

Planning and the Public Interest: An Editorial Introduction

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Modern planning thought is a new player in the urban scene. Cities are dated five to seven thousands years, whereas modern planning thought appeared at the late 19th century and is thus aged just about one hundred and fifty years. Modern planning systems, particularly land-use mechanisms, are even younger, as most of them were formalized after WWII. In a way, the evolution of the modern way of thinking on planning, and the continuous justification for the operation of comprehensive planning systems worldwide, stems from the need to protect the public interest in the built environment. Hence, understanding that the public is fundamentally unorganized and unable to protect the essential values and interests and knowing that the public good is continuously endangered by private interests provides the basis for public planning.

As noted by scholars (Hall, 1982; Taylor, 1998; Portugali, 2000), modern planning thought was born as a reaction to the massive urbanization that accompanied the industrialization of society. Ancient built environments were usually subjected to cultural directives, controlling the location and attributes of private buildings and arranging the design, access and structure of public spaces. The industrial revolution and especially the rapid urbanization of Europe and North America since the 18th century violated existing socio-spatial orders and created enormous conflicts regarding the built environment. Particularly, the growing involvement of entrepreneurs and initiators in the production of space highlighted the various interests related to spatial planning and development.

Laissez-faire viewpoints that constituted the common political frames were not easily changed into those legitimating the involvement of the state in the economy via planning issues. An insight to the revolutionary transformation of planning thought at the dawn of the 20th century is provided by reviewing Ebenezer Howard's inspiring *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (published in 1902). Howard's book

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is regarded by researchers of planning theory as one of the essential cornerstones of modern planning thought. However, Howard's model portrays modern planning as exerting rather limited legislative powers for the protection of public interests. On one hand, Howard is fully aware of the inherited tension between the interests of the individuals and those of the community and explicitly relates to representing the public in planning. He cites Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution*, saying that "the interests of the social organism and of the individuals comprising it at any particular time are actually antagonistic; they can never be reconciled; they are inherently and essentially irreconcilable". On the other hand, though, Howard finds the idea of utilizing legislation for ensuring the interests of the common in the built environment unthinkable. He specifically related to the existence of numerous publics, each having a slightly different interest, which makes planning inherently biased and sectional. In a way, Howard does not accept the existence of an absolute, objective, public interest—and therefore does not expect planning to safeguard such an abstract idea. The challenge of planning, in his view, is to offer an economically sustainable urban model in which the public interest is self-sufficient. He is proud to say that his Garden City is based on the community's coordinated action, and that the interest of the community is maintained without the involvement of an external planning power other than that of individual interests. Howard praises the fact that his model "requires no revolutionary legislation", and "involves no direct attack upon vested interests", as both are equally unthinkable.

Less than half a century later, the common good was placed in the hand of the planner. The British *Town and Planning Act 1947* was the signpost of a new era, in which the interests of the common are protected by statutory planning, and semi-scientific considerations guide building specification and uses of privately owned land. Practitioners agree that the public interest means more than the sum of stakeholders' interests and certainly more than simply compromising conflicting interests. It is also agreeable that supporting the public interest means restricting individual rights and accepting administered intervention in the built environment. Nevertheless, scholarly contemplations regarding the term and the way it is translated to planning decision-making occasionally occur. In the 1950s it was Meyerson and Banfield's *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest* (1955) that unmasked the public interest pretense beyond the construction of public housing in Chicago. Recently, it was Campbell and Marshall's (2002) venture of re-evaluating the public interest justification for planning. Their paper related to the problematic nature of the public interest, particularly when planning decision-making is at stake: on the one hand, the public interest cannot be completely defined or concluded, and on the other hand, it cannot be left for endless discussion as choices must be made. Moreover, as claimed by scholars and practitioners, the public interest sometimes appears as "a smokescreen or facade which prohibits any real evaluation of what effects the planning system actually has in practice" (ibid, 164). Others, such as Grant, noticed that "the public interest proves a flexible construct for the articulation of disparate views"

(Grant, 1994, 73). Her research shows that in planning debates, opposing views are equally presented as supporting the public interest. Clearly, the public interest remains an elusive term, and defining the public interest is a controversial task.

