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Operationalising Resilience within Urban Planning – Bridging Theory and Practice

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Over the past two decades, the concept of ‘urban resilience’ has gained increasing attention within the field of urban planning. More recently, interest in the concept can be partly linked to the recent global economic crisis, which has stimulated much debate around pre-crisis urban development models, and more broadly around the ability of modern planning systems to adequately adapt and respond to changing circumstances. This paper reviews the scholarly literature on urban resilience and concludes that despite its increasing ubiquity, the concept still lacks precise definition, and operationalising the concept within the planning domain remains a challenge. Specifically, the paper highlights the importance of distinguishing between ‘equilibrium’ and ‘evolutionary’ understandings of resilience, with particular focus on the potential of the evolutionary perspective to aid analysis of local planning responses to the recent global economic crisis. In doing so, the paper also queries the potential contribution of new institutionalism, and discursive institutionalism in particular, in enhancing our understanding of the resilience concept in this context, and in addressing some of the common critiques attached to it.

Keywords: urban resilience; adaptive capacity; new institutionalism; crisis; austerity.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades the concept ‘resilience’, and more specifically ‘urban resilience’, has gained increasing attention within urban planning research, policy and practice; particularly in the context of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, and continuing forms of social, political, economic and financial crises in a number of European countries (Lang, 2012). The concept is typically presented as the capacity of cities to ‘bounce back’ or even ‘bounce forward’ from a disturbance or crisis event – and thus is often considered to be, superficially at least, an agreeable and almost ‘incontestable’ concept (White & O’Hare, 2014).

Yet despite the increasing ubiquity of the resilience concept, particularly within an Anglo-American context, its exact meaning and measurement remains contested. Indeed, Davidson (2010) asserts that ‘It is far from clear whether the term resilience enjoys a shared understanding within academic disciplines and policy areas and also between them’. In particular, White and O’Hare (2014) point to contrasting academic understandings of ‘equilibrium resilience’ and ‘evolutionary resilience’ and emphasise the need for greater deconstruction and analysis of the concept from a planning perspective. In this case, the authors argue that opaque political treatment of the concept has, in many cases, impacted planning practice by privileging an equilibrist interpretation over a more transformative, evolutionary understanding (White and O’Hare, 2014) – an issue which has potentially significant ramifications, given how notions of ‘urban resilience’ are emerging in debates around the urban response to the recent global economic crisis.

When applying the concept to cities, many scholars argue that the evolutionary (also known as socio-ecological) side of the concept is the most appropriate when using the concept in an urban planning / management context (including Davoudi et al., 2012; Majoor, 2015; White and O’Hare, 2014) – whereby resilience is understood as the ability of a city to adapt, change and transform in the face of crisis or disturbance. This paper is particularly concerned with the applicability of this evolutionary resilience perspective within planning; seeking to investigate how such a perspective may aid analysis of local planning responses to the recent global economic crisis in particular. In doing so, the paper also queries the potential contribution of new institutionalism in enhancing our understanding of resilience – a proposition supported by scholars including Lang (2011; 2012) who argues that resilience must be conceptualised in such a way that processes of and (institutional) frameworks for decision making are recognised. This paper argues that such a perspective can be useful when applying the (evolutionary) resilience concept within urban planning, as it seeks to highlight dominant norms, perceptions and paradigms which can lead to particular forms of action (or lack thereof) in the face of a crisis (Lang, 2012).

In order to address these key questions, this paper reviews the scholarly literature around ‘urban resilience’. In doing so, the paper first briefly charts the evolution of the resilience concept in order to contextualise its modern application in the planning domain; it then examines some of the key constraints impacting its translation from theory to practice; and finally it explores the recent global economic crisis and the potential contribution of new institutionalism in expanding our understanding of both the resilience concept – and crisis response at city level across Europe.

