

Strategic Spatial Planning and Strategic Projects. A transformative practice

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It is the objective of this paper to highlight some of the results of a 5 year research program SP2SP (Spatial Planning to Strategic Projects). The program was financed by a Flemish (Belgium) institution for research and innovation (IWT) and realised by a partnership between the Universities of Leuven, Antwerp and Ghent and by two private Belgian firms (OMGEVING, IDEAConsult). A team of circa 10 researchers dealt with different aspects concerning 'strategic planning and strategic projects' and their relationship. The team studied the notions spatial sustainability and quality, integration and spatial design, participation and co-production, the relation between process and product and the meaning and the content of planning instruments. The research was guided by the author (promoter) of this paper and by his colleague L.Albrechts (co-promotor). Results will also be published by Routledge (Oosterlinck et al, 2010).

First I argue in this paper that the planning environment and context is changing fundamentally giving planning in general and spatial and strategic planning in particular a huge responsibility. Secondly I focus on planning as a transformative and innovative activity trying to create intended 'becomings'. Then I explain what we mean by 'strategic projects' and 'spatial design' as 'keys' for transformation and innovation. Finally I give some recommendations based upon the research of the team members.

New circumstances for planning, new challenges

There are some global issues that spatial planning, research, education and practice must address in the 21st century (CURP et al, 2010).

The era of inexpensive energy is over.

The spatial shape and structure of regions, cities and places should be guided by visions, spatial concepts, measures and projects that emphasise energy use- efficiency and economy.

The environment is not a 'free' good.

Planners in the 19th and 20th century often didn't take into account that the environment cannot naturally recycle waste products or that waste cannot be 'stored' indefinitely. They didn't take into account that human activities and behaviour can have a fundamental negative influence on both the natural and urban ecology.

The climatic conditions of yesterday are not the conditions that will prevail tomorrow.

Climate change means that planners must prepare our space for a more variable set of possible climate conditions taking into account many uncertainties.

The development of urban regions creates a new spatial, economic and social scale and thus new policy levels.

Political and administrative boundaries were drawn up in a past time when the technology of transport and communication were more limited. The disjuncture between the living and working patterns and the political boundaries lead to economic inefficiencies and inequities in social structures and fabrics. New forms of cooperative and 'networking' governance have to be developed to deal with these phenomena.

There is a great demand for 'local' social- spatial quality.

The new 'regional' scale and the globalisation phenomena create distances between 'global and local' policies. Often local conditions and needs are forgotten creating political tensions. There is a great demand for decent housing, services, facilities and infrastructure, a demand for employment. A demand also for participation and coproduction of policy and space. Planning should not only focus on 'regional' issues but also on city and neighbourhood development and 'local' spatial and social quality, which are directly related with each other.

Migration and the greater diversity as a consequence, becomes a characteristic of our world.

All over the world migration becomes a major issue: migration from rural areas to cities, migration within regions and migration towards other countries. As a consequence regions and cities have to deal with the growing diversity of their population and often with a demand to protect 'identity', with growing nationalism, racism, intolerance,... Pure spatial interventions will not give an answer to the problems. Therefore spatial planning should not deal only with the development and realisation of projects but involve themselves in social- spatial processes trying not only to transform space but to create also new social fabrics using space as a medium for change.

Urban settlements and activities are always related to transport.

The rationale of urban transport is always offset the disadvantage of distant location from activity centres. Hence co-location and transport are two approaches to achieve access for urban residents. It is important that access always should be seen as the goal and mobility and infrastructure as means. In an age of environmental fragility and limited space spatial design should privilege public transport, biking and walking as a paramount planning principle. This means that urban development should always be based upon this principle.

Space, as the environment, is a not a 'free' good but a valuable but limited resource.

People and even planners often don't take into account that 'space and places' are not 'neutral' objects. Space and places have their own characteristics, logics and values, as well natural as man made. Space is not 'a container' but a dynamic social construct, a becoming (Healey, Hiller). Planners should not only look at the negative effects of actions, projects and activities but also 'work' with these qualities and potentials. Space is a dynamic 'relational' good and planning a medium to create relationships.

