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Synthesising equitable spatial engagement: the 'something more' of planning?

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the 'something more' of planning?**

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Abstract

This paper focuses upon the place of engagement in spatial (strategic and tactical) planning, not specifically to make the case for the value of engagement in decision-making processes as this has been done, but rather to examine whether the espoused theories that underpin it are as yet sufficiently grounded to enable equity of engagement in practice. While the discussion is set within the wider discourses of spatial justice and environmental equity here the attention is set more narrowly upon the equity of engagement between multiple mereologies of spatial scales and interest holders. The complex relationships between these are identified as a central challenge, conceptually and practically, for planning; particularly at a time when it can be considered that the discipline has become uncertain about its fundamental purpose or 'something more'. It is concluded that more needs to be done to ground engagement systematically and synthetically in more spatially equitable approaches and that this could present a central role and unifying goal for the discipline of planning.

Key words: Mereologies, spatial, holders, equitable, engagement, barriers

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Introduction: a different shaped world coming up?

The multi-scalar spatial relationships between places and the challenges that multiple individual, collective and sectoral interests present for equitable engagement in planning set the frame and focus for this enquiry. Commitment to environmental justice, spatial equity and social justice, specifically in relation to planning and the potential of the discipline to mediate towards these spatially set the broader context. The widening scope and conceptual weaknesses of planning in theory raise critical questions in practice, and these are explored in relation to processes of governance and the shifting institutional approaches adopted from time to time by changing governments. Much of the discussion is conceptual, but the concern is with practice and upon the places where change, development and decline have very real consequences, not just upon the places in which it takes place, but also upon the relationships between places and their respective fortunes. These spatial dynamics are important, as they shape the fortunes of many people and, as the speeds and scales of change increase, so too do the impacts.

The significant disparities that already exist in global society have been widely recognised; for example the report *Global Strategic Trends*, prepared as part of the UK Defense Review, concluded that "The era out to 2040 ... is likely to be characterised by instability, both in the relations between states, and in the relations between groups within states" (MOD, 2010, p. 10). The paper is informed by these potential instabilities and it is shaped by the idea that, confronted by changing climates, rapid population growth and resource scarcity it is necessary to "struggle to establish an effective system of global governance, capable of responding to these challenges" (MOD, 2010, p. 10).

Spatial equity, environmental and social justice

The central concern of the paper – the equity of engagement of multiple interests in processes of spatial planning and governance – must be placed firmly in the context of the much wider context and more important discourses concerning spatial equity and environmental and social justice. It must also be placed into context with the work of planners in these areas over many decades. Harvey's seminal work *Social justice and the city* (1973) was influential in setting the scene for much contemporary debate, for example the work of Simmie (1974) who examined the sociology of town planning in terms of the spatial inequalities and social conflicts that arise when "All the factors (of dynamic interactions between people, economic resources, values and places) are in a continuous state of competitive tension and change" (Simmie, 1974, p. 109). Harvey's analysis was forensic and, far from positing worthy generalised aspirations, addressed some very real questions; comparing, for instance, the social justice of giving a subsidy to a new port facility, with another subsidy to people living in a flood plain (Harvey, 1973, pp. 106-107). The

conclusions reveal critical considerations of social justice regarding engagement in spatial planning.

Spatiality permeates much contemporary discussion, and has been seen as the means of shaping “critical debates on both ... politics and practice” (Soja, 2010b, p. 629). Sandercock (1999, p. 205) called for new approaches that focus “on the formulation of goals”; proposing radical and insurgent action to pursue “a more communicative rationality”. The search for what has been characterised as the Just City has been a powerful theme within those discourses concerned with spatial justice, and many sources of inequality have been identified (Harvey, 1973; Simmie, 1974; Marcuse, 2009; Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010). The search has been primarily concerned with fundamental principles of equity; of access to homes, resources, jobs, public transit; equality in diversity in the widest sense; together with consideration of the potential radical or insurgent possibilities for planners, for example in taking “an active role in deliberative settings in pressing for egalitarian solutions” (Fainstein, 2010, p. 173). Somewhat less attention has been devoted to deeper analysis of the spatial processes and relations or the potential roles of planners in systematically understanding or mediating spatial tensions. This concern flickers through the discourses and it is of particular significance for this enquiry as it suggests that *scales* and *interests* are key areas for research and development.

Fainstein recognises the importance of these dimensions, concluding that to further democracy, engagement processes should extend beyond immediately “affected areas” and seek insights into wider, and potentially future, interests in a wide sense (Fainstein, 2010, p. 175). This is a critical point, for many approaches to engagement rely upon direct contacts and exchanges; but can this work over the extensive spatial scales and diverse interests that these broader horizons involve? Marcuse (2010, p. 100) has observed that “Both theory and practice teach that what happens in any city is highly dependent on what happens in its region, its nation and the world”, and Soja (2010a, p.47) explains that “Distributional inequalities are the more visible outcome of deeper processes of spatial discrimination set in place by a multitude of individual decisions made by different, often competing actors”. Harvey (1973, p. 291) recognised that hierarchical perspectives are inadequate for the interpretation of such complex socio-spatial systems, and this is a fundamental issue that will be returned to later.

