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Bracken, G.

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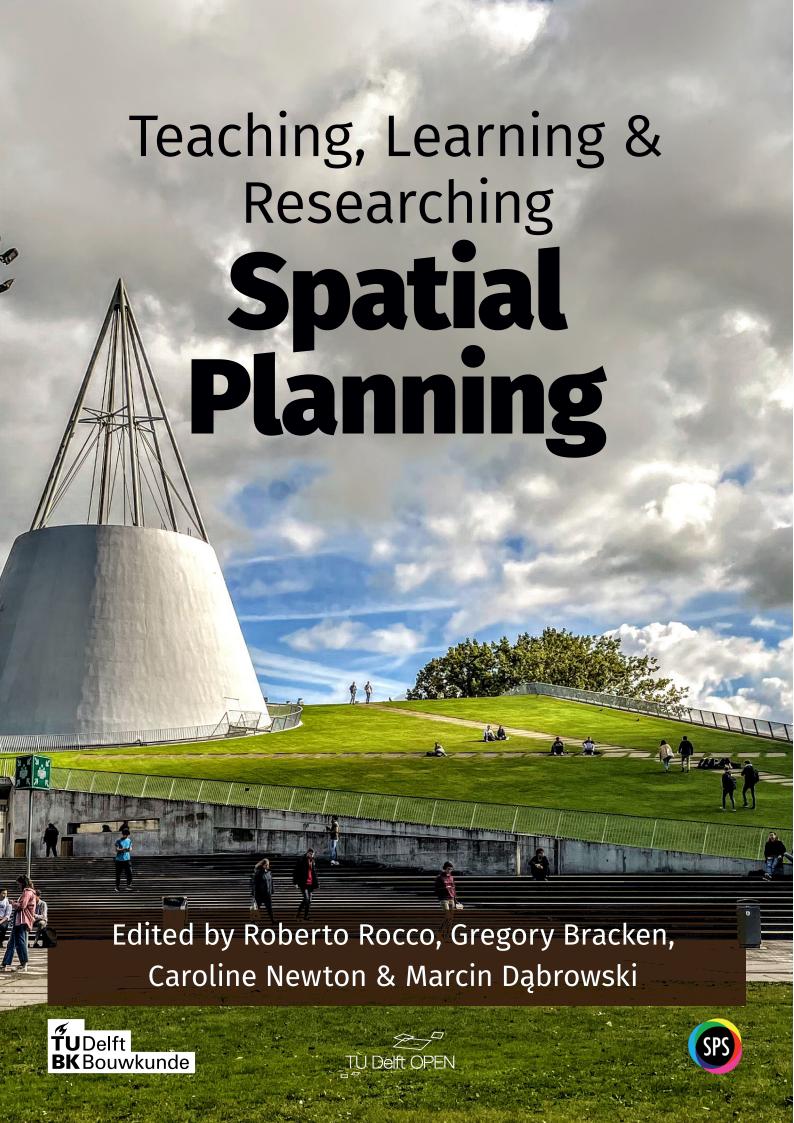
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Teaching, Learning & Researching
Spatial Planning

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TOOLS, CONCEPTS AND IDEAS TAUGHT AT THE SECTION OF SPATIAL PLANNING AND STRATEGY OF THE

OF URBANISM, FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

DELFT UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, THE NETHERLANDS.

Teaching Theories of Urbanism

GREGORY BRACKEN

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SPATIAL PLANNING AND STRATEGY, G.BRACKEN@TUDELFT.NL

This chapter introduces the theories of urbanism courses offered at the Urbanism Department in the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft. Urbanism is a discipline which has a crucial impact on how humans interact with the built environment. Understanding its theories is important and will be increasingly so in the twenty-first century as the world's population becomes ever more urban. This chapter begins with a brief introduction outlining its contents. Section two then asks the question What is urbanism? and answers it by looking at how cities developed before going on to describe the discipline of urbanism itself. Section three highlights three theories of urbanism courses run by the Urbanism Department, showcasing their teaching methods, and showing how they are targeted to students' different levels. The course deliverables, which are essays, are also explained here, including how they are graded and the feedback given. Section 4 deals with the courses' learning objectives, explaining both explicit and implicit ones: the former being about understanding theories of urbanism and demonstrating that understanding; the latter being about professionalism more generally, e.g. how to communicate, meet deadlines, and write academically correct English. Finally, a brief conclusion recapitulates the importance of urban theory in the twenty-first century.

