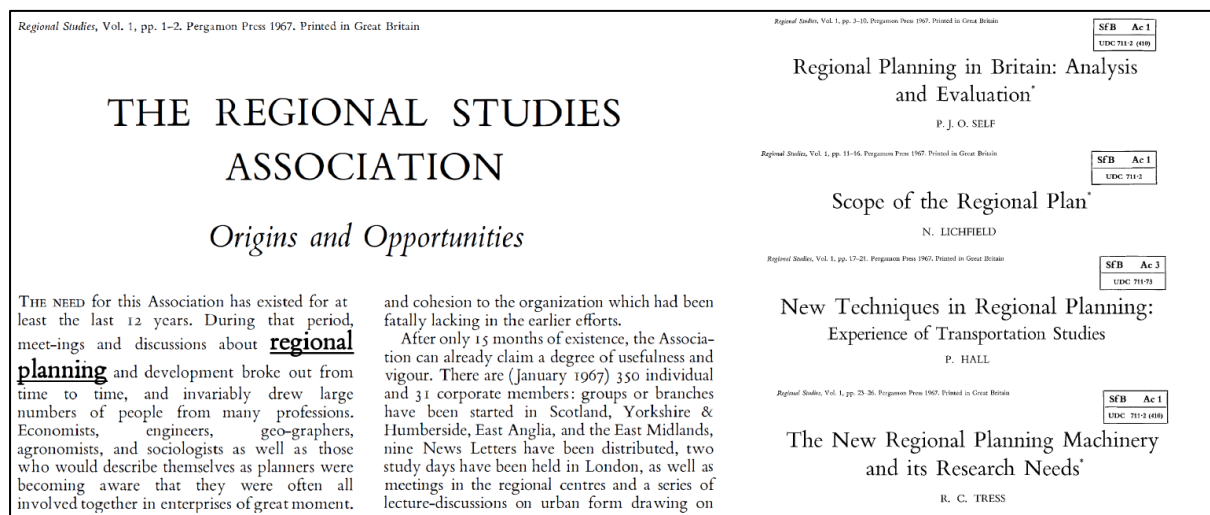
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1. Introduction

Since *Regional Studies* was founded in 1967, planning and planners have been central to understanding cities and regions. Lest we forget that in the first ever issue of the journal, the opening papers all contained 'regional plan' or 'regional planning' in their title (Figure 1), 'regional planning' was the first concept mentioned, and the first purposeful argument proclaimed the need "to ask and analyse some questions about the future of regional planning in the light of recent events" (Self, 1967: 3). Yet, fast forward to the present and it is striking how a journal synonymous with regions and planning contained no mention of regional planning in its *50th Anniversary Special Issue* (Regional Studies, 2017)[i]. This raises an important question: have we witnessed the withering away of regional planning?

Figure 1: Regional Studies, Volume 1, Issue 1 – 1967

Recent developments and trends raise fundamental questions about the 'p' word (planning) in academic and policy circles.

We can point to how planning is no longer solely the domain of professional planners but open to a diverse group of actors involved in place-making and place-shaping. In 1967, planning at various spatial scales was generally accepted as a function of the state. Over the last 40 years, planning has

been subject to ongoing ideological attacks from right wing and populist governments globally for its perceived thwarting of growth and development, ostensibly neoliberal, agendas; in this sense, not only has planning been kicked in the shins and gone out of fashion, it has also been undermined by the changing role and expectations of the state versus market interests.

We can observe how the study of cities and regions has traditionally had a disciplinary home in planning schools (geography departments, and the like, certainly since the early twentieth century and more prominently since the 1940s) but this link with place and space disciplines is steadily eroding as research increasingly takes place in and through interdisciplinary research institutes.