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The Emergence and Evolution of the Resilience Concept

In recent decades, the concept of resilience has proliferated as a policy metaphor for embedding foresight, robustness and adaptability into a variety of place-making and increasingly local planning activities (Coaffee, 2013); particularly as cities are increasingly seen to amplify global urban trends of enhanced risk (Simpson and Stoffregen, 2011). However, despite 'resilience' progressively becoming part of the urban planning lexicon, the concept risks being reduced to a 'buzzword' or an 'empty signifier', with little practical relevance.

The term 'resilience' has a long history, which, according to Pizzo (2014) can be traced back to the 1st Century B.C. Yet, it is the work of C.S Holling, a theoretical ecologist, which brought the term to prominence in 1973. Holling utilises 'resilience' to examine the behaviour of ecological systems that are exposed to unexpected external changes and disruptions, defining resilience as

A measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables (Holling, 1973: 14).

However, since then resilience has been explored in a variety of different research areas including environmental studies, disaster prevention and climate change reduction strategies. It has also continued to expand as an adapted research concept within social and human geography studies (Kärrholm et al., 2014) and more recently, applied specifically within the urban context – where it can be broadly understood as the capacity of a city or urban system to withstand a wide array of shocks and stresses (Agudelo-Vero et al, 2012: 3). This process, according to Eryadin (2013) can be described as a 'four stage path'. The fourth stage, Eryadin (2013) asserts, has been the use of the term within urban planning literature, where 'planning for resilience' has become a critical concern. This section briefly charts the development of these stages.

In the 1960s, along with the rise of systems thinking, resilience entered the field of ecology where multiple meanings of the concept have since emerged, with each being rooted in different world views and scientific traditions. Within this field, it was Holling's (1973) seminal paper which brought the concept to prominence and ignited further inquiries on how systems respond to disturbances. Within his work, Holling drew an important distinction between engineering and ecological resilience – with engineering resilience defined as the ability of a system to return to an equilibrium or steady-state after a disturbance (Holling, 1973; 1996). This engineering perspective understands resilience as a measure of the 'speed of return' to equilibrium (Pimm, 1991). In essence, the quicker the system 'bounces back', the more resilient it is. In contrast, Holling (1996: 33) asserts that ecological resilience is concerned with the 'magnitude of the disturbance that can be absorbed before the system changes its structure'. Thus, rather than speed being a defining feature, here 'resilience' is understood as how much disturbance a system can undergo while remaining within critical thresholds – how it can persist and adapt in the face of disturbance (Adger, 2000). Ecological resilience rejects the existence of a single, stable equilibrium and instead recognises the existence of multiple equilibria, and the possibility of systems to flip into alternative stability domains. Yet, despite this core difference in understanding, both perspectives recognise the existence of equilibrium in systems, be it a pre-existing one to which a resilient system bounces back (engineering) or a new one to which it bounces forth (ecological) (Davoudi et al., 2012).

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The equilibristic view of resilience has since become highly influential in a range of social science disciplines such as psychology, disaster studies, economic geography and environmental planning. For example, within the field of disaster risk reduction, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2009: 24) defines resilience as

The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions

Within this definition, various prior meanings of the term can be seen – rebounding, adapting, overcoming, and maintaining integrity. Yet, as Alexander (2013) argues, some of these typically cited meanings, such as restoring equilibrium and getting away from it by moving to a new system state, are potentially contradictory, and somewhat problematic when applied to the urban context. Indeed, Dudley (2010) emphasises the importance of distinguishing the system equilibrium idea from concepts of *urban* resilience; a resilient system may experience fluctuations or changes in conditions or structures, and these changes may provide the very basis for an urban systems persistence over time. Such equilibristic views too easily assume that there is some future steady-state (or a return to a past one).

Davoudi and colleagues (2012), after noting the varied meanings that have been attached to resilience, attempts to address the issues associated with the equilibristic view. In doing so, the authors argue for an ‘evolutionary’ understanding of resilience – whereby resilience requires continuous adaptation rather than a return to a previous equilibrium. This view of resilience purports that the very nature of systems may change over time without an external disturbance. This perspective is also often referred to as socio-ecological resilience (Folke et al., 2010). Here, resilience is not understood as ‘bouncing back’ to normality, but as the ability of complex socio-ecological systems to change, adapt, and, crucially, transform in response to stresses and strains (Carpenter et al., 2005).