The work of Norm Krumholz in developing equity planning in Cleveland in the 1980s has had an important place in changing ideas about people, politics and planning. Inspired by Davidoff’s concept of advocacy planning (1965), he found ways of “Articulating a cogent, equity-orientated public voice” (Krumholz and Forester, 1990, p. 209). It is important also to acknowledge the important work of the environmental justice movement, and especially the work of Bullard and the development of the principles of environmental justice. Bullard’s work drew direct connections between institutional decision-making regarding the location of hazardous, toxic or noxious facilities in or close to poor and minority communities in the USA. The work recognised that the drivers of inequity are complex, but that racism and the lack of a voice for the minority communities have been major contributors (Bullard *et al.*, 2000; Bullard, 2007). This is not the place to explore the work of the environmental justice movement, but it is important to recognise that institutional structures and approaches to local and strategic decision-making are significant. Three of the 17 principles of environmental justice adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC in 1991 are of particular relevance to this enquiry. They are that Environmental Justice

- “demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias;

- mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things; [and]
- affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples" (www.ejnet.org/ej/).

Planners have explored the idea of spatial equity with a variety of aims and with different spatial scales of interest. For example, Truelove (1993) focused upon methodological challenges for the measurement of spatial equity, and Chapman and Donovan (1996) offered the concept of 'environmental welfare thresholds' as a theoretical construct that would enable assessment of comparative access to facilities between places and of the potential impacts of strategic developments or infrastructure on a place. Talen and Anselm (1998), Tsou, Hung and Chang (2005) and Omer (2005) concentrated their attention upon the accessibility of urban and public facilities, often in relation to a particular facility, for example playgrounds and urban parks. Mennis and Jordan (2005), inspired by the work of Bullard, explored the dynamics of toxic air releases in New Jersey and the spatial impacts of these upon different neighbourhoods and communities. Their research gave "credence to activist claims that certain minority neighborhoods do indeed bear a disproportionate burden of environmental risk" (Mennis and Jordan, 2005, p. 267). At the much wider spatial and territorial scale, Kunzmann (1998, p. 101) explored the idea of spatial equity as "the underlying socio-political goal" of the European Union. These diverse and somewhat partial perspectives are useful, but it is important to consider the wider socio-political concerns for social justice, where questions arise that go beyond those of equitable spatial engagement and planning.

While in a wide sense equity is taken to mean 'just, moral and ethical', it is interesting that in UK jurisprudence it enables judgement to be exercised "to do justice in particular cases where the strict rules of law cause hardship" (Hanbury and Martin, 2001, p. 4). The appreciation that rigid application of rules or approaches may in itself be the cause of inequity is important for the pursuit of spatial equity, for while there are the same just, moral and ethical imperatives, the ability to recognise diversity is also important. As Jacobs (1961, p. 455) observed, the "processes are too complex to be routine, too particularised for application as abstraction". Kunzmann has raised concerns about the way in which the European focus upon spatial convergence and equity has been pursued in practice. First that its "statistical nature ... is happening at the cost of growing intra-regional and intra-urban disparities". Secondly that the twin forces of globalisation and convergence risk "destroying local and regional characteristics, by bringing the world to the village" (Kunzmann, 1998, p. 104). The hazards of comparative statistical oversimplification are clear and any efforts to promote spatial equity should recognise the dangers of aspiring towards physical and performative sameness. Indeed, preserving and promoting distinctiveness in place and culture should be considered as a primary concern for spatial equity. Celebrating and promoting distinctiveness is equally important in this enquiry, as "equality does not mean being the same" (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, p. 232).

As illustrated above, many of the debates concerning environmental and spatial justice have focused on the city, perhaps as a proxy for wider spatial scales of interest, taking a narrower perspective than that suggested here. The ability to identify interests, issues, options, decision areas and scales that have potentially profound implications for spatial equity, beyond the city, could be vitally important; for, as Soja has observed, critical spatial perspectives could powerfully influence "the mobilization, identity, cohesion and strategic actions of ... social movements" and have "the power to advance our knowledge in new and powerful ways" (Soja, 2010b, p. 630).

Spatial engagement and planning

The emergence of planning as a discipline in the early twentieth century can be seen as a very practical response to the physical and social concerns that arose from the industrial revolution – civic development, sanitation, recreation, culture and infrastructure – all under a paternal and, to a surprising extent, philanthropic influence. It was not until much later in the century, when the fruits of post-Second World War reconstruction revealed the profound implications of modernism, and civil society began to gain stronger voices, that ‘public participation’ (Skeffington, 1969) gained a recognised place in planning processes.

Two powerful ideas have guided much thinking since the later part of the twentieth century; one concerning ways in which planning processes engage with civil society; another with ways planning could support spatial change and territorial policy. While these communicative and spatial ‘turns’ could provide powerful means of promoting spatial equity, they have not as yet achieved their transformative potential. The communicative turn has been discussed most comprehensively by Healey (1992a, 1992b), having considerable influence on ideas in practice; albeit that the highly motivated ideals espoused in theory have been harder to achieve in practice, even when they have been welcomed institutionally. Healey saw the approach as a means of “collective ‘deciding’ and ‘acting’ through intersubjective communication” (Healey, 1996), and ten propositions were posited to underpin this. The first three are particularly significant for the discussion here;

1. “Planning is an interactive and interpretive process...”
2. “...interaction assumes the pre-existence of individuals engaged with others in diverse, fluid and overlapping “discourse communities” and
3. “...interaction involves respectful discussion...” (Healey, 1992a, p. 247).

