

RT19 | EXPLAINING THE PLANNING THEORY-PRACTICE GAP: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PLANNING THEORIES

Chairs

- E. R. Alexander, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA/APD.

Speakers

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Description

For sensible discussion of planning theory and practice, we need to understand what "planning" is. Vickers's (1968) "Planning is what planners do" suggests: "planners" are the people who a community acknowledges "do" planning. But only planning theorists talk about "planning", everyone else refers to "planning" with a descriptor: spatial, urban, economic, social, environmental, transportation, advocacy, or e-planning. If planning theorists are the only ones who refer to "planning", perhaps there is no planning – if "planning" is understood as one recognizable practice.

Still, if no definable planning exists, we can recognize diverse planning practices. At the highest level of generality and abstraction is "planning" practice - an organized nexus of activity that can be described and theorized, just like cooking or banking. Here the "planner" can be anyone planning something – whatever that might be. This is planning theorists' generic "planning": what "planners" do when they are linking between ideas and action.

Then there are various (something) planning practices, which are what everyone else means when they talk about planning. These are not something "planners" do: each is a knowledge-based practice with relevant expertise in an identified domain. Among these are planning practices we know: spatial planning, community-, environmental- or transportation planning. This is what people usually mean when they talk about planning, e.g. the APA's definition: "Planning, also called urban planning or city and regional planning, is..." (APA, 2016).

Finally, there are real-world planning practices enacted in particular contexts. These are recognizable too: advocacy planning for a Colombian barrio, city planning in Stockholm, environmental planning for the Los Angeles Area, sewerage planning for Jakarta, statutory spatial planning in the UK, EU TEN transportation planning, or World Bank development planning.

Not "planning", but these planning practices, should be the subject of planning theories and research. What does this imply for how planning theories link knowledge to planning practices? If there is no "planning", there is no planning theory either: accordingly, I do not refer to planning theory, but to planning theories. Recognizing diversity in planning theories suggests that there are different kinds of planning theories, related to various types of planning practices.

This relation offers the missing link between planning theory and practice, which planning academics and practitioners have been seeking for years. The conceptual framework developed here shows how and why different kinds of planning theories are associated with particular forms of planning practices, making some theories more useful than others for those types of practices we think of as "planning".

A critical review of planning theory over the last 70 years identifies three diverging "streams": the radical-communicative, the post-structuralist and the institutionalist stream. Combining these classifications shows how well planning research and prevailing planning theories relate to the diverse planning practices we know as "planning". The finding that much of what is called planning theory does not serve these planning practices at all explains the rightly perceived "planning theory-practice gap". The proposed Roundtable will debate and dispute this argument, with discussion exploring implications for planning scholarship, research and education.