If, as Friedmann (2008) states, we are to assume that ‘translation’ is one of planning theory’s tasks, one of the prime tasks for resilience research in the planning domain is establishing which ‘root’ of the resilience concept fits better with the planning discipline. Since cities can be interpreted as complex adaptive systems whose organisation and behaviour are comparable to ecosystems, most scholars agree that the ecological / social or evolutionary side of the concept is the most appropriate when using the concept in an urban planning / management context (Davoudi et al., 2012; Majoor 2015). Yet despite the well-recognised distinctions between differing conceptual understandings of resilience in academic spheres (Davoudi et al., 2012; Brand and Jax, 2007), the impact of the concept on planning practice, according to White and O’Hare (2014) continues to be hampered by fragmentary applications and opaque definitions.

‘Translating’ Resilience – Key Challenges

Interest and concern for *urban* resilience, according to Coaffee and Clarke (2015), has been stimulated by the perception that cities are particularly vulnerable to shocks and disturbances – due to their status as densely populated political, economic and cultural centres; the interdependencies of their networked infrastructures; and as a result of continued and rapid urbanisation. Indeed, growing interest in the concept has led to a recent array of philanthropic and commercial attempts to develop strategic evaluation frameworks to assess urban resilience. For example, the UNISDR launched the ‘How to Make Cities More Resilient’ campaign in 2012; and in 2013 the Rockefeller Foundation launched ‘100 Resilient Cities’, a campaign dedicated to helping cities around the world ‘become more resilient to the physical,

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social and economic challenges that are a growing part of the 21st century'. Moreover, in 2014, two large multinational corporations, ARUP and Siemens, produced city resilience 'toolkits' which highlight factors that city leaders should consider when making decisions about resilience interventions.

However, the rapid political ascent of the concept also raises important questions around how resilience is understood, what it is designed to achieve, and how this may translate into practice. This becomes all the more pertinent given how notions of 'urban resilience' are emerging in debates around local government responses to the recent global economic crisis – particularly within the Anglo American context. Indeed, in the early 2000's a particular catalyst for an upsurge of interest in 'resilience' - from a policy perspective - was the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001. Coaffee (2013) argues that following this event, security, and increasingly resilience, gradually became a central organising metaphor and concept within the (urban) policymaking process and in the expanding institutional framework of national security and emergency preparedness (Coaffee et al. 2008). This has been underpinned by a related increase in the political prioritisation of the safety and security of communities against an array of perceived hazards and threats, including terrorism, climate change, and extreme weather events (Coaffee, 2013).

Within this security driven context, resilience is most often deployed to link concerns about urban development and disaster risk reduction. However, there is a danger in inheriting understandings of 'resilience' from disaster studies alone – where resilience is often limited to describing the ability of a system to absorb or offset damage and to recover to pre-disaster status - an equilibristic perspective. Indeed, Pelling and Zaidi (2013) argue that current conceptual, analytical and policy approaches in urban disaster management combine to perpetuate a vision of resilience that is defined by a responsibility to support post disaster recovery and maintenance of 'normalcy'. White and O'Hare (2014) are also highly critical of such equilibrist interpretations, referring to this perspective as 'both simplistic and fatalistic – accepting the status quo, leaving unchallenged current norms of behaviour that drive risky behaviour, and privileging reactive responses to risk'.