URBANISM, THEORY, HISTORY, TEACHING, LEARNING

1. Introduction

This book is intended as a handbook for the teaching and learning of concepts, theories, tools, and methods related to spatial planning. Its audience is anyone interested in this discipline, one that has a crucial impact on how humans and the built environment interact, which is something that will be examined in Section 2. But first, let me explain the main aim of this chapter, which is to outline our approach to the teaching and learning of theories of urbanism in TU Delft. This will not be an introduction to actual theories – to go into any one theory in detail, let alone a number of them, would require more space than this chapter allows. And to try and make broad generalisations about urban theory in general would probably require a book. Indeed, this is something that has already been done, and by people better qualified than I, and the reader will find a brief list of some recommended reading at the end of this chapter. In keeping with the aim of *this* book, however, I will give an outline of how we approach teaching and learning of theories of urbanism.

Most, if not all, the courses in the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment (and indeed TU Delft) have theoretical components. This chapter will focus on three courses dealing with theories of urbanism that are routinely offered as part of masters, post-masters, and PhD education in the Department of Urbanism. They are: History and Theory of Urbanism, for first-year masters' students; Theories of Urbanism, for second years beginning their graduation project – this course also forms an integral component of that work (as does the Methods of Urbanism course, which we will see in Section 3.2); and finally, History and Concepts of Ur-

banisation, which is for post-masters and PhDs but also attracts practitioners from outside the university: professionals who wish to broaden or improve their skills set.

These courses will be explained in detail in Section 3, and their learning objectives, both explicit and implicit, will be explained in Section 4. The chapter ends with a brief conclusion reminding us of the importance of urban theory in a rapidly urbanising world.

2. What is urbanism?

Cities emerged in Mesopotamia, in what is present-day Iraq, almost 10,000 years ago. Cities also appeared independently in the Indus Valley and China, as well as, later on, in Central America and Africa, but Mesopotamia was the front-runner. When they emerged, cities were already in a mature form that we can recognise today. The first cities, located in the rich river floodplains of the Tigris and Euphrates, had what Lewis Mumford calls an ambivalent character, one which they never wholly lost, because, according to Mumford, they combined the maximum protection with the greatest incentives for aggression; they offered the widest possible freedom combined with the most drastic systems of control and regimentation (Mumford, 1989: 4).

Why was this? One explanation is because of the place where these cities first emerged: Mesopotamia (Greek for 'between the rivers'). This area was, until recently, known as the Fertile Crescent. The name changed recently to the Fragile Crescent because we now understand that the rivers

which provided such rich agricultural land also had a tendency to sweep everything away in periodic flooding. People realised they had to work together if they were to harness the life-giving power of the rivers, but also tame their more destructive aspects.

This new social organisation saw components of village life carried forward and incorporated into new city life, recomposed in more complex and unstable ways. But, as Mumford points out, it was this complexity and instability that promoted further transformation and development leading to the emergence of specialisation (Mumford, 1989: 29). Kings, aristocrats, and priests, merchants and soldiers created a higher-order urban unity that grew out of this new social complexity. This also allowed for an explosion of human capability because the city could mobilise manpower, it could command long-distance transportation, and it became a hotbed of invention, which in turn promoted agricultural improvement, leading to larger populations, and larger cities.

The city's rise was built on older, pre-existing cultural elements. What gave it its power to effect change was the way in which these were brought together. This was the 'urban revolution' of V. Gordon Childe (1950). A revolution where small but important portions of humanity first became urban.