Influence in practice has been considerable and, as Carpenter and Brownhill have said, in some cases “participation has become integral to the delivery of public services, as governments attempt to involve citizens in decision-making through processes of consultation and engagement” (Carpenter and Brownhill, 2008, p. 227). Booher and Innes (2002, p. 221) envisaged a “network power” shared by participants across a wider process” and, although this potential is yet to be realised, a number of initiatives have shown the possibilities. Booher (2008) also makes a persuasive case for the value of citizen engagement “in the creation of urban places of quality” (Booher, 2008, p. 234), but it is important to note that there are spatial and political obstacles in practice and many determinants of spatial opportunity and constraint at the local level derive from decisions taken at much wider spatial scales. Only if citizen engagement enables participation in these ‘higher’ levels of strategic choice could they be said to be spatially equitable.

In practice in the UK today, the hope of Tewdwr-Jones (2002, p. 281) that “planning as a governmental process of the state has been transformed to become a function of governance” now appears over-optimistic. In the Netherlands, Torfing and Sorensen (2008) found “the idea that we are currently witnessing a shift from government to governance [is] totally misguided”, and that engagement and collaborative governance had become tools for public managers to get things done, often in ways that bypassed scrutiny by democratic processes (Torfing and Sorensen, 2008, p. 399). Tensions between representative and deliberative approaches to democracy can also be significant when citizen engagement is seen to challenge elected representatives and political agendas. Carpenter and Brownhill contrast the instrumentalism that is characteristic of reliance upon “elected representatives to act in citizens’ interests” with the “negotiated decision-making” of deliberative democracy, and they noted flaws and attributes of each approach (Carpenter and Brownhill, 2008, p. 227). Rydin has also observed that planners’ procedural knowledge may disempower communities, albeit also having the potential to elevate “the standing of local, lay and experiential knowledges within planning” (Rydin, 2007, p. 366). While the potential of

communicative approaches has been recognised, and steps taken to develop them, further conceptual reflection will be needed if they are to be realised in practice.

The spatial turn in planning aimed to go beyond land use and development planning to mediate the functional dynamics of places across the ranges of scale at which activity occurs. As Albrechts explained, the “term ‘spatial’ brings into focus the ‘where of things’, whether static or dynamic; the creation and management of special ‘places’ and sites; the interrelations between different activities in an area, and significant intersections and nodes within an area” (Albrechts, 2004, p. 748). The origin of this spatial approach owes much to the increasing recognition of the complexity of local and global dynamics, as well as the considerable disparities and conflicts that exist between places. The spatial turn also embraced the idea of citizen engagement as a means of integration between sectors and scales. The EUROCITIES research programme *Pegasus* explored a variety of approaches within prescriptive and discretionary planning contexts across Europe, including Birmingham, Genoa, Malmo, Seville, Oslo and Vienna. The report (EUROCITIES, 2004, p. 4) concluded that “vertical and horizontal coordination [are] not sufficient” but that diagonal integration, as shown in figure 1, is needed.