Strategic Spatial Planning has the potency to deal with the above mentioned assumptions and basic principles . Planning has the capacity to change and transform the existing reality and to integrate and to relate objects, places and places with each other but also to relate people.

Planning : a transformative practice

In most countries present spatial planning is mainly 'control-based', using traditional bureaucratic instruments: legal land use plans, rules, prescriptions and bylaws defining 'what can and what can not'. Possibly these instruments were meant (by planners) to create a more sustainable and qualitative world but in fact they only function as a way to ensure spatial legal certainty and the equal treatment of people. There is nothing wrong with these objectives but they are different from 'our' goals. Indeed spatial planning and design attempt the realisation of a 'better space'. It is or should be a pro-active and implementation oriented activity focussing on 'what should be' and 'what can'. This means that there is a need for a shift from 'regulation' towards an active sustainable development based upon visioning, action and coproduction and based upon ethical principles equity and social justice (Van den Broeck et al 2010). In the present social context this is not evident. Planning instruments and the institutional context focus practically only upon the development of frames and criteria to judge projects from (third) parties and not on the creation of a better future. Action orientation

means that visions should be related directly with clear programmes, means and budgets. Planners should argue for a selective and pro- active approach : strategic planning.

Such an approach can be considered as a transformative practice (Albrechts 2006) (Van den Broeck et al 2010):

- aiming at a social- spatial innovation and transformation of the social structure and fabrics by spatial interventions,
- focussing on structural spatial key- issues,
- able to construct new visions, concepts and solutions breaking beaten tracks,
- changing the way resources are used, distributed and allocated.

It is also a practice that deals with space which has a 'relative' autonomy and has the capacity to integrate human activities and artefacts within a valuable natural context.

The need for strategic planning

We can define 'strategic planning' simply as 'the process trying to develop and implement strategies to reach a specific goal with the available and appropriate means'.

Sun-Tzu (500 BC) mentions four characteristics of such strategies:

- realistic goals,
- a correct and accurate knowledge of the context,
- the use of available 'strengths' within the context,
- a continued action up to the moment that meaningful results are attained.

Many definitions have been developed since then. Out of them we can select some common principles of what we call to date 'strategic planning':

- a creative practice developing possible 'futures or becomings' (Hillier, 2008) represented by a attractive and 'seducing' vision,
- a selective practice focusing on key-issues and interventions
- an action oriented practice linked with programmes and budgets,
- an integrative and co-productive learning process aiming at social-spatial innovation,
- a 'non- neutral' and 'relational' practice aiming at involvement, emancipation and empowerment, judgements, argumentation and agreements between actors.

For the implementation of these principles in reality there is a need to change the institutional context fundamentally: value systems, approaches, instruments, the role of planning organisations, etc...We have to look for and build an institutional context aspiring as well sustainability and quality as well as equity and social-spatial justice. We look for co-productive instruments which can effectively change and innovate reality and which can influence power relations taking care of less privileged people and weaker functions.

It is a challenge to develop 'spatial' approaches, strategies and instruments with an intrinsic emancipatorial character(Van den Broeck,P. 2010).

Different roles of planning bodies

When we accept strategic planning as a core planning task of (official) planning bodies on the different policy levels, we can make a distinction between their different roles and tasks.

The development of a 'generic' policy for a certain (administrative) policy area

Such a policy contains 'frames' for the judgement of activities of 'third' parties asking for permission for a specific project. It contains also action programmes for the own policy level. Such frames define what can be considered as sustainable and qualitative policies and actions (projects, activities,...) for an administrative territory. Frames are visions and concepts which can be legalised using plans and bylaws but only if necessary and in a selective way leaving space for uncertainty. As already said before such frames are to date mostly meant to ensure legal certainty. It is a challenge to develop a new kind of frames and a new way to use them for judgement and decision making aiming at spatial quality.

