Is planning past politics?

Political displacements and democratic deficits in contemporary territorial governance

Symposium at KTH Architecture and the Built Environment, 8-9 September 2011

Planning is political but not politics –
the need to identify and develop theory on planning media

Lars Marcus, lars.marcus@arch.kth.se
KTH School of Architecture
SE-100 44 Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract:

As in politics, we find in planning an inherent confusion of means and ends. As an ideologically based endeavour, politics clearly has goals for society but comprises, just as importantly, also means to achieve these goals. Planning is a critical method for achieving political goals, which of course makes urban planning, and adherent practices, such as urban governance and urban design, inherently political instruments. As such planning is clearly part of the means of politics. But does that make planning politics? Even though it is often said that planning also generates goals for politics, these goals can hardly be accepted as politics unless politically sanctioned. And even if such sanctioning in planning practice often is circumvented, this must surely be seen as a flaw in planning rather than a formative characteristic. Based on this rather conventional argument this paper therefore takes the stance that planning clearly is political but can not, or rather should not, be understood as politics.

More importantly, the paper argues that a major reason that this conventional wisdom has been so debated in recent decades, is due to inherent theoretical problems in planning itself, especially when it comes to defining its ends and means - the failure to accept that planning is not everything, if you like. The paper argues that to remedy this it can, in contrast to the focus on the process of planning that has been prevalent for a long time in planning discourse, be fruitful to focus the products of planning, such as policy documents, legal frameworks and built neighbourhoods, not least when it comes to identifying its means, but in extension maybe also its ends.

Of critical importance here is the fact that planning can never intervene directly in the urban processes it aims to structure and shape, but uses different intermediary systems, such as discursive, institutional and spatial systems, resulting exactly in such
things as policy documents, legal frameworks and built neighbourhoods. Such systems do change over time but they still represent the most tangible products of planning, which often also show a remarkable durability. Rather than dismissing these as mere tools for the grander goals of politics itself, it is argued that they should be taken most seriously and maybe even be accepted as the ends of planning. This would indeed not imply a dislocation of planning from politics, only a more definite delimitation between the two that clearly leaves the political goals in the realm of politics. What is more, it also points to the first direction in planning in need of theoretical development, according to this paper, the relation between the intermediary systems used in planning and the urban processes addressed by political goals, or put differently, theory on planning as intermediary product.

Certainly, arguments for a more serious analysis and debate on the means of planning have been put forward also more recently, for example in what is called the New Institutionalism. But a true embracement of institutional systems as a medium that is open for systematic research and development of knowledge that can support planning practice, does not quite seem to be there. It most often appears to stop at a mere argument for institutions per se. This would even less be the case when it comes to discursive systems, so critical for successful urban governance. Not even in urban design, dealing with the most concrete reality of cities, is a belief in theoretical knowledge on its central medium, urban form, to be found. A decisive reason for this might be the great unclarity in what is meant by theory in planning discourse, but to be satisfied by this state of affairs, is truly to abandon the idea of planning as anything else than politics by other means.

A reason why this abandonment has been so embraced in recent decades, explicitly or not, can exactly, it is argued here, have to do with the reluctance to see the intermediary systems, drawn attention to above, as the ends of planning, instead letting planning ends converge with political goals – where the ability to make out the difference could be said to be the very definition of professionality. If we define such intermediary systems as the ends of planning, instead of the urban processes themselves, this also redefines the means in planning. The preference of seeing political ends as the ends also of planning has, furthermore, accentuated the importance of the political process for planning, that is, how are political decision taken, how are they implemented, who gets to say what when etc. While this process certainly is of tremendous importance for planning, it can also run the risk of hiding a more immediate process for planning that maybe in a more direct sense is the true means of planning, that is, the knowledge process behind the development of the intermediary systems emphasized above. We are then close to the second direction in planning in need of theoretical development – planning as knowledge process.

We can develop this line of argument using urban design as an example, urban design being exactly about trying to influence different urban processes of political interest by the structuring and shaping of urban space as an intermediary system. Characteristic for urban design is that this is accomplished using very concrete media such as the structuring and shaping of buildings and landscapes, that is, built form, while it also could be done using institutional means such as plans and regulations used in other fields of planning. We can therefore conclude that urban space as structured and shaped by built form, is the characteristic medium used in urban design to intervene in
different urban processes, and that theory on intermediary products in this case deals with theory on urban form in relation to different urban processes.

As stated above, we also need theory on the knowledge process of urban design and more precisely, as argued above, the knowledge process in urban design. This is exactly what is provided by design theory. It is today generally acknowledged that the design process can be described as a process where different knowledge forms or types of theory are applied, why it can also play a critical role in elucidating what is meant by theory in different instances in planning discourse. In any design process we need, first, 

*generative theory*, that is, theory of the possible rather than the actual, which resembles ideas in utopian discourses, second, *analytical theory*, which can support the designer in understanding how the proposed solution will actually perform, third, *discursive theory*, that is, theory that support the designer in understanding the wider social and cultural context of a particular design. The critical question is how well informed the designer is when it comes to the different knowledge forms, which most likely, will differ in different fields of urban planning.

More importantly for the current argument, the lack of theory on the knowledge process in planning that in this way is able to identify the role of different theoretical categories and knowledge forms in the design process has muddled the understanding of theory in planning and created reoccurring unproductive conflicts between different knowledge traditions contribution to planning theory. In extension it could even be argued that it has contributed to a weakening of planning as a discipline, especially when it comes to developing discernable means and ends which is essential when it comes to planning as support of implementation of political goals but also when it comes to keeping planning apart from politics.