This special issue of *Geography Research Forum* thus aims at exploring aspects of representing the public interest in plans, planning laws and by planning agencies. Since we cannot define the public interest in a straightforward algorithm, our aim is to look at the inevitable dilemmas associated with seeking out the public interest and integrating it into spatial plans, laws and administrations.

The voyage begins with Roy Fabian's search through the manifestation and definitions of interests. Since interests are normative constructs, their existence and the actions they drive people into performing are culturally bounded. The urban culture, as such, is especially stressing the inevitable competition between various interests. Especially, controversies between the more naturally defined self-interests and the somehow synthetic expression of public interests come into view. Public policies, actions and choices may seem irrational, in terms of their economic justification or when testing them according to the self-interest prism of the individual. Nevertheless, public policy—driven by the need to produce a public interest player—is an essential actor in the urban sphere. Fabian skillfully leads us through the numerous aspects of public-private concerns, via the clashes and the inevitable links between the two, to his own intelligible viewpoint and classification of urban interests.

A second rather more conceptual paper is provided by Rachel Katoshevski-Cavari, Theo Arentze, and Harry Timmermans. This work is motivated by the urge to advance plurality and differences in small scale urban areas by producing a planning tool that aids to calculate the public interest in planning and to produce publicly-oriented urban plans. The planning model they present is based on a multi-agent approach simulating the behavior and decisions of three actors: the planning authority, the supplier agents (initiators and entrepreneurs developing urban facilities), and the public (individuals and household). In particular, the model is sensitive to the various preferences of the individuals in the urban sphere and to the fact that the public interest is a cultural construct and thus varies in time and place. Developing various land-use patterns and assessing different planning alternatives is thus responsive to the preferences and the ideals valued by the specific group.

Following this theoretical preface are two papers exploring the public interest via specific case studies, each looking at relatively long periods, critically investigating the mechanisms of safeguarding the public interest in the built environment. Talia Margalit brings an extensive research on the history of high rise construction in Tel Aviv. While high rise buildings, “machines that makes the land pay”, appear to be randomly dispersed in the city, Margalit searches for the institutional order that stands behind this continuous urban phenomenon. She finds that privatization of publicly owned land is the prevalent mechanism that stands beyond most of Tel Aviv's tall buildings. This wide-range impressive research portrays the emergence of

four cycles of high rise buildings in the last fifty years, all manifesting the ease in which planning authorities and local politicians make compromises on the public interest. Throughout the years, public land assets are transformed into “paying machines” for the benefit of entrepreneurs, with the consent and active cooperation of the public authorities. Specifically, the public interest in the built environment is being defined by the local authority in a way that enables the institution of a durable urban regime. Moreover, Margalit shows that this entrepreneurial regime is in effect a typical urban mechanism, and again raises the question of defining the public interest in planning.

The fourth paper in this issue examines the performance of the planning system, in terms of protecting the public interest, in a much easy and straightforward instance: the case of protecting the coastal environment. While the previous paper looked at the collision of interests in the complex urban arena, Nurit Alfasi analyzes the utility of planning in the face of the clearly defined interest of protecting the coastline of Israel. The question underlying this examination is this: once the public interest is defined and accepted, once it is backed by planning policies and plans – can the planning system deliver its goal and really protect it? The research compares between three modes of planning and management that has operated in Israel in connection with the coasts. The first is the statutory comprehensive planning. The second is strategic planning via policy papers. The third is the primary legislation. While all three planning tools operated for the sake accomplishing a similarly defined public interest, each operated in a different mechanism and hence reached different results. The paper shows that the operation of the planning system is in itself problematic as accomplishing the planning objectives is far from being a simple, achievable task.