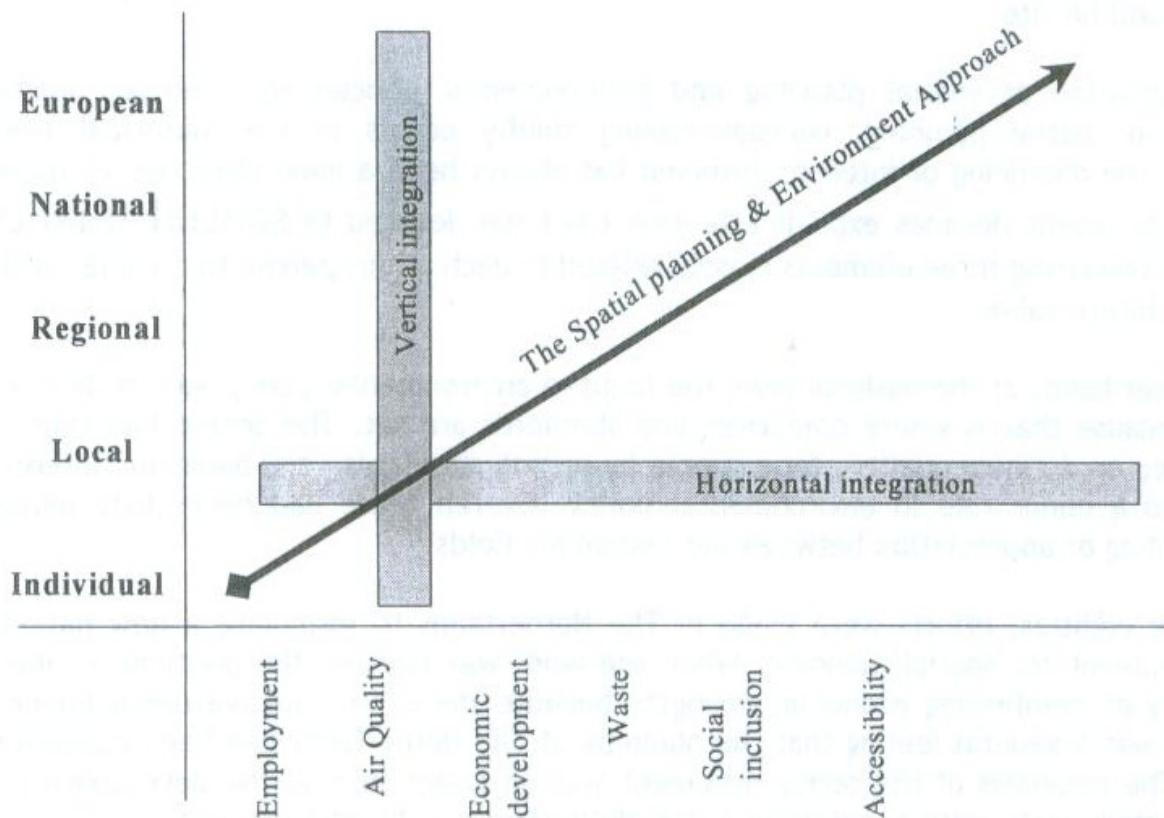


Figure 1: The Pegasus concept of ‘diagonal coordination’(EUROCITIES, 2004, p. 4; reproduced by permission).

This ostensibly simple model of integration is intellectually powerful and beguiling in its clarity. However, there are layers of complexity in practice which must be appreciated if any attempt to bring about such integration could be effective in practice. Dabinett and Richardson (2005) have illustrated some of the real difficulties and possibilities in South Yorkshire under EU policies where spatial engagement and fiscal policy has been used to promote integration and cohesion.

Emergent approaches to engagement

Critical examination of the nature and extent of engagement or public participation can be traced to the conceptually powerful ladder conceived by Arnstein (1969). It is not possible to explore these well-known ideas here but it is important to note that there are a number of emergent ideas about how approaches to engagement might be developed further. For example Booher and Innes (2002) have explored the development of social media and the opportunity for planners to “play many key roles in making [network power] possible, participating in it, shaping its form and direction, influencing its outcomes, [and] providing the opportunities for it, and helping other agents to create and use it” (Booher and Innes, 2002, p. 232). Booher also describes some encouraging examples of effective engagement; in the development of the Seattle sustainability tool kit, California’s regional transport plan and the US Centers for Disease Control public engagement program on pandemic influenza (Booher, 2008, p. 388) but, generally, engagement in practice is very patchy and partial at best. The idea that new technologies for spatial mapping, analysis, visualisation and video-gaming can begin to address the serious weaknesses in present processes of citizen engagement has also attracted many scholars to explore the possibilities. For example, Bailey *et al.* have explored the potential for synergies between planning and engagement and the powerful role that technology can play in raising the quality of citizen participation. They conclude that there are significant benefits which “carefully designed participatory geovisual protocols ... can bring to planning, and in doing so, reduce the Arnstein gap (Bailey *et al.*, 2011, p. 448) between declared aspirations for citizen participation and the reality as tested against Arnstein’s (1969) ladder.

Gordon *et al.* (2011) have proposed a model of ‘immersive planning’ which envisages “a new way for the public to be engaged, to generate an ongoing sustainable dialogue with local officials, and to shape government action in a way that is informed in a meaningful way by its citizens” (Gordon *et al.*, 2011, p. 517). They explore a number of potential applications and consider the capability of GIS to capture spatial data and qualities derived from input by members of the public. While they clearly recognise that “too often the goals ... of participation [have not] been clearly articulated” (Gordon *et al.*, 2011, p. 505), it is very significant that they are also quite silent on this. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that immersive approaches could enable members of communities and many other holders to “understand one another’s stakes in a decision” (Gordon *et al.*, 2011, p. 516).

Changing institutional contexts

The institutional contexts within which planning is practiced and engagement is pursued inevitably sets up its own imperatives, and may indeed shape practice, and could divert purpose. For example, from the perspective of governments there may be real tensions between the desire “to balance a devolution of power to communities with the need to retain strategic oversight, and to exercise central control where necessary” (Gallent, 2008, p. 308). The potential tensions between deliberative and representative democracy may also have significant implications (Carpenter and Brownhill, 2008).

It is not surprising that, in the whirl of practice, debates about institutional arrangements and policies, rather than reflection on the fundamental spirit and purpose of planning, dominate discussion; but the swings and roundabouts of power hierarchies of government have profound implications on processes and outcomes and it is critical that planners are able to evaluate these. However, the distribution and exercise of power is sensitive and “those who write about planning ignore power all together, as if it did not matter, or more ominously, as if it mattered so much that they dared not even raise the question” (Booher and Innes, 2002, p. 221). Nevertheless, geometries of power are a central consideration for the pursuit of spatial equity because national and corporate organisations may use “remarkably sophisticated