The move towards resilience is often justified through the argument of an increasing level of uncertainty in an increasing complex world (Berkes and Folke, 1998). Resilience is presented as a fundamental improvement in *managing* uncertainty - specifically through the shift from 'risk mitigation' to 'risk adaptation' mindset. Yet, as Lang (2011) purports, it is not the 'city' that acts in the face of crisis but individual or collective actors. Resilience is shaped by laws, policies, and human institutions and ecological models of resilience tend to ignore the ways that the central government shapes markets, local governments, and even cultural values. Indeed, a number of theorists, when discussing the concept of resilience and the paradigm of social ecology, critique it for inadequately addressing the questions of political power, the role of the state, conflict and culture (Wilkinson, 2011; Fainstein, 2013). According to Swanstrom (2008: 16):

Rejecting both the state and the market, ecological thinkers embrace social processes of consensual decision making and network governance ...[But] the diminishment of the role of the state and political conflict in favour of consensual social networks ends up being profoundly conservative, reinforcing the status quo.

Furthermore, Joseph (2013) also argues that such equilibristic interpretations of the concept 'resilience' fits well within a wider embedding of neoliberal forms of governance. This is due to its emphasis on the 'responsibilisation' of the individual to govern themselves and their preparedness – whether in the face of natural disasters or crisis induced austerity measures.

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Joseph (2013) asserts that this is not to say that the idea of resilience is reducible to neoliberal policy and governance, but it is does fit neatly with what it is trying to do and say – depending on how ‘resilience’ is interpreted.

This potential alignment with neoliberal ideology has also drawn criticism from a number of other scholars, who suggest that the meaning of resilience within urban policy is distorted by its neoliberal reworking for governance purposes. For example, Handmer and Dovers (1996) draw a distinction between resilience as found in the ecology literature and resilience as it appears in risk management, which is more concerned with the preservation of day-to-day activities of individuals and communities, and a return to ‘normalcy’. The latter usage is predominant in urban policy, they assert, because it better fits with neoliberal governmentality – and in fitting into this discourse, the term becomes little more than a buzzword that might easily be exchanged for some other term.

UK policy statements in particular are highlighted by Joseph (2013) as placing much greater emphasis on individual responsibility. This point is also highlighted in Coaffee’s (2013) account of resilience policy in the UK, where he documents the emergence and progression of different ‘waves’ of resilience policy. He highlights the shift in recent years to a more trans-disciplinary concept of resilience that integrates the physical (both the built and natural) and socio-economic aspects of resilience. This new governance approach to enhancing urban resilience in the UK emphasises joined up thinking and the ‘responsibilising’ of a greater range of individuals and organisations for preventing and preparing for disruptive challenges. As such, it is argued that the resilience ‘turn’ (aligning with UK drivers such as austerity and a move towards localism) has influenced a move away from the traditional relationship between the state and the individual with ‘governing from a distance’ through decentralised decision making (Foucault, 2007).

Indeed, Coaffee and Clarke (2015) argue that the behaviour of planners towards the goals of enhancing resilience is, like all planning operations, highly related to organisational context and can have a huge effect on the ability of the planning system, or individual planners to act effectively to mitigate or respond to a disruptive challenge. Where planners are seen not to act or not to adapt to changing circumstances, this can often be considered maladaptation – which, in the context of resilience, highlights sub-optimal decision making which can lead to increases in vulnerability and a decrease in adaptive capacity (Coaffee and Clarke, 2015). In examining such issues, it is proposed that applying an evolutionary perspective of resilience is necessary.

Evolutionary Resilience and the Economic Crisis

Since 2007, global housing and financial markets have experienced an intense period of volatility and uncertainty. At first, the crisis was centred on the banking sector (the so called ‘credit crunch’), with its roots in sub-prime mortgage lending practices in the US, leading to bank failures and falling stock markets. This was quickly followed by a sovereign debt crisis in Europe (with Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy among the most heavily impacted). Within Ireland, for example, the fall-out of the crisis has been severe. Throughout the ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom era, the Irish economy became increasingly reliant on property, facilitated by neoliberal tendencies within the deregulation and re-regulation of the financial and banking sectors and within the planning system (Murphy and Scott, 2013). However, the transformation of Irish planning during this period was not an isolated event. In fact, the institutional and political contexts for such changes were associated with the growing penetration of political strategies, throughout Europe, by a neoliberal agenda.