We can identify the advent of real-time modelling of cities and regions (and the rise of so-called 'smart cities' set within 'smarter regions') and the challenges this poses for the type of long-term perspective that planning has traditionally afforded at a time, and in a society, where immediacy and short-termism are the watchwords. For citizens and communities increasingly leading and shaping their lives through smart technologies and social media, taking responsibility to shape their geographies themselves rather than rely on state and government to operate on their behalf appears arguably to be both the present and the future. In 2020, 3.5 billion people own or have access to a smart phone, representing 44.87% of the world population, and the numbers that will own mobile devices are forecast to increase to 7.33 billion by 2023.

We can reflect on 'regional planning', based historically on arduous geographical surveys and analytical paper exercises undertaken by professional planners, and its mixed record of achievement. And we can recognise how the link between 'region' and 'planning' is decoupling as alternative regional (and other spatial) approaches to planning emerge in conjunction with more networked and relational forms of place-making, and the wider re-imagination of the urban and the region.

Planning Regional Futures is an intellectual call-to-arms to engage planners (and those who engage with planning) to critically explore research agendas at the intersection of planning and regional studies. Our aim is to move beyond the narrow confines of existing debate, providing a forum for debating what planning is, and should be, for in regional studies. Let us be clear from the outset what this is not. It is not a narrowly focused discussion about the future of regional planning[ii]. Neither is it an attempt to comprehensively document the depth and breadth of current work. And, despite the title, nor is it designed to be pessimistic. This collection has quite the opposite purpose. The aim is to re-energize and provoke planning debates in regional studies by forging new ways of "planning regional futures". Our optimism comes from approaching this task as firm believers in the function of regional planning, if not the institutionalized form that regional planning typically takes. For us, this is about recovering the essence, purpose and values of planning suitable for a 21st century context, and bringing these to bear on wicked regional problems. It is here that we would argue planning's future in regional studies should be debated (Harrison et al. 2020).

2. Debating planning regional futures

2.1 What kind of planning?

How we answer the question *What kind of planning?* depends largely on whether we take 'planning and institutions' or 'place and problems' as our starting point. Contributors to this collection take as their starting point place-specific needs and wicked regional problems (cf. Purkarthofer et al. forthcoming). In this way we return to planning history, where regional planning occurred in an ad

hoc, place-specific way, to address specific regional problems. It is sometimes easy to forget that the prehistory of institutionalised reginal planning emerged in this way, rather than because there was a regional government or set of nationally determined institutions to perform it[iii]. The implication of taking 'place and problems' as a starting point is that answering the question of what kind of planning becomes one of asking which planning style and approach is most appropriate for framing the problem at hand (Harrison et al., 2020). Across the papers in this collection we see this in action as the focus of attention moves from one wicked regional problem to another – be it population dynamics and the impact of migration processes (Gordon & Champion, 2020), increased nationalist, regionalist, separatist forces (Colomb & Tomaney, 2020), the need for climate compatible growth and environmental sustainability (Ravetz et al., 2020), and managing competing demands on land use and their spatial externalities (Pan et al., 2020).

A common theme is that the weakness of traditional planning institutions is that they are not sufficiently agile to adjust to the new drivers of change (Tewdwr-Jones and Galland, 2020). While preparing this collection we have been able to observe the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, critical questions about planning's role in facilitating racial inequality across US cities and regions, alongside many other issues which when looked at together emphasise the centrality of change and the need for planning to change with the times. It is here that we can see how approaches focusing attention on multiculturalism, decolonization and informality are leading to ever more diverse perspectives on what planning is and should be (Barry J & Thompson-Fawcett, 2020; Bhan et al., 2017; Huq & Miraftab, 2020; Williams, 2020; Yiftachel, 2020). At one level this calls for reforms to the planning system. However, this does not solve the longer standing issue which is how do we make it adjust to, and accommodate, change?

