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EDITORIAL

Regional planning: an arena of interests, institutions and relations

Eva Purkarthofer[a] , Alois Humer[b] and Raine Mäntysalo[c]

ABSTRACT
This special issue approaches regional planning as a contested arena of strategic planning. With this view, we transcend the idea that regional planning is purely a matter of scale and approach the complexity of regional planning from three perspectives: interests, institutions and relations. The perspective of 'interests' reveals the various underlying motivations connected to regional planning. The perspective of 'institutions' addresses the encounter of formal and informal rules, norms and discourses shaping planning and governance practices. The perspective of 'relations' uncovers the complex constellations of actors and processes associated with planning, involving various administrative scales, territorial entities and sectoral policies.

KEYWORDS
spatial planning; strategic planning; governance; city-region; policy; territory

INTRODUCTION

Regional planning has been described as an 'intruder among the planning fraternity' (Friedmann, 1963), as having 'come of age' (Friedmann & Weaver, 1979) and, most recently, as 'dead' (Harrison et al., 2020). It seems that no other realm of planning has been declared obsolete and revived as many times as regional planning – at least if we believe the academic literature. Yet, regional planning is a recognized element of planning practice in most countries around the globe, addressing complex and highly relevant tasks concerning spatial development. We understand regional planning as evolving rather than resurrecting: not least due to the fuzzy, context-dependent and ever-changing understanding of regions, regional planning has taken a variety of forms.

In the 1960s, John Friedmann distinguished between three separate meanings of regional planning: regional development policy at the national level; processes of decision-making and design for investment projects at the regional level; and economic development programmes for subnational areas (Friedmann, 1963). While these meanings are still valid almost 60 years later, a multitude of other meanings could be added to this list. In Europe, regional planning is often associated with spatially relevant European Union (EU) policies, especially those related to cohesion and cross-border cooperation (Alden, 2006; Scott, 1999). Frequently, regional planning is seen as a vehicle for competitive metropolitan and city-regional planning (Ward & Jonas, 2004), or for managing growth in large scale mega-regions (Schafran, 2014). In some contexts, regional planning is equated with strategic spatial planning, with the aim of creating spatial visions as opposed to purely regulatory zoning plans (Albrechts et al., 2003; Knaap & Lewis, 2011). Often, regional planning refers to integrative planning approaches that combine, for instance, sustainable transportation and land use as well as environmental, economic and social policy goals (Humer & Granqvist, 2020; Purkarthofer & Mattila, 2018; Wheeler, 2002). Under the term regional design, regional planning has recently been understood as imaginative and creative practice suitable to frame citizen participation and stakeholder collaboration (Lingua & Balz, 2019).

With this special issue, we do not strive to find an all-encompassing definition of regional planning. Rather, we aim to shed some light on 'the regional' as a contested strategic planning arena, characterized by varying interests,

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changing institutional procedures, and tensions of complex inter-scalar and inter-sectoral relations. With this view we want to transcend the idea that regional planning is purely a matter of scale. Instead, we approach the complexity of regional planning from three perspectives: interests, institutions and relations.

The perspective of 'interests' in regional planning reveals the various underlying motivations constituting and framing regional planning. Interests related to regional planning can be derived from different tiers of government, such as local, national or EU level, as well as from different ideologies, including agendas of globalization or neoliberalism and concerns related to environmental, democratic or public interests. Individual and collective actors pursue their interests through employing institutional rules, norms and discourses. The perspective of 'institutions' thus addresses the encounter of formal and informal planning and governance practices shaping regional planning. In many countries, regional planning is characterized by the coexistence of established processes stipulated in the law and new, innovative and sometimes experimental initiatives of regional cooperation. Other countries experience a move from more formalized towards more flexible regional planning, or vice versa. The perspective of 'relations' discusses the complex constellations of actors and processes associated with regional planning, including the functional, vertical and horizontal connections between regional planning and other scales and sector policies. Regional planning serves as a relational intermediary between the local and the national, while at the same time bringing together different agendas, such as labour markets, educational, social and health provision, mobility and industry.

In the following sections, we introduce the articles comprising this special issue by examining how they investigate these three perspectives through comparative studies, diverse case studies from several countries and novel sectoral perspectives.

INTERESTS

In the first article of this special issue, Smas and Schmitt (2020, in this issue) provide an overview of the status and role of regional planning across Europe. In their comparative study covering eight European countries, they argue that even if the political significance of regional planning is said to decrease, various motivations for formal regional planning still exist: regional planning is expected to coordinate action and decision-making across jurisdictions and sectors, to regulate land use, and to promote desired spatial development, regional competitiveness and economic prosperity.