Civilisation emerged in the city, and created much of what we now treasure in society, including the written record, education, culture, democracy, and justice. All cities have the capacity for civilised life; some have even attained dazzling heights, like Periclean Athens, Tang dynasty Chang'an (Xi'an), or Florence under the Medici. But what separates a city that has attained a high level of civilization from one that has not? I think it is the capacity for allowing its citizens to flourish.

As cities grow in size and complexity, so too should their capacity to provide civilised life, with peace, justice, and a meaningful contribution to government for all. And this is something that is going to be even more important in the twenty-first century, since already more than 50 percent of us live in urban environments, and that figure is expected to grow to 85 percent by the end of the century. We are, in fact, experiencing what could be called a second 'urban revolution'. And understanding what that means for us as a species, and for the planet we inhabit, will be one of the key concerns for urbanism in the twenty-first century.

But what is urbanism, exactly? The term seems to be used as a catch-all for any discipline related to urban life (including, but not limited to, architecture, geography, the social sciences, and others). Even though cities have been around for almost 10,000 years, urbanism itself is a relatively new discipline. And this is despite the fact that people have been planning cities since the very beginning: the ancient Greeks and Romans laid out their cities according to strict grids, as did the Chinese, with the Rituals of Zhou. Americans even revived this system in the nineteenth century. In the Renaissance, Sixtus V reorganised parts of Rome, cutting great axes through the city's ancient fabric, anticipating Haussmann's Parisian boulevards by three centuries. Georgian-era Dublin saw the foundation of the Wide Streets Commission (1758-1849), widely seen as the world's first urban planning body. Yet these plans and interventions were either too rigid, in the militaristic grid, or too *ad hoc*, in the Baroque and Georgian interventions.

Just as there is a difference between vernacular architecture and the products of professional architects, so too is there a difference been *ad hoc*

city development, no matter how rigorous, and the emergence of urbanism as a profession.

Urbanism, as a profession, first appeared in the early twentieth century. Initially, it was associated with the rise of centralised manufacturing, mixed-use neighbourhoods, and social networks in what came to be seen as a convergence between political, social, and economic citizenship. Architects, urban planners, and sociologists investigated ways in which people lived in densely populated urban areas. Urbanism itself, however, came to mean the study of characteristic ways in which the inhabitants of urban areas interact with their built environment, and is concerned more with place-making and identity creation than with simple zoning or planning.

Space is not empty; it is never simply something left over between buildings. Space is active, and its activity comes into being through people's uses. It is people who turn space into place, and this is done over time, which is almost like a fourth dimension bringing it into being, uniting its users on a daily, seasonal, or longer-term basis. The urbanist and, to a lesser extent, the architect focus on the larger-scale built environment. It is the point of departure for their work as designers, planners, and builders. But to do so without taking into account the people who use the places they design and plan for is to miss the point. The most important thing anyone can understand about a city, no matter what their disciplinary background might be, is that a city is its people. Our job as urbanists is to facilitate people's networks of interaction and allow them to flourish as individuals.

3. Teaching theories of urbanism

This book is about what we do in the Spatial Planning and Strategy section, but we have a much wider reach than merely what goes on in our section. For example, the theories of urbanism courses (to give them a simple collective descriptive term – we will come to their actual names in a moment) have a much wider scope than any narrow sectional interest.

These courses go to the heart of what we teach in Urbanism: helping students understand theories related to the disciple (and related disciples), but also introducing students to ways of approaching and using theory intelligently.

The three theory course are attended by all masters of urbanism students, as well as post-masters and some PhDs. The masters' students, in fact, attend two of the courses, one in first year and another in second year. I happen to be uniquely placed to write about these courses as I have the privilege of being coordinator (or co-coordinator) of all three of them.

Each course has a different format, designed to engage students at different levels of experience or ability. The first years have a course called History and Theory of Urbanism; followed in second year (the graduation year) by Theories of Urbanism. We also run History and Concepts of Urbanisation. This was originally one of the three support courses for the studio run by the European Post-master in Urbanism (EMU), a long-standing collaboration between TU Delft, KU Leuven, UPC Barcelona, and Università IUAV di Venezia. This course is also open to PhD candidates and to professionals seeking to broaden their skills set.