The development of an 'area focused' policy

Some areas, with a fundamental impact on the spatial development, are too complex and too specific to be 'cached' by generic policies. It concerns for instance port areas, urban regions, areas where considerable investments are planned, fragmented peripheries, changing rural areas,..., but also specific problematic neighbourhoods and villages often struggling with poverty, deterioration, a divers population, the lack of services, etc.. For such selected areas a specific policy should be developed defining a development vision and action programme. The selection of such areas is strategic and should be negotiated within the generic policy.

The development of a project oriented policy

Strategic projects, defined as integrated spatial interventions on a 'in between' scale (neither a building nor a district) can be a stimulant, an initiator, a key for social- spatial transformation and innovation. But most official planning bodies are not organised to realise (integrated) projects. Implementation is left to 'third' bodies, policy sectors (housing, infrastructure, ...) and to the private sector. However spatial projects need an integrative approach (Vanempen 2010) and cooperation between different actors and an 'open' emancipatorial approach combined with a 'closed' action process. Most traditional planning bodies are control led and not development oriented. A development oriented policy is asking for a total other mentality and another type of public servants having an 'entrepreneurial' character and capacities.

Strategic projects: a key for transformation and innovation

Strategic projects can be a lever, a catalyst, for effective structural and fundamental changes because they intervene in a concrete way in a spatial and social context (Oosterlinck 2010). They are visible and their scope limited in time and space and they can 'turn the tide in a lasting way' (De Meulder et al 2004) if they are framed by a sustainable vision. Because of their complex and multidimensional character they should create synergy between different dynamics and between social-, cultural-, economic and spatial aspects.

In order to reach the objectives and the expectations and to realise a 'leverage innovative effect' strategic projects should meet some basic conditions.

- Strategic projects have to be considered as search- and learning processes with an 'open' character because strategic projects, as defined before, aim at the transformation and innovation of the social context. This means that the final product should not be fixed and unambiguous from the start. The product of such a process is in fact the result of a confrontation of the context, different kinds of knowledge, needs and interests, visions and ambitions of actors (Van Dyck 2010) Van den Broeck P. 2010). However such processes should have also a 'closed' character because they focus on concrete interventions. The integration of these two processes isn't obvious. There will be always a tension between on the one hand 'a collective learning process' and a process aiming at the realisation of a project which is always linked to a political and financial context limiting the time scope. Certainly in a context where the private sector is involved as the initiator of a project or as the executor this tension can be very problematic. A feasible process structure has to be based upon a realistic interaction, a permanent dialogue, between openness and closeness, between short and long term objectives, between learning and efficient and effective management. It is a combination of a cyclic and a semi-linear process. There is no general format for such processes. Each situation and context asks for a specific process design.
- As learning processes strategic projects contributes to the local integrated area development (Moulaert et al 2003). This means that 'good' projects not only achieve fundamental spatial changes but also transform social relations, create new social

fabrics, empower people (also weaker groups), change decision making mechanisms and power relations. The traditional planning approaches and instruments don't meet these objectives at all. Local development is looking for local imbedded instruments and appeal for local knowledge, local potencies for innovation, local dynamics and local initiatives. Of course this a longer term process in contrast with concrete short term spatial interventions. But such interventions can considered and developed as a medium for the realisation of long term ambitions. Such learning processes stimulate the interaction between social-, cultural-, economic and spatial development. They integrate space and culture, spatial and social policy, spatial quality and healthcare, liveability and employment, etc. The objective is to combine physical interventions (public space, neighbourhood renovation, green areas,...) with social and economic goals (training, creation of employment, ...).