Nadin et al. (2020, in this issue) take up an even broader comparative perspective and investigate the trajectories of policy integration, adaptiveness in planning and citizen engagement in 32 European countries. The three themes are considered crucial when dealing with wicked problems such as climate change, energy security and social injustice. Consequently, the pursuit of integration,

adaptation and participation turns into an interest in planning as such, while at the same time changes regarding these aspects affect the planning process and thus reshape institutions and relations. Nadin et al. observe strong variation between the 32 countries regarding policy integration and identify a stronger integration of EU Cohesion Policy and spatial planning in the countries that are the main recipients of EU funding. Adaptability is increasing in most countries, yet it seems to yield positive results especially in countries with strong and stable planning institutions and trust in the administration. The possibilities for citizen involvement in the planning process are growing all over Europe, but a closer look reveals that, in some cases, participation resembles symbolic reassurance rather than meaningful involvement.

Providing a historical view on greenbelts, Macdonald et al. (2020, in this issue) find an increasing variety of interests behind the planning instrument of regional greenbelts. Earlier, greenbelts were intended mainly to separate urban areas from farmland or nature conservation areas. However, the 'new generation' of greenbelts becomes a multipurpose instrument that, for example, serves ecosystem service purposes or economic development interests. The growing diversity of interests goes hand in hand with an increasing variety of institutions shaping greenbelt planning.

Similarly, Walsh (2020, in this issue) identifies multiple competing objectives in his case study about maritime spatial planning and the North Sea 2050 strategy, including production of offshore wind energy, aquaculture, conservation of biodiversity and preservation of cultural heritage. Although the strategy articulates the various interests well, it does not give guidance how particular conflicting interests could be prioritized or harmonized. Tensions become visible, especially in trade-offs between ecology and economy: while ecological concerns are considered to serve the public interest, economic benefits are shared among a small number of businesses.

Taylor et al. (2020, in this issue) study the resilience strategies of 14 cities within the 100 Resilient Cities Programme, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. They find differences between stakeholders' interests regarding future uncertainties and risks, but these differences are downplayed in almost all strategies by presenting a consensual image of their communities. This is particularly surprising as embracing a diverse society is frequently showcased as a strength in the analysed resilience strategies.

In a case study of city-regional planning, Granqvist et al. (2020, in this issue) show that in Kotka-Hamina in south-east Finland, the major interests at stake are those of the individual municipalities of the city-region and the city-regional interest, fostered by the Kotka-Hamina Regional Development Company Cursor. The familiar tension between the municipal and the city-regional perspective in territorially fragmented city-regions is perhaps more heightened in Finland than in other places in the world due to the high level of autonomy of Finnish local governments regarding their planning and service

provision powers and taxation rights. In the Kotka-Hamina city-region, motivation for inter-municipal collaboration in strategic city-regional planning was pursued by resorting to unrealistic economic objectives and population growth estimates.

INSTITUTIONS

Focusing on formal regional planning, Smas and Schmitt (2020, in this issue) provide invaluable insights about the institutionalized mechanisms that guide regional planning in Europe. They argue that regional planning is expected to work not only with multi-form planning regions but also with multipurpose instruments: while being visionary and strategic, regional plans also provide frameworks for other plans and policies and enable binding decisions on spatial development. Despite an increasing interest in informal cooperation and soft spaces, for example, at the metropolitan scale, formalized regional planning is still well established in most European countries and has in some cases even been strengthened through reforms of the planning system.

Precisely this argument is largely confirmed by the case study of Granqvist et al. (2020, in this issue). In the Kotka-Hamina case, a hybrid of 'soft' and 'hard' city-regional plan was attempted that consisted of an integrated combination of municipal strategic master plans. These plans included legally binding zoning instructions only in part, while otherwise presenting more fluid non-binding strategic development guidelines. This rather innovative attempt backfired, as the overseeing state regional agency disapproved making legally binding master plans with such fuzzy elements. The institutional set-up of the local master plan instrument was not to be messed around with.

Another to-date unsuccessful regional planning process is presented by Grundel (2020, in this issue) who explores the institutionalization of spatial logics in the creation of the 'Scandinavian 8 Million City', a transboundary mega-region spanning Oslo, Gothenburg, Malmö and Copenhagen. Economic and territorial competitiveness served as dominating arguments in favour of the endeavour to develop a high-speed rail corridor and stronger cooperation in the region. In addition, the appeal of a large-scale, polycentric region as soft space was supported by national and EU discourses. The Scandinavian 8 Million City also relied on new regional coalitions and managerial forms of regional policy and planning, involving partnerships between public and private actors. However, the process of region-building did not strengthen a shared regional identity and citizens were portrayed as mobile, economically driven objects moving in the region.

In their comparative study of the 14 resilient city strategies, Taylor et al. (2020, in this issue) put into question the scholarly claim that the concept of resilience places responsibility for disaster preparedness on communities, while minimizing state authority. On the contrary, they find that the majority of the studied strategies propose state-centric actions and thereby very much rely on existing planning institutions. In turn, fostering resilience might be expected to lead to embracing preparedness for acute shocks, and thereby putting an emphasis on collective capacity-building that could remedy the possible temporary immobilization of the state. Taylor et al., however, argue that most cities were not motivated to develop stakeholder relations for such collective capacity-building, but instead framed their actions in terms of expert-driven, technocratic planning.