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In both Ireland and Spain, for example, residential property price inflation increased dramatically from the late 1990s driven by increased availability of cheap mortgages. Yet this was unusually also accompanied by marked growth in the construction of new houses. Norris and Byrne (2015) argue that in both countries the housing boom / bust cycle was underpinned by a suite of macro-economic policies which aimed to use asset price growth to underpin rising demand and economic growth. This, they assert, was particularly attractive to the Irish and Spanish governments because it enabled them to resolve historical legacies of industrial underdevelopment and regional imbalances by generating construction jobs in underdeveloped areas. As a result, local governments in both Ireland and Spain played a key role in the implementation of this policy.

However, between 2008 and 2010, Ireland's GDP contracted by 15.6%, with Spanish GDP contracting by 5.3% (Norris and Byrne, 2015). In 2009, the Irish banking industry was almost fully nationalised, and by the end of the following year, Ireland was forced to negotiate an emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU, and an associated four-year austerity programme, in order to fund public funding and bank recapitalisation. Indeed, Portugal, Italy, Spain and Greece were each compelled to implement similar austerity reforms, yet today exhibit divergent recovery pathways.

The depth, duration and global reach of the recent economic crisis, together with the severity of its impacts on cities, have raised numerous questions around existing institutional and decision making structures, regulatory arrangements and pre-crisis development models (Knieling and Othengrafen, 2015) – questions which have major implications for planning. In particular, Knieling and Othengrafen (2015) question whether, and to what extent, the crisis can be seen as a catalyst for paradigmatic, institutional and behavioural change in cities – and query the role of urban planning in contributing to necessary or possible transformations.

At the same time, many scholars are sceptical about this potential to induce change including Meegan and colleagues (2014), who argues that while the global economic crisis revealed the unstable nature of the neoliberal growth model, neoliberalisation and financialisation remain deeply embedded in the global economic and political order. This can be seen in the UK for example, where Lovering (2010) suggests that there is a prevailing assumption that the economic crisis has merely 'interrupted' processes of urban development and regeneration and 'business as usual' will return sooner or later. Lovering further argues that the post crisis landscape will see more intense competition to secure a share of the reduced flow of investment, with the familiar 'competitiveness' based arguments given even more insistence.

In addition, Crouch (2011) refers to the 'strange non death' of neoliberalism post crisis, stating 'Whereas the financial crisis concerned banks and their behaviour, resolution of the crisis has been redefined as a need to cut back, once and for all, the welfare state and public spending'. He proposes that pre crisis politics of the 21st century was accentuated rather than weakened by the crisis, a proposition supported by Tulumello (2016), who argues that current austerity-policy responses to the crisis can be understood as a renewed and coherent deployment of neoliberal stances.

New Institutionalism and Understanding Crisis Response

In attempting to understand change, and to specify how and why planning practices are changing (or not), Taylor (2009) proposes that new institutionalism is a useful analytical framework for exploring these questions, which he defines as 'a diverse family of approaches

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to understanding stability, change and causal processes in social and economic systems'. According to Lang (2011), combining new institutionalist positions with those from the resilience debate, means that we can understand resilience as a systematic 'capacity', closely related to an institutional environment which is supportive of the constant advancement and adaptation of the system, favouring experimentation, risk and innovation in responding to external challenges and threats.

First, it is important to define what is meant by 'institutions'. Institutions may be broadly understood as 'the rules and norms that govern human interaction' (Herrfahrdt-Pähle and Pahl-Wostl, 2012) or 'rules, structures and norms that create and enforce cooperative behaviour among individuals and groups' (Davies and Trounstone, 2012). While formal institutions are legally binding norms such as constitutions, laws and policies in the political system (e.g. the governance structure), the economic system (e.g. property rights) and the enforcement system (e.g. the judiciary); informal institutions include cultural norms, such as customs, moral values or traditions (socially shared rules which are enforced outside the formal governance structures). Both formal and informal institutions provide the context for urban planning (Verma, 2007), and can impact the resilience of a system. Although institutions are not unalterable, Davies and Trounstone (2012) asserts, they are difficult to change and embody power; so understanding an institution necessitates an examination of its origin and how (and whether) it has been altered over time.