The last three papers in this issue offer a slight turn, looking at the public interest from the point of view of ethnic groups and minorities. Avinoam Meir discusses the emergence of planning as objection: planning that is motivated by the objection of the Bedouin minority to the fact that formal planning performed by the State practically ignores their interests. Meir portrays a unique, creative planning maneuver taken by the Bedouin, a post-nomadic-pastoral-peasant group located in the northern Negev region in Israel, as a reaction to the State’s long-lasting neglect. Throughout the years governments in the Middle East has been attempting to modernize the Bedouin and turn them into a productive, controllable population. Specifically, the Bedouin are conflicted with the Israeli state on territorial resources and as a result suffer from ongoing marginalization. However, following a discussion of the roots of planning from below among them, the research looks at a new, surprisingly different occurrence in which a conscious planning empowerment takes place: the group’s interests are being formulated into bottom-up planning endeavors, as unrecognized settlements produce Bedouin-friendly spatial planning and struggle for formal authorization. This step is leading the Bedouins towards the formation of a new system of power relations with the State, based on renewed articulation of

their interests.

John Sheehan's paper portrays a situation that although taking place at a different part of the globe bares many similarities to the one discussed by Meir. Sheehan's research examines the native title of Australian Aboriginals recognized in 1992 through a High Court decision. Like Meir in the previous paper, Sheehan is interested in the representation of native interests in spatial planning, and similarly to Meir's findings, Sheehan discovers that the State and local authorities are not happy to meet the native's titles in planning. Sheehan's viewpoint highlights the ease of neglecting the Aboriginals' rights and avoiding their interests, let alone compensation rights. His research particularly stresses the existence of specific claims and land interests that stem from spiritual and cultural attachment that are still unknown. The inclusion of such interests in spatial planning is not yet accomplished. Nevertheless, as a first step, they are articulated and acknowledged by the Aboriginals themselves.

Last but not least is the seventh paper of this issue, written by Tovi Fenster. Fenster's initial claim is that the public interest rhetoric is in fact used to control, discriminate and oppress one public for the benefit of another. Based on her understanding of the implications of such policies in planning, Fenster suggests to distinguish between two forms of 'planning from below': the first aims at meeting *practical* needs and making practical changes while the second is directed to making *strategic* changes in the social and built environment. Fenster claims that this distinction is especially useful for exposing new practices of radical planning and helping the new players in the planning field, the NGOs, to promote contra hegemonic principles of equality and justice. She then demonstrates these notions on an Israeli NGO involved in planning for the Bedouins.

The questions raised by papers included in this special issue of thus highlight three underlying concerns related to pursuing the public interest in planning:

1. *Defining the public.* In other words: whose interests are to be protected by planning? Must there be a conflict between the interests of the privileged and the disadvantaged, in terms of spatial planning? Moreover, critical writings since the 1980s somehow assume that the interests of the fortunate are usually met, while those of the more vulnerable publics remain naked. In line with this conjecture, there is a need to find out if planners are biased towards the powerful and the most influential, and whether planning is somehow inclined to favor specific publics.
2. *Defining the public interest.* Corresponding to the above discussion, the question of knowing the public interest still remains open: How does planning cope with the fundamental lack of definition of the public interest, than? Must the public interest be spelled out by a certain public, or should planners calculate and define it by themselves? Perhaps we could learn something from practice. For example, is there a way to test the public interest and verify it? Is there a way to evaluate it? Is there a need to get it supported? What do planners usually do?
3. *Protecting the public interest.* Once the public is defined and its interest is agreed

upon, there is still a doubt whether planning is fit for the job. Can planning actually protect the public interest and thus fulfill its main objective? Is planning equipped for standing against private and sectional interest, or must planners seek help from outside the planning system?

While Howard's Garden City, as other planning models of his time, did not pretend to deliver a comprehensive public good, modern planning theory is in effect founded on this promise. The inevitable crisis of planning thought in our times is hence related to the fact that both scholars and planners cannot provide clear answers to these bothering questions. Safeguarding the public interest therefore remains the most problematic aspect of current planning systems.

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