ways to reinforce spatial structures of social control, cultural and racial oppression, and political economic advantage” (2010, p. 632). Albrechts (2004, p. 751) argued that we should “move away from the idea of government as the mobilizer of the public sector and the provider of solutions to problems, towards an idea of governance as the capacity... to search for creative and territorially differentiated solutions ... through the mobilisation of a plurality of actors with different, and even competing interests, goals and strategies”. The complexity of networks and isolated interests that exist over layers of spatial scales are, however, not easy to engage with; and in practice a variety of surrogates for this have been adopted. The institutions within and beyond statutory structures of government also set up their own dynamics and arenas of influence, and clearly do not capture wider spatial dynamics or engagement synthetically. As Swyngedouw (2005) noted, “assigning ‘holder’ status to an individual or social group is not neutral in terms of exercising power” (Swyngedouw, 2005, p.1999). Even where democratic values are strongly espoused, it is clear that institutional rescaling can result in “new constellations of governance articulated via a proliferating maze of opaque networks, fuzzy institutional arrangements, ill-defined responsibilities and ambiguous political objectives and priorities”(Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 2000). These complex interrelations between planning, Governments and governance and across the rights, space, knowledge, share, stake, interest, and status ‘holders’ identified by Schmitter (2000, p.1995) are central challenges for both spatial and the communicative aspirations and they will be explored later.

While spatial interdependencies have been increasingly recognised, it is paradoxical that “sectoral policy integration is ... almost never a high priority for key actors in government” (Stead and Meijers, 2009, p. 318) or that “states have no interest ... in describing an entire social reality” (Scott, 2000, p. 22). Perceiving a significant deficit in contemporary democracy, Swyngedouw (2005, p. 1991) observed that what was happening at the end of the twentieth century was “not a diminishment or reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities, but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government (e.g. NGOs) ...” (Swyngedouw, 2005, p.1997). Swyngedouw also notes Hajer’s concern about an ‘institutional void’ within which “there are no generally accepted rules and norms according to which policy-making and politics is to be conducted” (Hajer, 2003, p. 175).

Planning and engagement: a need for something more?

The cases for spatiality and engagement in planning have been well made and they have been espoused in principle by various institutions, but achievements in practice have been fitful and partial. Much engagement in practice has been pursued at a local or project level (Carpenter and Brownhill, 2008), but much less has been done to examine how engagement might be genuinely achieved between multiple spatial scales and among the great diversity of holders and interests. As touched upon above, some of the reasons for this may be traced to governmental and institutional origins; but some may also originate within planning and it is important to critically reflect upon whether there is a lacuna within the discipline itself. As a starting-point for doing this it is suggested that, if engagement and spatiality are important to planning, then surely it follows that they should be pursued through at all scales of spatial planning policy and decision-making.

There have been recurrent anxieties about the conceptual weakness of planning as a discipline. In the 1950s, Lynch and Rodwin argued that wider engagement with socio-economic concerns, beyond a physical environmental focus, would lead to “integrated, comprehensive incompetence” (Lynch and Rodwin, 1958, p. 203). More recently, concerns have emerged with Healey asking “how can there be a ‘planning’ without ‘unifying’ conceptions?” (Healey, 1992a, p. 235). Davoudi and Pendlebury draw upon Cherry’s belief that planning should offer ‘something more’ (Cherry, 1974, p. 45) than other closely related

disciplines like architects or geographers, and question the “vaguely defined and diffused intellectual foundation” of the discipline (Davoudi and Pendlebury, 2010, p. 639). Campbell (2011, p. 471) also asks “do we, within the planning community, have a contemporary sense of the (ethical) value of planning?”. Before exploring these theoretical and practical questions further, a brief reflection on the development of planning up to the present is important.

The activities embraced by planning have changed considerably over time, as is revealed by the changing epithets that have been used. A very partial list would include: town and country planning, land-use planning, development planning, reconstruction planning, environmental planning, conservation planning, transport planning, countryside planning, marine spatial planning; and every practitioner could add a number of others. Each epithet suggests a significantly distinctive character and purpose and, although still wide, focuses and delimits scope. Other related activities, for example urban regeneration, neighbourhood renewal, urban design and others, conjure up distinctive notions of purpose. For many, the mention of planning conjures up the image of permits, bureaucracy or restriction; while politicians, professionals and academics frequently refer to a ‘planning process’ as if this was some way a simply defined and recognised entity, which is far from the case. In reality, there are complexities between the generally interrelated, but somewhat disparate activities, embraced within planning. While many have sought to address these issues (including Cowan, 1973; Faludi, 1973; Cherry, 1974; Bruton, 1984; Reade, 1987a, 1987b, 1996; Albrechts, 2004; Ferreira *et al.*, 2009; Davoudi and Pendlebury, 2010; Chapman 2011a, 2011b), uncertainty remains and a sharper focus is needed.

This brief overview of the scope and concerns of planning reveals expanding horizons and the introduction of new specialist skills, while the spirit and purpose of the discipline has become diffused and perhaps confused. The diffusion is seen positively by Ferreira *et al.* (2009) in their Hydra Model, in which planning is likened to the mythical beast of many heads, where the planner is “an individual capable of flowing from one theory to another according to a discretionary view of particular situations” (Ferreira *et al.*, 2009, pp. 29). Similarly, Rydin has envisaged planners as “specific knowledge workers (or ‘knowledge spanners’)” who could “range across different networks, taking knowledge with them and transforming it in the process” (Rydin, 2007, p. 369). Both visions suggest a rather pragmatic and entrepreneurial style in which planners are able to appreciate the diversity of holder standpoints, various possible responses, and to personally guide decision-making. While this perspective of the role of the planner maybe flattering, like the rather omnipotent position envisaged by Ferreira *et al.* (2010), it presents some real conceptual and practical difficulties for the relationships between Governments, governance and planning. As inspiring as these visions might be, they do suggest the need for a very sophisticated skills set, great responsibility and an assumption of powers and responsibilities for which there is little evident wider purpose or mandate. Inch questions whether planners are equipped to handle these ‘superhero’ responsibilities, particularly in the absence of a goal or ‘guiding compass’ (Inch, 2011). More fundamentally, there is little sense in any of these visions of how spatiality and engagement could be pursued at all synthetically.