While some studies on institutional change focus on rules and structures, others focus on norms. However, Hall and Taylor (1996) identify three primary 'schools of thought' in this arena – rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism and historical institutionalism. Rational choice institutionalism presents institutions as limitations on the choices of rational actors. By analysing the incentive structures that institutions create, theorists in this area seek to make 'testable' predictions regarding individual behaviour and aggregate political outcomes. Some rational choice theorists understand institutions as pre-determined constraints that shape preferences, behaviour, action and ultimately outcomes. Other scholars study institutions as creations of the actors themselves; as collectively agreed upon ways of acting (Shepsle, 2006). The rational choice perspective often views institutions as having arisen as solutions to particular collective action problems and as generating and maintaining equilibrium outcomes.

Sociological institutionalism, is often referred to as normative institutionalism, as shared norms are seen as the source of institutional stability. This school of thought focuses on how institutional forms and practices can be culturally explained. It is grounded in culture-oriented organisational theory, in which norms, rituals, models and conventions establish what is appropriate (Meyer, 2000). From this viewpoint, state actors are motivated by status concerns, adopting and maintaining the characteristics of those peers they perceive as being legitimate (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010).

Finally, historical institutionalism views institutions as the 'legacy of concrete historical processes', (Davies and Trounstone, 2012) outlining the development of political institutions over time, described as patterns and routine practices, subject to a logic of path-dependence. The historical institutional approach to policy is, as many have noted, especially useful in explaining broad patterns of continuity and in accounting for persistent variations across different political systems. It is less helpful when we seek to explain discontinuities or search for tools to analyse possibilities for new policy directions (Weir, 2003).

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However, this paper proposes that a fourth institutional approach, referred to as ‘discursive institutionalism’ by Schmidt (2010) is particularly useful in terms of understanding various responses to the crisis, through its use of ideas and discourse to explain political change (and continuity) in institutional contexts. Indeed, as Petry (2013) argues, it is the discursive construction of crises – how we make sense of failures – that ultimately shapes how we respond to it. For instance, in the context of a crisis, urban decision makers (including planners) must diagnose, and impose on others, their notion or understanding of a crisis before collective action to address perceived problems or challenges with existing policies or mechanisms can be taken. Thus the framing of a crisis event is important - in terms of perceived forms of vulnerability and crisis, related to normative perceptions and considerations of desirable and undesirable social and economic conditions (Lang, 2012).

As Schmidt (2012) asserts, the economic crisis has generated a wide range of ideas and discourse that come in many forms – frames, narratives, stories, memories and practices; two types of arguments – cognitive and normative; and three levels of generality – policies, programmes and philosophies. All of these may have different rates and mechanisms of change (or persistence). Differentiating the different levels of ideas and discourse, Schmidt argues, along with the likely rates and mechanisms of change can help us understand in particular where some of the problems are with regard to the negotiation of solutions to the crisis. For example, there are conflicting frames around the causes of the crisis – with Petry (2013) referring, for example, to narratives around the acronym ‘PIIGS’ (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain) and the construction the Eurozone crisis as solely one of public debt, which enabled and justified austerity based solutions. Indeed, Petry further points to media representations of a crisis ‘born of certain states and certain people’, where much of Northern Europe were portrayed as the ‘victims’ of economically irresponsible ‘others’ who brought the crisis upon them. As Sommer (2014) notes, such discourse fuelled opposition to further bail outs and debt cuts – measures which were seen to be ‘wrong incentives’ for ‘irresponsible’ states. Austerity was thus portrayed as the only logical and possible consequence both in politics and the public sphere (Sommer, 2014).