3.1. History and Theory of Urbanism

History and Theory of Urbanism (AR1U121) is run once a year beginning in September. The course's main coordinator was Birgit Hausleitner (now Taneha Bacchin). The course itself lasts for approximately two months and consists of lectures, formal debates, and informal discussions culminating in a 3,000-word essay. The lectures introduce students to urban history and theory, with topics like Paradigms, Reading the City, Urban Landscape, Form of the City, Open City, and Town Planning in the Netherlands. Each of these topics has a list of required (and also recommended) reading, which include such diverse authorities as Neil Brenner, Matthew Carmona, James Corner, Margaret Crawford, Michel Foucault, Bill Hillier, N.J. Habraken, Batty Marshall, Ian McHarg, and David Grahame Shane. Students are expected to demonstrate the ability to gather and present research, situate it in various discourses, and communicate their ideas clearly. They are also expected to show that they have reflected on what they have done. The coordinators and teachers involved in this course grade the essays and give the students feedback. The students also receive feedback on draft versions of their essays during the course. This is true for all the courses, and there will be more details on that feedback in the next sub-section.

3.2 Theories of Urbanism

The Theories of Urbanism course (AR3U023) is for second years, these are students who are doing their graduation project. The course used to be run every semester, beginning in September and February. Due to a recent reorganisation, it is not being run at the moment but will (hopefully) be reconfigured to run again in the not-too-distant future. The September intake was always considerably larger than that of February, with up to four times the number of students, making the spring course more of a seminar series.

Like the first-year course, it also lasted for about two months. The first half of the course consists of lectures introducing the various studios to the students to help them make better-informed decisions about which one to join to do their graduation project. There is also a general introduction to different theories of urbanism. The aim is not to go into any one theory in detail, but to make students aware of the wide range of topics available to study so that they can use the best and most appropriate ones in their own graduation projects.

The students are also encouraged to use their projects as a way of critiquing the theories they have used. This circular approach, enabled by the iterative method of learning encouraged during the masters, means that theory is seen as a support and framework informing empirical research, with the empirical research in turn interrogating that theory, leading to a synthesis that enriches both.

In the second half of the course, students are divided into groups according to themes they wish to explore (e.g. sustainability, citizen participation, transit-oriented development, etc.). Here, under my guidance, they pick research readings and are helpful to one another in analysing them. These discussions in small, focussed groups greatly enhance the students' understanding of the theories they are examining. It also improves their ability to interrogate or critique them as they have to present their findings to their classmates.

The students are also required to produce an es-

say (3,000 to 5,000 words). They pick their own topic and the readings and theories that support it, but these must have relevance for their graduation project because the essay becomes the theory chapter in their Graduation Report.

Essays are reviewed and graded by a team of teachers, each of whom grades three to four essays. The teachers who act as mentors do not grade their own students' work. Reviewers use a rubric and follow guidelines to ensure consistency of grading. Students have access to the grading rubric before they submit their essay so they know exactly what the reviewers are looking for (as is the case for all the theory courses).

The course used to be run in parallel with the Methods of Urbanism course (AR3U013), and was complimentary to it (this has also disappeared in the recent reorganisation). Methods helped students decide **how** they were going to do their research, while the Theory course helped them answer **why** a given theory is important.

The essay is not the end of the course, because towards the end of the graduation project students are expected to reflect on the processes they have gone through to produce their proposals. This reflection is important, not only for a critical appraisal of the processes they went through, but also as a useful way of revisiting the theories they used. Here they can take the opportunity to critique their own theoretical work, since they should have a deeper understanding of the issues involved thanks to their empirical research and analysis. Often, the students rewrite their theory chapter at this stage to incorporate their new insights.

3.3 History and Concepts of Urbanisation

The third and final course is History and Concepts of Urbanisation (ABE004). Originally set up as a support course for the European Post-master in Urbanism (EMU), it had also attracted increasing numbers of PhD students, which raised its level. It also occasionally attracted practitioners from outside the university. Sadly, TU Delft is no longer part of the EMU network, so this course has stopped.