The heterogeneous nature of the incremental, disjointed and fragmentary nature of planning activities as they have developed up to the present presents significant difficulties; and, while neither the *Hydra* nor the charge of *comprehensive incompetence* are the case, there has been a troubling widening in scope and increasing confusion in planning. The great breadth and diversity of strands of expertise within the planning discipline(s) are central to its present uncertainty and consequently a clearer perception of the disciplines fundamental spirit and purpose, or *something more*, is now needed to act as its compass. Two critically interrelated but fundamentally distinct domains of activity can be identified; the local (tactical) and the spatial (strategic); but it is argued that there are major conceptual and practical confusions

about, and between, them. Although this presents a major obstacle in practice, it may also present a real opportunity and for which synthetic spatial engagement may be a key.

Synthetic spatial engagement: mereologies of scales and interests?

As Schön (1983, p. 41) observed, “when ends are fixed and clear, then the decision to act can present itself as an instrumental problem. But when ends are confused and conflicting, there is as yet no ‘problem’ to solve”. So far, this paper has explored three broad strands of enquiry; one concerned with wider concerns for social justice and spatial equity; another with the increasing scope and conceptual lacunae in the planning discipline; and a third with the limitations of planning’s disciplinary position when set against the background of rapidly-shifting institutional approaches and structures. Each strand deserves individual attention; however the focus of this enquiry is set more specifically upon spatiality and engagement in planning and the equity of approaches to it. Recognition of the complexities involved in this is not new: for example in the UK during the 1960s at the height of post-Second World War reconstruction, a Coventry priest, Stephen Verney, convened a conference to explore how people can “develop their full humanity in urban life ...” (Verney, 1969, p.13). The framework of the conference was inspired by Constantinos Doxiadis, whose conception was captured in a diagram (see Figure 2) representing the complexity of issues and challenges facing people and places in reality. Verney quotes Doxiadis as saying “the grid that we must ... draw of the city will be three dimensional, and the questions to be asked about the city will ... run into billions and trillions. Have you decided which of these it is that you want to ask?” (Verney, 1969, p. 50).

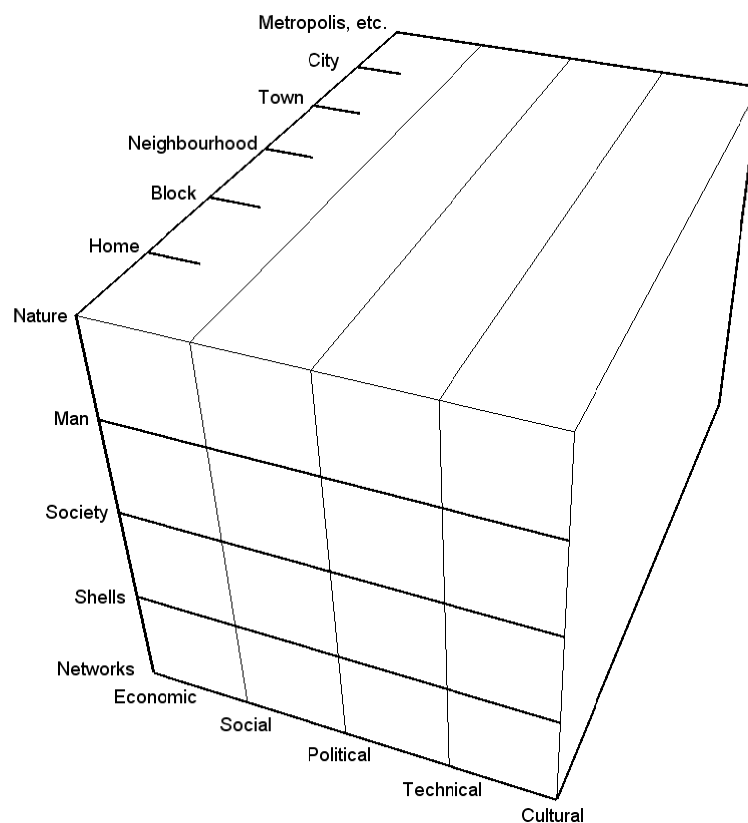


Figure 2: The diagram used by Doxiadis (Verney, 1969, p. 51; redrawn by Joseph Chapman)

It is this complexity that is at the heart of the challenge confronting us in terms of citizen engagement, governance and integration in planning. Jacobs (1961, p.455) had recognised the importance of this, observing that “city processes ... are too complex to be routine, too particularised for application as abstraction”. However, as Weaver has shown, in complex systems of potential ‘Organised Complexity’ (Weaver, 1946), not only do human actions influence the outcomes of complex systems but they also have the potential ‘power’ to shape those outcomes. Importantly, as Ashby’s law of requisite variety (1958) suggests, the approaches used must be as complex as the systems with which they are trying to engage. Oversimplification would inevitably result in over-simplistic and ineffective responses. Having stated this serious injunction, it is recognised that the paper is inevitably over-simplistic. Overcoming this represents a major research challenge for the future.

