

# ‘Planning for States and Nation-States’: Gerrit-Jan Knaap, Zorica Nedović-Budić and Armando Carbonell, (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Mass., 2015)

## Review by Brendan McGrath

The book is a result of a symposium in Dublin in 2012 that brought together planning practitioners and academics to discuss contemporary, macro-level spatial planning on both sides of the Atlantic. The symposium was presented by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and organised by the planning school in University College Dublin and the National Centre for Smart Growth Research and Education in the University of Maryland.

This is a very good comparative study of planning systems. Its quality is down to several factors; the structured nature of the discourse, the choice of case studies, deployment of a generalised template for the case studies, the level of the detail in the studies and the overall calibre of the contributions. By the structure of the discourse I refer to three things; first, an authoritative overview by the editors through introductory and concluding chapters, second, an impressive intermediate scale of comparative analysis, in the form of overviews of the United States by Patricia Salkin and Armondo Carbonell and of the European Union by Andreas Faludi and Brendan Williams, and third, the pairing of an academic and a practitioner for each case study. For most of the studies an academic describes and analyses a system and its context and a practitioner comments upon that analysis. This collaborative approach ensures a nuanced perspective and sometimes throws up interesting differences of opinion.

A book about spatial planning has to address a basic issue of definition. Just what is spatial planning? This book regards it as the activity that arises from ‘the laws, regulations and norms that frame the planning activities of all levels of government’ and includes both development control and ‘plans that address spatial aspects of functional areas such transportation, water, economic development or climate change’. The book concentrates on the supralocal level of governance while recognising the prominence of local planning on both continents. The editors also reference an EU definition of spatial planning which is ‘the methods used largely by the public sector to influence the future distribution of activities in space....to co-ordinate the spatial

impact of other sectoral policies.... and to regulate the conversion of land and property uses.’

The book describes planning systems in five American states and five European countries, including Ireland. The European case studies include four countries with strong planning traditions; the Netherlands, Denmark, France and the United Kingdom. As planning students most of us would have studied and visited one or more of these countries. We would not be as familiar with planning in the United States, where we tend to think of spatial planning only in terms of detailed land regulation. But this book investigates planning systems in five atypical states; Oregon, California, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware, which are pursuing innovative approaches. The editors make clear that the case studies are not intended to represent macro-level planning practice either side of the Atlantic but to ‘document what is happening in some interesting nations and states and to see what trends can be identified and what lessons can be drawn from these selected cases.’

The editors do not overreach themselves. Few definitive conclusions are drawn. There is a general acknowledgement of systems in flux, of it being difficult ‘to see the wood for the trees.’ The planning traditions on the two continents are very different. In the United States, according to Carbonell, ‘There can be no argument that (it) has a fragmented and highly decentralized planning system in which only a small number of states take a strong role in land use regulation and control, while most land use decisions are left to 39,000 units of local government.’ Historically, Patricia Salkin describes it as ‘a feudal system in which municipalities decided land use issues for their own egocentric benefit.’ She acknowledges a ‘quiet revolution’ during the 1950s and 60s, when several states did begin to take a proactive approach to land use planning. But that revolution pales into insignificance compared with the ambition and achievement of European planners over that period. The era saw the introduction of national land use planning systems in Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark. In Britain planners helped to design and build a generation of new towns, establish a network of national parks and draw a ‘green belt’ around London. In the Netherlands planners produced influential National Physical Planning Reports and designed a network of new towns for the reclaimed IJsselmeer. The Rijnstad emerged as an international model for multi-centred metropolitan development. In neighbouring Denmark, Copenhagen grew in line with the Finger Plan, the advisory plan, drawn up after the war, to coordinate the planning of the 29 municipalities of the Greater Copenhagen area. In France DATAR (The Délégation à l’Aménagement du Territoire et à l’Action Régionale) was set up as a think tank to promote and coordinate national planning policy. DATAR oversaw the growth of a network of regional metropolitan centres (growth poles) to act as counterweights to the traditional hegemony of Paris.

This formidable record of endeavour is touched on by the various European contributors but they tend to treat that recent past as having negligible relevance to the present day.

Several of their contributions are coloured by a sense of a professional activity now on the defensive and in some disarray. In England Mark Tewdwr-Jones suggests that academics and non-government organisations will continue to ‘consider the synoptic and wider matters of land use change even if doing so is unfashionable in government’. He concludes that, if other groups are still performing the strategic role at present, it may be useful for future government. In Denmark, according to Daniel Galland and Stig Enemark, ‘at the national level, spatial planning has gradually lost an important share of its former institutional clout’ and ‘the comprehensive-integrated approach of Danish spatial planning is worn out.’ Anna Geppert begins her description of the situation in France by asking the question ‘is French spatial planning still alive?’ and recounts how ‘France has progressively abandoned the national spatial planning strategy that was its hallmark under the name *aménagement du territoire*’. Only Barrie Needham’s account of planning in the Netherlands is relatively upbeat. He believes that the ‘experience of the Netherlands shows that national spatial planning is not a hopeless cause. It can work well, but it needs to be thought through very carefully’.