There is an extensive amount of research debating how and why the global financial crisis has evolved since 2007. However, although there have been studies on responses to the crisis, these have typically been conducted at the national or international level. Far less attention has been given to how municipalities and cities have responded to the crisis, or how international crisis discourse impacts planning policy and practice at the local level. However, this paper proposes that an institutionalist research perspective (and discursive institutionalism in particular) could help to illuminate these processes. For example, the Eurozone crisis stems not just from problems with the substantive content of ideas and discourse. It also concerns their discursive interactions, which occur in different spheres – and across different scales (Schmidt, 2012). These interactions, between European and national, and national and city conceptualisations of the crisis (and crisis response), for example, are important to understand in the context of evolutionary resilience, and could be understood as part of the ‘inherent controlling processes’ of complex adaptive systems (ie. elements which constrain or enable institutional change or adaptation).

This is particularly important in light of numerous commentaries alluding to a ‘non death’ of neoliberalism and neoliberal urban policy post crisis (Eraydin, 2013; Tulumello, 2016; Crouch, 2011). Indeed, Lovering (2010) argues that while the global economic crisis exposed the many failures of ‘neoliberal urban planning’, it will not lead to any significant improvement so long as the planning institutions and habits of thought developed before the recession period remain hegemonic. As Oosterlynck (2013) asserts, we must ask whether

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local responses to the crisis serve to reinforce ongoing neoliberal urban restructuring or effectively produce new, post-neoliberal urban governance rationalities.

Indeed, this paper proposes that a deeper understanding of the (context specific) practical realities around the application and implementation of 'urban resilience' policies and mechanisms at local level is required. Such an understanding can be fostered through more detailed examination of, for example, institutional change trajectories (including the politics of institutional change) and the dynamics of path dependence. Acknowledging the politics of institutional change can help to illuminate the varied struggles inherent in attempts to reform or restructure institutions post crisis. The four new institutionalist viewpoints outlined above can thus provide insights in this respect, through capturing social and organisational constraints to institutional evolution.

Concluding Reflections

This paper argues for an evolutionary understanding of resilience when applying the concept to urban planning and decision making processes. In contrast to equilibrist interpretations of resilience, an evolutionary understanding of the concept emphasises the criticality of ongoing institutional and behavioral change. As White and O' Hare (2014) assert, evolutionary perspectives of resilience are perceived as process dominated, in which resilience is considered a broader and more deliberate practice whereby, for example, the adaptive capacity of cities can be augmented with an emphasis on behavioral or institutional change alongside recovery. Such a perspective challenges existing practices and aspires for a new normality – one which is better equipped to avoid and respond to shocks.

As Friedmann (2005: 29) argues, 'planning is in a constant need to reinvent itself as circumstances change'. This perceived need to 'reinvent' in the face of change or crisis aligns with this evolutionary perspective of resilience which purports that the very nature of systems may change over time even without an external disturbance. In considering the 'capacity' of a city – and urban planning - to adapt or respond to change, this paper argues for greater consideration of (institutional) frameworks of decision making – including how ideas (such as resilience) diffuse, are institutionalised, and shape the practices and structures of management organisations. Moreover, this paper proposes that new institutionalism can be useful when applying the (evolutionary) resilience concept within urban planning particularly, as it seeks to highlight dominant norms, perceptions and paradigms which can lead to particular forms of action (or lack thereof) in the face of a crisis (Lang, 2012).

Indeed, the paper highlighted the potential of discursive institutionalism in particular, in providing insights into the construction of local responses to the recent global economic crisis. This, the paper argues, is especially pertinent given increasing commentary around the apparent sustaining nature of neoliberal ideology and discourse within urban governance post crisis. As Eraydin (2013) argue, urban policy; legislation on urban governance and planning systems; and some institutional changes have emerged post crisis, but they have not been supported by a new planning perspective. Further analysis of this proposition is required at individual city level – an exploration which may benefit from the analytical framework proposed in this paper, combining resilience with new institutionalist theory.

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