The course was run once a year in the autumn and was coordinated by myself with Wil Zonneveld. In its last year, Wil was replaced by Rodrigo Cardoso. Its structure is modelled on the seminars I attended while doing my own PhD in Architecture Theory in TU Delft. The course ran for eight weeks, with anything from eight to sixteen students (although there were on occasion as many as twenty-four – but I find twelve to sixteen an ideal number for this sort of seminar).

The first session was an introduction, where I made a presentation on how to write English to academic standards (which I will return to in a moment). There then followed six sessions where students made short presentations based on set readings. There were two readings per week (and this changes year on year). The readings followed a trajectory that covered the emergence of the city, and how they formed networks, to the emergence of the world economy and the role cities play in it. The readings also examined city regions and other related topics, such as theories of mapping. Students were split into two groups, each presenting one of the texts to the other. There then followed a discussion on the text before moving onto the second group. There were six of these sessions, with a break

in the middle for students to present essay ideas.

The essays were graded by the course coordinators, giving detailed written feedback with not only a breakdown of the grade (e.g. use of sources, originality of ideas, development of these, etc.), but also feedback on how the essay was written (i.e. hints on what could have done better, and how – this has no bearing on the grade, it was just an extra we provided).

4. Learning objectives: explicit and implicit

The aim of all three courses was and is the same: to help students arrive at their own understanding of key concepts relating to spatial planning and urbanism. This is something that has already been highlighted in the companion to this volume: Celebrating Spatial Planning at TU Delft 2008-2019 (2019).

The courses were and are tailored to students' different academic levels, and enable them to define (and redefine) theoretical concepts. This helps them take a critical stance towards what they are learning and it also enables them to better establish parameters for their research.

The learning objectives are both explicit and implicit, and these are clearly communicated to the students throughout the courses. The explicit learning objectives are that students should demonstrate knowledge of various theories and communicate them effectively. The implicit objectives are for them to show that they can work to deadlines, organise themselves, and write well. In other words, act professionally.

Each of the courses has a section focussing on

improving students' written English. The vast majority of the students are not native English speakers. Being able to write good English, with clarity and concision, is a vital skill – brilliant ideas are useless unless they can be communicated clearly. Each course began with a Writing Academic English presentation. These are tailored to the different levels of the students, and with my own background as a native speaker, as well my editing experience, this helped give a valuable extra dimension to these courses.

To sum up: the aim of all these courses is twofold: 1) in the short term, to help students use theory to make informed decisions about their research, and to show that they can evaluate it; and 2), in the longer term, to prepare them for professional life, where habits of punctuality, the ability to meet deadlines, and write good, clear English, will stand them in good stead.

5. Conclusion: the relevance of urban theory today

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, the world's population is now more than 50 percent urban and that figure is set to rise to 85 percent by the end of the century. With so many people inhabiting urban environments, it is increasingly important for us to understand them. And that is one of the main tasks of the urbanist.

Making sense of things includes looking at what has gone before. The attentive reader will have noticed that two of the three courses have 'history' in their title. This is because we need to look at what has gone before, the better to understand the present, and, by that understanding, plan for the future.

Theories help us make sense of the world; they

help us to reflect, and, through that reflection, make better plans for the future. But, as we have seen in the theory courses, it is not just about what is happened, important and interesting as that is, it is **why** something is happened this is important. Once we understand the why then we will have the key to understanding what we can do about it.

Looking at history, looking at theory, are both important, but what is most important is seeing **how** we look at them. Theory not a thing in itself, its real value comes from enabling us to approach learning, and that is the main aim of all of these courses. It is not knowledge itself, although that is of course valuable, it is the understanding of ways of apprehending knowledge that we wish to impart to our students. In order for them to get their degrees, students have to demonstrate the ability to do certain things. No theory is more important than any other in this regard, it is the process the students use in deciding whether they are important or not, and what to do with this knowledge, that is key. Once we see them demonstrate these knowledge and skills, both theoretical and empirical, in planning or design, or both, then we know that the student is ready to go out into the world.

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