- A strategic project needs a vision framing it in a specific context, giving it a direction, a meaning, a justification and legitimacy in relation to the social- spatial context. In my mind visioning is the most critical and but fundamental activity and capacity of planners. Visions refer to an image of possible or alternative futures. They are constructed in a specific context, a place, dealing with a certain scale or scales and a specific moment. Visions are the expression of spatial values within a social/ ethical value system: equity, solidarity, democracy. In fact they represent the ambitions of a society at a certain moment and are the basis for trust building between actors in a process. Visioning is the process leading (possibly and occasionally) to an agreement between actors which certainly can not be a 'comprehensive' consensus but a realistic commitment (compromise) about structural issues and actions based upon certain, often unpronounced but not totally contradictory, values and interests of actors. Visioning is a creative and dialectic process revealing opinions, conflicts and relationships between actors. It is 'a journey', a collective process (Healey 2008), a social construction whereby the planner should be willing to explore visions and concepts from all actors trying to define 'shared' objectives which is asking for an open attitude. Finally it is in a plan and decision making process and a basis for judgement and argumentation.
- Strategic projects are the result of a process trying to develop shared terms for sustainability and spatial quality (Goethals et al, 2010).

Spatial sustainability and quality remain vague 'container' notions. Often the content is restricted to pure technical and functional dimensions. The fact that we cannot define these notion precise and clear means also that it is difficult to use them in practice and limits the credibility of planners and our discipline. In former days planners and researchers were looking for 'objective' unambiguous criteria often resulting in unfruitful terminological discussions about the concept. Sometimes it was leading towards strict generic standards, norms and rules. Using them was certainly not a guarantee for sustainability and quality.

To date we argue that sustainability and quality are the result of a complex search, deliberation and negotiation process between actors trying to specify and define what both notions mean for them in a certain place at a certain moment and within a specific context (Reyndorp et al 1998, Schreurs 2007, Goethals et al 2010). This means that both notions have to be considered as plural, flexible, dynamic and relational social constructs. Unfortunately our discipline and our society is missing a feasible 'language' to deal with the notion which is a basic condition to understand each other and for the development of 'shared terms' (Hajer et al 2006), (Goethals et al 2010) are trying within the scope of the research project, mentioned in the introduction to develop such a language and an approach to share terms.

We argue also that 'spatial' design, seen as a process, can be an interesting medium to help people, experts and politicians to define and to share the exact content of the notions.

Spatial design: a creative core activity

Everybody knows more or less what is meant by 'urban design', often defined as a physical three dimensional development plan (master plan) for an urban space/ place. However within the context of strategic planning processes the notion isn't satisfactory to describe the many different characters and forms of representations within such processes. A considerable amount of research is required to gain a better understanding of the nature of 'spatial design' and in particular to develop methods that allow its different roles to be fulfilled in an optimal manner and to relate them to one another. The content of the designs can be quite different, as is obvious from the various roles and forms (Van den Broeck 2010). These roles and forms depend of the definition of strategic spatial: a social process aiming at designing and realising an intended spatial development of a given area/ territory. Within this process we can see four interacting sub- processes or activities with a different character:

- a visioning process characterised by a creative and divergent way of thinking and leading to a dynamic vision,
- an action process as an answer to the daily reality (problem solving and concrete interventions),
- two co-productive processes related to discussion, deliberation, negotiation, judgement and decision making within stakeholder arena's and activities trying to involve and empower the broader public and non- traditional actors in the planning process

*'Spatial design is seen as a clue to relate the four processes with each other, as a key activity within a visioning process imagining possible futures and perspectives, as a practical way to position projects in a wider sphere in order to make them strategic, as the art (Healey 2008) to materialise and make concrete futures and to create possible realities which can be used as a source for learning, discussion, negotiation, decision making and implementation. The design methods and techniques used today are aimed too exclusively at the representation of physical end products and not sufficiently at the different forms of representation required within a planning process. One hypothesis could be that **spatial design is the conglomerate of integrating activities and products that allows us to represent and imagine different types of knowledge and insights into the characteristics of a space and a place, its potential, the potential sustainable futures (becomings) and their effects. This should be done in ways suited to communication, consultation and negotiation with all of the actors during the various development phases and at the various thinking levels of a planning process**' (Van den Broeck 2010).*

Within the research programme SP2SP two researchers focussed upon the capacity of (spatial) design as a research method revealing another and specific kind of knowledge as a complement for analytic, technical and functional research methods. 'Research by design' has an integrating capacity, can play an important role in the visioning process and is a medium in learning, judgement, negotiation and decision making processes. In Nakuru / Kenya this method was used to reveal the potencies of an area between the national park and the cities and to negotiate about the social and spatial relations between the city council and WWF (Loeckx et al 2004).