Theoretical propositions are challenged by the imperative for explanatory clarity in situations where systems present far more complex properties and behaviours. A key question in this enquiry is how to frame the multiple issues, questions and possibilities that are inextricably interwoven with one another without taking any single perspective that privileges only part of the research problem and not the whole. Harvey (1973) grappled with this difficulty and noted that hierarchical views are inadequate. Taking this as a starting point and re-examining the diagonal coordination proposed by the Pegasus project discussed above (Figure 1), the following discussion suggests a framework for developing equitable spatial engagement synthetically.

As illustrated already, the conclusions of Pegasus were that synthesis between multiple interest holders within multi-scalar geographies is a fundamental goal for environmental management and planning. The challenge is not simply, as Carpenter and Brownhill (2008: 230) claim, “how to engage citizens in the planning process”, but how to develop valid processes of spatial governance in which all holders can represent their interests at all levels and across all sectors. One way of seeing these tensions – between parts and wholes in complex spatial relations, and indeed how we define parts and wholes – is from a mereological perspective. Mereology, conceived by Stanislaw Lesniewski (1886-1939), can be characterized as a theory of collective sets and it is a theory of relationships between *parts* and *wholes* (Gruszczynski, 2010). Recognising the relationships between the multiple simultaneous configurations of issues, or clusters of parts, and the multiple wholes that differently clustered interests present is a critical prerequisite for much future research, and the potential development of new communities of enquiry and practice. The many local places, neighbourhoods and indeed non-places each have an important place in our consideration; but none of them can be seen as the whole of our concern. Here, multiple parts make up multiple wholes, where each deserves equal and synthetic consideration as multi-scalar strategic decision areas may impact upon spatial equity positively, adversely or perversely. Figure 3 illustrates the primarily local scale of attention given by engagement processes in contemporary practice, and also the much wider scales where little is done to promote engagement even though they are domains and decision areas which will bear directly upon the fortunes of interests at all of the scales (Harvey, 1973; Fainstein, 2009; Soja, 2010).

Developing this simplistic model, Figure 4 seeks to illustrate, albeit conceptually and simplistically, the nature of the mereological relationships that synthetic equitable spatial engagement needs to recognise and engage with and respond to spatially. The dynamic mereological clusters of holders and interests that need to be recognised and in equity deserve to be engaged is clearly immense. Yet it is this diversity that confronts us in devising processes having the requisite complexity in order to meaningfully engage with them. It is a major and critical challenge. What is needed is a journey of enquiry where no idealized end state is envisaged, rather an approach “whose evolutionary pathways we can only guess at” (Gagliardi, 2009, p.45).

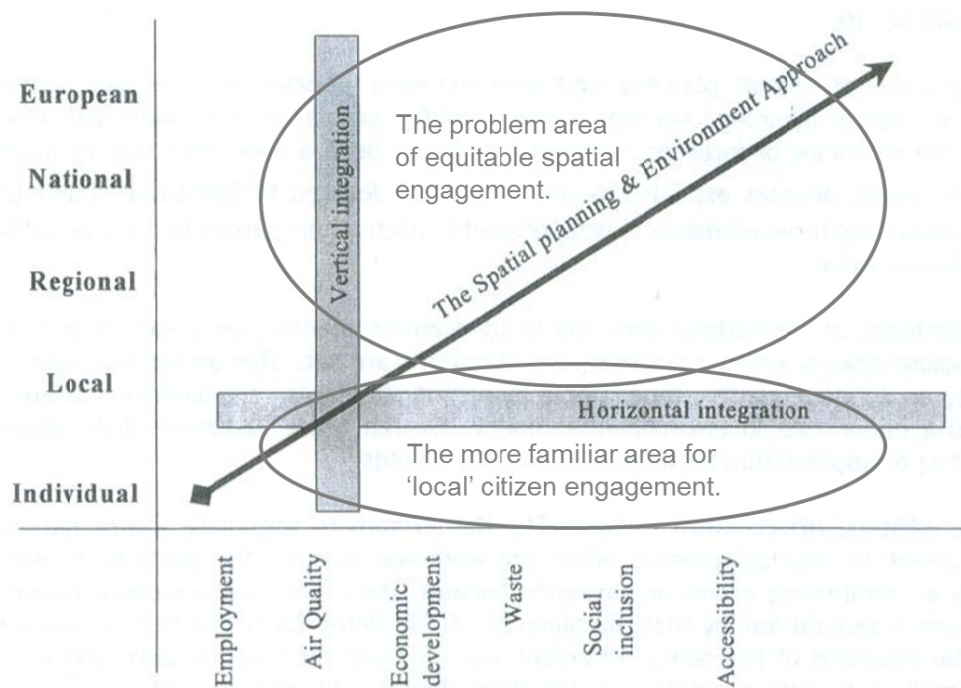


Figure 3: The 'problem' area of engagement overlaid on the concept of 'diagonal coordination'.