Constantly subjected to shifting political ideologies and institutional reforms of the governing framework around planning (Davoudi et al 2020), the regional tier of planning administration has always lacked the necessary agility to efficiently adjust to the multiple drivers of change constantly affecting territorialization. Operating within more fluid governance structures, planning regional futures will require more agile forms of planning activity. Developing the idea of 'alternative substitute place-making', Andres et al. (2020) show how contemporary planning processes require embedding informal and temporary dynamics acting as surrogates in places where formal planning is hindered. Drawing on both lay and expert judgment, the resulting malleable planning style is shown to effectively grasp the complex interaction between place-making processes at different scales, allowing cities and regions to better respond to different temporalities. In a similar vein, Watson (2019) argues for a more widespread recognition of place diversity and regional difference. Exposing the many parochial assumptions and limitations of the New Urban Agenda, Watson takes issue with the NUA's framing of cities and regions as well as the proposed managerial style of top-down, hierarchical state implementation. Across these contributions, we see that the kind of planning required is not old-style regional planning but new styles of planning regional futures capable of effectively addressing wicked regional problems. Or more accurately, emphasis must be placed on how wicked regional problems are being, and will potentially be dealt with, by emerging styles of planning regional futures.

2.2 What kind of regions?

Planners and planning are having to adapt to a world comprising an increasingly unplanned and messy configuration of regional, and other spatial, imaginaries. Wachsmuth & Kilfoil (2020) see the transition from the 'structured coherence' of the Fordist-Keynesian era to 'structured incoherence'

as presenting multiple challenges for navigating the today's regional planning landscape. Such is the fluidity and rapidity of change that discerning what new regional imaginaries mean for regional planning is a formidable task, especially when these "imaginaries are performed to fix that which is fluid and unsettle that which is long conceived of as fixed" (Davoudi & Brooks, 2020: 1).

Incoherence brings confusion, but coherence can just as easily lead to confusion. We should not forget that regional planning always takes on (sub)nationally specific forms (Bhan et al, 2017; Nadin et al., 2020). Yet, as Watson (2019) argues, for all that the New Urban Agenda is reviving international interest in planning, it is guilty of promoting a one-size-fits-all concept of city-regions which is neither appropriate or even possible to use across much of the Global South. In the current period, growing international interest in regions and planning is a significant development because regional planning has traditionally been caught between the two main elected tiers of government – national and local – unable in many instances to sets its own definitive agenda. Contrast that with today where you have international organisations (such as UN-Habitat – Watson, 2016), global financial firms and international developers (Raco et al., 2019), and philanthropic organisations (such as the Rockefeller Foundation – Fastenrath & Coenen, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020) as increasingly powerful actors, the ability for regional planning to be adaptive and agile to the needs of individual regions, sensitive to individual places and trends, and responsive to the multiple agencies operating in any one region becomes key. Agility also requires those doing the planning to be adept at juggling different skills, knowing when, where and how to deploy them (Harrison et al., 2020).

Perhaps the biggest concern to emerge is the growing gap between the ambition and the reality of what regional planning can achieve. Exploring the re-emergence of spatial planning strategies connected to large scale infrastructure-led developments, Schindler & Kanai (2019: 9 original emphasis) argue that although "ambitious *territorial forms* may be realized …. their *content* may escape the control of (inter-)national planners". This sense of detachment comes through strongly in Harrison and Gu's (2020) distinction between planning megaregions (as discursive and imagined) and megaregional planning (as concrete and actual). They argue that while both connect regions and planning, directing attention to the former is a worrying distraction from the actual practice of planning. Across all papers the message coming through loud and clear is that the current form of regional planning is problematic, however optimism rests in recovering the essence, values and purpose of planning as it was always intended. This requires reconnection to place, addressing regional needs, and capitalizing on regional opportunities – the very hallmarks of regional planning.

2.3 What kind of futures?

Shifting the horizons for planning in regional studies cannot involve business-as-usual approaches. Equally it cannot involve throwing the baby out with the bathwater by attempting to press a fictional reset button and wishing for a return to the halcyon days of institutionalised regional planning. Rather, planning regional futures necessitates going back to recover the essence, purpose and values of regional planning so that it continues to serve its fundamental wider purpose of addressing regional specific place needs.

