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RESPONSE



Planning is Zoning: A Response to Lawrence W.C. Lai

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It was with great interest that I read Professor Lai's piece in which he tries to define 'town planning'. This is a brave attempt in the challenging format of a dialogue, a form he seems to be keen on. This form is stylistically attractive and allows for explicitly incorporating critique and rebuttal. The downside is that dialogues rarely unfold orderly and systematically, which makes getting an overview of the arguments and counter-arguments rather difficult.

Lai defines (town) planning as zoning, whereby zoning is to be understood as 'land use boundary delineation'. For me, this definition is self-evident and almost trivial. Of course, there are many different approaches to planning, such as collaborative planning, radical planning, feminist planning, rational-comprehensive planning and advocacy planning. But those are all *conceptions* of planning and do not define the *concept* of planning. 'The general *concept* refers to the unitary idea represented by it and is constituted by a list of core features, while specific *conceptions* are different ways in which the general concept can be specified' (Moroni, 2019, p. 9).

I am nevertheless aware that Lai's *concept* of planning might stir some controversy. First, from those who only consider zoning in its narrow sense, as an explicit and legislative form of action by public bodies. In that case, there is no zoning in Houston (Texas), nor in common-law systems such as the one under which English town planning operates. But if you accept a broader definition of zoning as what it literally means – i.e. creating 'zones' or drawing boundaries – it is more inclusive. I once tried to show that in Houston there is much actual zoning going on under less politically contentious labels than 'zoning' (Buitelaar, 2009). These, too, are nevertheless legislative forms of (back-door) zoning. But there are also, as Lai justly points out, non-legislative attempts – administrative, contractual or private – to 'zone'. In other words, there is zoning *de jure* and zoning *de facto*.

Second, I would expect that many academic planners would find this definition *Euclidean*, in the sense that it is 'object-centred' (i.e. it focuses on land use) (Graham & Healey, 1999). Such modes focus on unitary two-dimensional physical space and do not take account of the 'many time-space geographies' (Friedmann, 1994). Planning theory has moved into many non-Euclidean directions – whatever that means, the literature is not terribly clear on the practical implications – with its focus on flows, networks, relations, soft spaces, let alone the more esoteric forms that currently circulate in planning theory. Boundaries seem deeply disliked as they apparently need to be ignored,

rejected, transgressed or softened. And indeed, it is important to take a much broader and multifaceted approach to space. But even if you have perfectly non-Euclidian ideas, in a spatially bound activity such as planning, these ideas ultimately need to be translated into land use boundary delineation of some sort, making clear to people what is allowed where.

Complements to the Definition

Although I am generally appreciative of the definition, I feel that there are two things that are underexplored and may need to be complemented.

First, what I miss is consideration for the time dimension and for the element of reflection on the basis of knowledge (empirical or logical). Planning is ‘deliberate forethought’ and the ‘anticipative design of action that underlies any human activity that is not purely an instinctive reflex or an intuitive response’ (Alexander, 1992, p. 14). Planning connects knowledge and action (Friedmann, 1994). In his definition of planning as ‘land use boundary delineation’, Lai leaves the door open to forms of boundary delineation that are not the result of preparation and thought but of impulse and instinct. My neighbour might *plan* the erection of a fence on what he believes is the boundary between our plots. But if that triggers my rage and I start tearing down the fence straightaway, because I feel the neighbour has unjustly extended his plot at my expense, I am clearly (re)delineating boundaries but am I then also engaging in an act of *planning*? I beg to differ.

The second point I want to raise is not so much one of pointing at a shortcoming of Lai’s definition but actually at a shortcoming of the English language. Town planning – although the adjective ‘town’ may be replaced by ‘urban’, ‘spatial’, ‘city’, ‘regional’ or ‘country’ – is used for both the *practical activity* and for the *science* or academic discipline about this practical activity. Using the same word for two things that are analytically distinct is not very instrumental. The Dutch language is much poorer than the English in terms of the size of its vocabulary, but in this case it is richer. There is the activity of spatial (or town) ordering (*ruimtelijke ordening*), spatial planning as the systematic preparation of spatial ordering (*ruimtelijke planning*) and the scientific discipline of spatial planning (*planologie*), which Barrie Needham anglicised into *planology* (Needham, 1988).

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