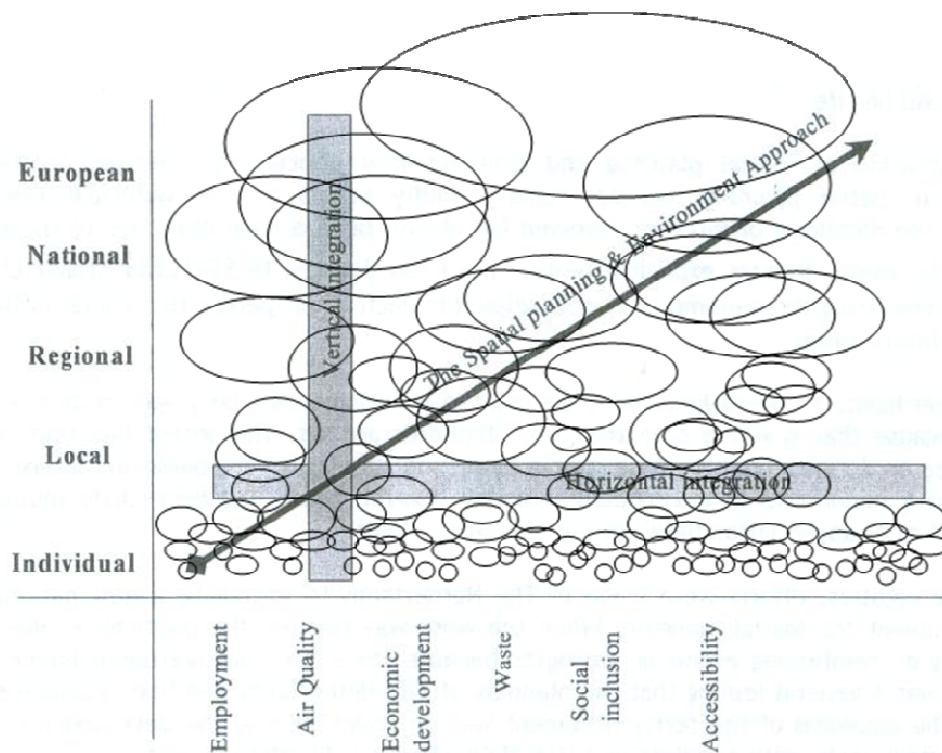


Figure4: Mereologies of engagement overlaid on the concept of 'diagonal coordination'.

So far the paper has been concerned with what could and, it is argued, should be done; but it has not explicitly considered how or by whom it might be done. These important questions can only be considered briefly here and they deserve much wider debate. In this it is important to adopt a realistic or even pessimistic (Challis *et al.*, 1988) view of the social, institutional and logistical difficulties and limitations that spatial engagement in practice would face. Certain principles would, however, underpin the enterprise *a priori*. First, any approach should engage with all spatial 'scales' of issue, analysis and policy without arbitrary influences from administrative boundaries. Secondly, they should be conceived and pursued between and across all appropriate interest holders and spatial scales. These synthetic imperatives render implementation difficult; and they suggest that, while the conventional actors should all be engaged, few if any could lead. Synthetic equitable spatial engagement must work beyond and between city borders, regions, states and supra-statal bodies. Radical and insurgent actions could play a significant role in championing such an enterprise, but possibly their real value is to bear down upon manifestations of inequity more directly.

Clearly, in the absence of synthetic equitable spatial engagement, there is a real threat that single interest action groups, global corporations or financial institutions will dominate: although other agencies concerned with governance, or perhaps a networking vehicle similar to Nation Builder, 38 degrees or America Speaks could potentially play a significant role. However, in the absence of any more synthetic processes, it is likely that a variety of other campaign networks and social media will be harnessed, largely as the means of opposition, to influence and perhaps frustrate policies or projects separately, one by one, and driven by the loudest voices and narrowest interests. Inevitably, more synthetic approaches would need some enabling infrastructure, with data gathering and analytical capacity; but quite how this could be secured is not at all clear. However, it is argued that unless Governments and the planning discipline pay serious attention to the creation of institutional structures that enable individuals and interests to engage equitably and meaningfully in strategically significant spatial decision-making, as well as with the qualities of place locally, there is a real risk of paralysis as increasingly effective means of opposition develop, frustrating governments and marginalising planning. If, as Wilkinson and Pickett have argued, "further improvement in the quality of life no longer depends on further economic growth ... [but upon] ... how we relate to each other" (2009, p.247), then engagement is critical.

Conclusion

As Potter and Novy (2010, p. 238) have said, "utopian conceptions could be employed to overcome self-limiting resignation to current unjust social arrangements". This paper argues that equitable spatial engagement is now a synthetic necessity, and that there is an important role for those who develop these relationships. For the planning discipline this would present an opportunity to redefine the spirit and purpose of planning, and to reappraise the relationships between planning and Governments through the development of sophisticated new ways of engaging diverse and conflicting bodies of interest in synthetic spatial and equitable decision-making. The imperative for requisite complexity in an increasingly connected world, the contested realms of Government and governance, and the weaknesses of the theoretical underpinnings of planning all suggest that this is the critical time to reflect and redirect attention and efforts. Radical, social, governmental, and professional perspectives would play a vital part and assiduous pursuit of genuinely synthetic and equitable spatial engagement in practice would be transformative.

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