

Book Review

Planners in Politics - Do they Make a Difference?

Edited by Louis Albrechts

Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham Glos, UK, 2020, 304 pages, ISBN 978 839100109.

My personal excitement with *Planners in Politics* edited by Louis Albrechts was motivated by the topic and editor – who has influenced my approach to planning as a collaborative endeavour – as well as by several contributing authors whose work influenced my theoretical perspective on spatial planning. The book evidences that planners-acting-as-politicians can effectively shape, for example, housing policies or navigate through the stakes of private groups or opposing parties in order to develop plans or implement projects.

The editor's main aim was to show 'how executive politicians with a background in planning themselves reflect on the impact they may have on political decision-making' (p. 7). Also, having planners sharing their political experiences fills a gap in the literature (Evans & Cvitanovic, 2018). These aims are presented in Chapter 1, where Albrechts explains the procedures to select authors along with the grid of questions posed to them to guarantee a consistent storyline. This coherence has been achieved; yet the authors went beyond and detailed how they could enable change. Examples go from mitigating urban inequalities of *favelas* in Brazil (Chapter 2), to regional innovation strategies in Portugal (Chapter 6) or the development of Iowa's City (USA) strategic plan (Chapter 9).

In Chapter 2, Maricato and Tanak, stress that "Academic knowledge in and of itself is not sufficient for tasks that demand daily decision-making in short timeframes" (p. 11). The authors present their political experiences in Brazil and highlight the dangers of transposing planning theories developed for "a European urban reality". This is because the "specific features of the built environment of societies on the periphery" (p. 29) are far more complex and entangled in power games when compared to urban realities of the West.

Chapter 3 analyses the evolution of planning in India since the 1970s through the political engagement of Yoginder Alagh in the domains of agriculture, urban development and the manufacturing sector. The author's commitment in supporting food security and resource allocation for agriculture and irrigation lead to an Integrated Water Resource Management System

providing individuals “a right to a minimum quantity of potable water for essential health and hygiene and within easy reach of the household” (p. 51).

In chapter 4 Ferrão stresses that the low level of social acceptance of planning in Portugal partly justifies its ineffectiveness, while chapter 5 by Barbanente maintains that planning students should be aware of both power dynamics and technicalities so they can propose new planning practices.

Chapter 6 by Rosa Pires underlines the “usefulness of theoretical and substantive knowledge that the academic brings with him to the political and policy-making spheres” (p. 99). The author’s political story aids him in valuing existing policy frameworks and instruments. In this sense, the author states that his political experiences changed his teaching as he attempts rising students’ consciousness and critical understanding of planning knowledge.

Chapter 7 by Lerner underlines that planners can have active political roles and enable spatial changes even during military dictatorships. The author and his team were able to gain credibility through fast planning solutions as improving the transportation network or public spaces that altogether heightened the sense of place of urban dwellers of the Brazilian city of Curitiba. The chapter exacerbates how the desire to “serve a city” drives planners to serve as politicians and thus mobilize forces, procedures, theories and policy instruments to make things happen.

Chapter 8 by Sutcliffe stresses the central themes of planning and local governance in South Africa since colonial times, concluding with a plea for more action-oriented planning.

In Chapter 9, Throgmorton discusses his actions to make Iowa City more inclusive, just, and sustainable. Two concluding messages: (i) “mayors can play an important role in co-crafting their cities’ [...] with persuasive storytelling” (p. 190); (ii) co-crafting is challenging and stressful but can also be very rewarding.

In Chapter 10 Hagen shares his stories of 22 years as an elected representative in Norway. Hagen emphasises that his planning research and teaching draw on his political work and that, in turn, the latter has been influenced by his planning expertise. In his view “planning and politics have always had a common thread”, that is social change through participation (p. 199) and co-production processes. Hagen concludes with the reminder that planners need to be realistic about their ambitions in planning and “work in the range of possibilities” (p. 220).

Chapter 11 by Balducci highlights how planning experts highly respected in academia and beyond can find themselves entangled in a triad of interests, opposing arguments and confrontation. The author stresses that “Until a time when the power of argument, demonstration

and persuasion is leading the interaction, the technical expert has an indubitable advantage' while during confrontation, "technical expertise becomes far less important" (p. 227).

In Chapter 12, De Leo stresses the importance of an institutional approach in dealing with a web of interests and power relations unfolding in the political arena of planning decisions.

The book advances the views of those arguing that, despite the political skills of some planners, they strongly need political authority and legitimacy to have a more determinant role in shaping policies and spatial development (see Karki, 2017). The book aids in recognising the value of political experience in expanding planning theory and education. The editor is clear on this – while planning theory is important in shaping a planners' action, planners do make a difference in spatial development because of their negotiation skills, storytelling perseverance and personal dedication to do something fair, ethical and good for cities (Chapter 13).

Despite the fact that, in my view, planners acting in political positions cannot be considered as a panacea for today's challenges of cities and regions, I recommend this book to those seeking to understand better how planning theory influences planning-related decisions and how planning practice is brought in planning education through planners' experience. Evans and Cvitanovic (2018) claim that many academics wish to support policymaking but may not know where to start; *Planners in Politics* provides a sound and detailed starting point for planners.

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References

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