For Nelson (2020) reclaiming the reform-minded planning of interwar regional thinkers such as Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford is essential to breaking free from the administrative rationality of present-day institutionalised regional planning. In a similar way, Gordon & Champion (2020) return to a classic spatial planning case study in regional studies – London and the south east region of England (Hall, 1967; John et al., 2002) – to make the case for going back to first principles with

strategic spatial planning. Arguing against the practise of adhering to the centrality of any singular 'strategic' plan of the conventional professional kind, they argue how:

> "… the role of a socially licensed professional represents a tamer, more institutionalized but politically defensible, counterpart to his [Rein 1969's original taxonomy of available sources of legitimation for planning practice] 'guerrilla' role which has planners striving to enhance governmental competence and responsiveness by any means available. If not specifically one for 'planners', his guerrilla role does … have something in common with the view of strategic planning (as practice) for which we are arguing" (Gordon & Champion, 2020: 11)

Going back to move forward is also integral to Ravetz et al.'s (2020: 8) futures claim that achieving carbon neutrality targets in metropolitan regions requires a synergistic-collaborative planning style that facilitates practical pathways which are capable of "linking future goals with present-day actions".

When considering planning regional futures (and planning's future in regional studies) a stark warning is offered by Fastenrath and Coenen in their contribution examining the future proofing of cities via the adoption of resilience frameworks. Set against the context of claims that 'governance experiments' promise new ways of collaborating and innovating, capable of breaking down bureaucratic silos and fostering transformative change, they question how much of this planning actually amounts to transformative change or "simply camouflages business as usual" (Fastenrath & Coenen, 2020: 10).

3. Opening a debate on regions and planning

Planning has not disappeared from regional studies. Indeed, and perhaps curiously, despite the ideological coshing of planning by state entities over some decades, planning is still alive and well in most nations, even if it is subject to continual reform narratives amidst complaints from some politicians and business leaders that it is not fit for purpose. This said, other themes have emerged over the past fifty years such that 'regional studies' is no longer byword for regional planning and development. Regional studies has matured into an increasingly pluralist forum encouraging diversity of perspectives and approaches over any single paradigm, interpretation or approach. Our argument is that planning remains integral to the future of regional studies but not in the form it once took. Stated bluntly, we do not need regional planning, but we do need planning in regional studies.

Our view is that planning in regional studies will always have important connection to formal structures and frameworks of government/governance. This is essential to provide a democratic legitimacy and give form to planning activities. As Wray (2015), drawing on the work of the aforementioned Peter Self, notes, "planning exists not simply to anticipate the future but to actively shape it – and sometimes to change, rather than accommodate, current trends".

Planning regional futures will increasingly centre on consortia of willing actors bringing their skills, competencies, and resources to bear on trying to actively address those wicked problems affecting cities and regions. Planning and planners can have a key role to play in this and it is one they must be ready to grasp. Planning's origins lay there. Why not its future too?

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[i] Across thirteen articles, Paasi and Metzger (2017) fleetingly mention 'regional planning' once, while Chen and Vickerman (2017: 156) do likewise but only to say "there is no administrative body and statutory planning power to consider the wider effects of HSR [high speed rail] at the city-regional level".

[ii] Given our starting point (see paragraph one) the original title for this special issue was going to be *Regional Planning Futures*. However, we found this limiting and in the spirit of opening up debates over the future of planning in regional studies we wanted to leave nothing off the table – including the future of regional planning itself.

[iii] In the opening paragraph of *Regional Studies* first editorial we are struck by the wording that differentiates other professionals (economists, engineers, geographers, agronomists and sociologists) from "those who would describe themselves as planners" (Sharman, 1967: 1). This highlights how despite the emphasis on 'regional planning', planning itself was still in the process of becoming institutionalised.