In our mind 'research by design' has a crucial importance because it has the capacity to link, to interpret and integrate different kinds of knowledge and because it is a way to communicate, deliberate and negotiate about values, interests, visions, concepts and solutions. It has the capacity to represent and imagine possible 'becomings' in a concrete and understandable way. For our discipline it is a possibility to introduce from the first moment the 'spatial' dimension in planning processes. In fact this should be evident but in practice it isn't obvious unfortunately. Indeed most projects start from a pure financial or technical need. Design in the broad sense and research by design as a creative and an

integrating instrument, can be a way to express new ideas, as well visions, concepts as concrete solutions (Vanempen 2010).

Policy recommendations

(1) Within the governmental structure and organisation one should make a clear difference between the bodies dealing with planning and development and bodies judging applications for private and public projects. They have a different objective, rationality and logic and they should use different instruments which is not the case in most countries. Indeed planning aims at transformation and pro-active interventions while 'judging' bodies focus on legal security. Both activities need another kind of expertise and another kind of public servants.

(2) The use of strategic projects, as defined above, should be introduced as an pro-active instrument in spatial planning and to create specific bodies dealing with integrated projects and area focussed planning within the governmental institutions at all policy levels. Within spatial policy plans (strategic plans) strategic areas and projects should be selected, and budgeted.

(3) Within the governmental structure spatial planning and social development are mostly totally separated. They have different objectives approaches and instruments and other people and disciplines are dealing with them. Only few 'bridges' exist between the policy fields. But social- spatial projects need to mobilise and link different policy fields requiring a multidisciplinary approach and cooperation and a structural link between institutional bodies dealing with spatial planning and social development. Approaches and instruments should give create 'space' to link, at the first view 'incompatible', logic's, rationalities and organisations. We need on the one hand 'open' instruments giving space for learning, deliberation, conflicts, civil initiatives, co-production and experiments and on the other hand 'closed' instruments for professional plan making, concrete short term interventions and management. Of course both types should be linked with each other as well as the people using them.

(4) Guiding, directing and managing strategic projects has to remain the task and the responsibility of a public non sectorial, authority, the state, province, city, municipality. This task may not be delegated to the private sector. It should not be the market neither the financial return for a private firm that should steer urban innovation. This doesn't exclude cooperation with the private sector or NGO's of course. On the contrary such cooperation is necessary because private actors have other capacities, knowledge and possibilities. But they should operate within a public responsibility and legitimacy.

(5) The involvement of people may not be considered as a 'lubricant' to force or seduce them to accept a technocratic top- down policy. It should be a way to introduce local knowledge and dynamism, other values, visions, concepts and solutions in processes and policies. Often communication and participation is a 'one- direction' and top- down process which is totally inadequate to deal with the present problems, the context and the growing maturity of people. 'Co-production' aims at the active involvement of people in policy development and its implementation. Co-production is a dialectic process that accepts the rich diversity of society and stimulates an open dialogue between all actors that gives chances to different opinions and can deal with conflicts. Co-production is a collective process, a social construct looking for a new future. Of course we may not be naïve. We know that interests and power are driving forces in society and will play an important and fundamental role in processes. Approaches and instruments have to deal with these realities. We should take these forces and also conflicts seriously, accept them, make them transparent, research, localise and contextualise them. There are methods and techniques 'to work' with conflicts and differences trying to 'manage' them (Coppens 2010).

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