RELATIONS

Smas and Schmitt's (2020, in this issue) comparative perspective reveals a common loss of territorial synchrony between administrative systems and planning systems, resulting in tensions between multiple regional planning levels. This is most prominent when metropolitan regions gain new planning competences vis-à-vis rural and peripheral regions. They argue, however, that regional planning is more concerned with addressing cross-boundary issues – between sectors as well as territories – than with finding the appropriate scale for intervention.

This is in line with Macdonald et al.'s (2020, in this issue) analysis of regional greenbelt governance in various institutional settings, in which they consider vertical, horizontal and territorial elements of coordination. With their two distinct case studies of Ontario and Frankfurt/Main, they highlight the peculiarities of single practices of regional (greenbelt) planning. The variation between the two cases becomes visible vertically between top-down and bottom-up approaches, horizontally between the influence of a single sectoral policy and the coordinative role of spatial planning, and territorially between different types of administrative borders.

While Walsh (2020, in this issue) focuses on maritime governance and land–sea relations, he also confirms the complex relations in a particular regional planning arena. Despite the territorial fragmentation of maritime issues, maritime spatial planning is often approached through politically bounded spaces. The North Sea 2050 strategy, however, dares to transcend the container view through visionary cartography and can be considered an innovative example of strategic spatial planning bridging the land–sea divide. Walsh thus highlights the imaginative and performative role of spatial plans, especially through the creation of 'spatial imaginaries' that purposively connect land and sea, instead of focusing solely on the sea.

By addressing the complexities of the planning process, Eräranta and Mladenović (2020, in this issue) bring novel insights to the perspective of relations. They apply social network analysis, interviews and focus group discussions to unravel the complex dynamics of knowledge integration and learning in a strategic planning process in Finland. Through this original methodological approach, they reveal the social and sectoral realities of planning practice over time. Their study affirms the non-linear, complex and social nature of planning, and highlights that planning processes evolve through the continuous interaction of institutional rules, social fabric stipulated by organizational practices as well as skills and attitudes of individuals.

SHAPING RESEARCH AGENDAS

Less than ever before can one expect regional planning to have become settled, either in academic debates or in practice. On the contrary, the contributions to this special issue point towards increasing attention to the regional planning arena. They reveal that interests driving regional planning are diverse and often entangled into appealing discourses and spatial imaginaries, potentially hiding competing rationalities and conflicts between actors. As an arena, regional planning is fraught with seeking compromises and smallest common denominators, and the reasons for why regional plans appear the way they do can often be found only by understanding the balancing between interests underneath.

The contributions reveal that formal institutions, stipulated in administrative logics and planning systems, continue to mould regional planning and frequently undermine the importance of informal policies or innovative practices. New institutionalism and (gradual) institutional change theory offer theoretical lenses through which to better understand institutional constraints and resources in regional planning, and why institutional change does (not) occur (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Sorensen, 2018).

Together, the articles acknowledge the substantive and procedural complexity of regional planning, revealing vertical relations between different levels of government, horizontal relations between different sector policies and territorial relations across administrative boundaries. The relationality of planning is heightened in the regional realm, in which trans-scalar, trans-sectoral and trans-territorial perspectives are brought together. With such relationality, the identification and framing of the 'regional' itself becomes a key question to be explored further (Paasi, 2010; Paasi et al., 2018).

While the various complexities and tensions of regional planning discussed in this special issue are inclined to raise further academic interest, a better understanding of these issues and new ideas for ways forward are sorely needed in regional planning practice. We need more knowledge and insights on how to navigate between conflicting interests, how to accommodate emergent governance networks and novel planning agendas to the institutional contexts and ambiguities of regional planning, and how to use the regionally relevant relations that extend beyond the regional territory and scale.

The contributions to this special issue express that regional planning is not necessarily outdated, inflexible or tied to the 'all-knowing planner' (cf. Harrison et al., 2020). Instead, we can see transformative and innovative practices of regional planning, albeit also unfruitful attempts for its renewal or revival, resulting in difficult deadlock situations. Nonetheless, at a time when a lot of responsibility is being put on cities and urban areas, for example, in the context of smart cities (Batty, 2016) or sustainable urbanism (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020), there is still a need for visionary regional perspectives to address wicked problems.

We agree with Harrison et al. (2020) who have recently suggested viewing 'regional planning as an enduring set of attributes and qualities, a toolkit of perspectives, knowledges, skills and methods' (p. 6). However, in our reading, such a view is not a vision of a distant future, but instead numerous examples of innovative practices can already be found, in formal as well as informal regional planning contexts. In other words, the reports of the death of regional planning are greatly exaggerated.

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