Donald Schön’s 1983 critique of the planning profession comes to mind reading these contributions. Schön described planning as a professional activity which depended upon two increasingly shaky assumptions:

- There is a working consensus about the content of the public interest, sufficient for the setting of planning goals and objectives; and
- There is a system of knowledge adequate for the conduct of central planning.

By 1983 that conceptual foundation was under strain. In this volume Geppert puts forward a number of reasons for the abandonment of macro level spatial planning in France. One reason is that ‘the economic crisis has resulted in a focus on sectoral policies rather than spatial planning’. This comment is probably relevant to all the planning systems under review. The editors conclude that ‘institutional change continues to occur in the frameworks for planning across the Western world’ and ‘it remains to be seen whether this newly evolving paradigm is up for the challenge’.

The book’s overview of planning systems is measured and tentative but it is striking how out of step Ireland is with the other European systems examined. This opportunity for comparison of the Irish system with other better known systems in Europe is one of the main attractions of the book for Irish readers. The other countries are characterised by the following:

- ‘Clear and unambiguous evidence of devolution in the formulation and exercise of planning, especially land use planning;
- The rise of regionalism;
- The movement away from hierarchy toward territorial governance; and
- Replacement of spatial plans and visions by ‘more pragmatic strategies and frameworks.’

None of these trends apply to Ireland. Ireland, in fact, adopted a national spatial strategy in 2002 just as other European countries were abandoning theirs. Why did we embark on an endeavour when the traditional ‘powerhouses’ of spatial planning in Europe had decided to go in other directions? The Irish regions are distinctive because of their limited and nebulous role in national life (as an Irish planner not working in the public sector, one of the benefits of reading this book was to find something out about the regional level of the hierarchy). Ireland has embarked on a hierarchical approach to governance just as other countries are developing more informal, more complex systems. In the Netherlands, according to Needham, ‘resort to the hierarchical, formal procedures is regarded as an admission of administrative failure’.

There is a good deal of food for thought in the comparative analysis. The extent to which Ireland diverges so much from the other systems suggests an entirely different social and political context, so there is an implicit danger of trying to learn from the experience of the other countries. Nevertheless, I think that this can be done, given that the case studies presented are so detailed and qualified. Barrie Needham draws ‘key outcomes and lessons’ from the Dutch experience, one of which is that:

‘national government must be prepared to commit substantial funds, first to develop policy (consultation and research) and subsequently to get (spatial) policy implemented (building the infrastructure and giving subsidies to provincial and municipal governments).....Enterprising local governments will thwart national governments that try to achieve their spatial planning policies primarily by saying no (no building in certain locations, no new housing without new schools, no industrial sites without public transport). National planning should be active rather than reactive.’

Spatial planning is associated with a holistic perspective that embraces social, economic and environmental goals. This is a breadth of vision that can never be matched by the scope and power of macro spatial planning systems. The mismatch is highlighted in this volume by the Californian case study, entitled ‘Will Climate Change Save Growth Management in California?’ Senate Bill 375 (SB375) was signed into law

by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2008 and requires metropolitan planning organisations (MPOs) in California to develop transportation and land use plans that meet demanding greenhouse gas emission targets. The daunting challenge of SB 375 is to get Californians out of their cars and reduce VMTs (vehicle miles travelled). True to form, everything about California is on a grand scale, the complexity of its local government system, the ingenuity of its planning solutions and, judging by William Fulton's paper, the proliferation of acronyms! What is also on a grand scale is the chasm that exists between the reach of the Californian and federal government and the magnitude of the environmental issues that have to be confronted. Fulton concludes that SB 375 is only 'nudging' Californians towards a more sustainable way of life. And what of the other known and pressing environmental challenges that face the urban culture of West Coast America? These include managing a rapidly dwindling fresh water resource and the very high risks (only recently discovered) created by an unstable tectonic plate (the Juan de Fuca). The example of California, the second largest of the case studies in terms of area and the third largest in terms of population, also illustrates the extent to which a focus of engagement at state and national levels appears to be increasingly anachronistic. There is a growing case for effective management at continental and global scales.

Irish planners will appreciate this book because it offers an authoritative and up-to-date overview of the Irish planning system with contributions by Berna Grist and by Niall Cussen, Principal Planning Adviser in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. Grist's review of Irish planning is thorough and wide ranging. The book also benefits from the input by Brendan Williams, as a spokesperson for the European periphery. Williams points out that Andreas Faludi's assessment of future prospects of spatial planning in the EU ignores the vicissitudes of exposure to global market forces. The inclusion of Ireland as a case study, when it has such a limited planning tradition compared with the other European countries featured, was actually a good idea. Ireland's recent history exemplifies a planning system often at the mercy of external forces, a situation that may become increasingly the norm.

The experience of an Irish planner reading this book is a 'glass half full', 'glass half empty' one. The glass is half full because it is nice to read that we are not alone; macro spatial planning is a difficult and, in large measure, unsuccessful enterprise everywhere. The glass is half empty because we now know that we may be searching in vain for a macro level planning system that will work the way we would like it to. This is a tremendous book which is to the credit of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the book's editors and the contributors. I recommend it to any planner with an interest in planning on a grand scale.