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# Reproduction of Spatial Planning Roles: Navigating the Multiplicity of Planning

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Planning scholars use complexity perspectives to account for unpredictable societal circumstances in an uncertain and changing world. Questions emerge not only about how planning communication and action can transform but more so about the planner's ability to navigate the complex relational dynamics of planning. To move forward, we use Gilles Deleuze's concept of assemblage thinking to frame spatial planning as a continually changing multiplicity of diverse entities and emerging dynamic relations among them. Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory then helps to promote a perspective on planners as a multiplicity of roles grounded in continuously evolving self-descriptions and self-developed meanings. Planners achieve the organisation (navigation) in an uncertain and complex environment through the reproduction of roles. This paper positions planning as a self-reflexive process that uses a multiplicity of role configurations that ultimately defines and transforms the meaning of planning itself.

**Keywords:** assemblage, Deleuze, Luhmann, roles of planners, social systems, uncertainty.

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### Introduction

Complexity is being increasingly recognised as a condition relevant for various disciplines and scientific domains. In spatial planning, scholars emphasise the importance of complexity as well (de Roo & Hillier, 2012; de Roo et al., 2020a). Acknowledging uncertainty is understood as a fundamental requirement for planning to succeed in developing approaches to cope and to plan with complexity (Rauws, 2017; de Roo et al., 2020b). At the same time, this raises questions about the meaning of planning and the ongoing reproduction of meaning and of the roles which planners enact. We aim to contribute to finding answers to these questions by offering a perspective on planning as a multiplicity of roles that planners recursively define, redefine and take in the attempt to account for complexity. Thinking about planning in terms of continuously reproducing roles allows us to grasp the way planning is actualised (performed) against the background of the complex and uncertain world while planners simultaneously make sense of it. Said differently, planning actions (decisions) are more than attempts to organise space. They continuously redefine (differentiate) the scope of planning actions and the meaning of planning as a discipline.

We contribute to these debates in planning theory by combining elements of assemblage thinking of Gilles Deleuze and the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. The ideas of Deleuze have witnessed a rising interest of planning scholars over the last decade, particularly coming to light in the work of Jean Hillier (Hillier, 2005; 2007; 2008; 2011; Hillier & Cao, 2013), who suggests applying them to planning as a pragmatic way to deal with rising uncertainties, or a rising perception thereof (Balducci et al., 2011). Besides some sporadic attempts to include his ideas into the planning debate (Van Assche & Verschraegen, 2008; Van Assche et al., 2014; Mäntysalo, 2016), Luhmann has remained largely absent from the work of planning scholars. However, we believe that bringing Deleuze's philosophical project and Luhmann's social theory closer together opens a novel direction in planning research, one that shows a greater appreciation for uncertainty and complexity as the essence of spatial planning. It also allows grounding abstract Deleuzian ideas into more tangible theoretical concepts and thus helps to address the problem of their inconsistent interpretation and application to the realm of planning (Purcell, 2013).

For Luhmann and Deleuze, reality consists of a recursive repetition of events, and the notion of difference<sup>1</sup> by which they are reproduced is its basic generative principle (Van Assche et al., 2014). Moreover, they both 'acknowledge that discursive and material elements can co-produce reality' (Duineveld et al., 2017, p. 383). We apply Deleuze's concept of assemblage to frame our thinking about spatial planning as a continually changing and evolving multiplicity of diverse entities and emerging dynamic relations among them. Assemblage thinking prioritises the thoughts of unpredictability, fluidity and becoming over those of stability, durability and being. It disregards the ideas of end-states, essences, and outcomes, in favour of seeing the world through the process, change, and evolution (Hillier, 2007). The idea, however, is not to use Deleuzian concepts stemming from assemblage theory (if there is such) and apply them directly as analytical structures to the phenomena of the social world, but rather to adopt them as an approach to thinking about the reality and processes within it. In this way, we move away from the determinism of conceptualising assemblage as a theory to assemblage thinking – serving only to frame and give direction to thought and reflection. By doing so, assemblage thinking unveils a new perspective on reality and opens potentials for the transformation of planning in a self-reflexive process. We apply Luhmann's stance on social systems and complexity to create a space for thinking that makes it possible to work

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<sup>1</sup> For Luhmann, it is the difference between the system and its environment, and for Deleuze, it is between the virtual and the actual.

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towards Hillier's aim of 'not losing sight of structuring molar, social, cultural, and economic contexts' (Hillier, 2005, p. 292).

Building on these foundations, we promote a perspective on planning as a multiplicity of roles grounded in constantly evolving self-descriptions of planning as a discipline and of self-developed means of organising complexity (Luhmann, 1997; Van Assche & Verschraegen, 2008). Complexity means that a system exceeds the capacity to connect each element with every other one at any moment (Luhmann, 1987). Rather than one conceptualisation of planning, this leads us to a continuous self-reflexive process in which planners take roles and ultimately, even when unconsciously and unintentionally, define the scope (the disciplinary boundary) of planning itself. Reducing or eliminating such complexity deems impossible, so the focus shifts to make it accessible and organise it. At this point, organised complexity refers to building a second image of the existing system, i. e., a representation with a lower number of connections in which relations become relational (Luhmann, 1987). Such an image allows enacting known roles, though the actual system remains unknown, while its image shifts along (co-evolves) with every action taken. In the light of contemporary global social and spatial transformations, planning is continuously redefined by planners adopting a variety of ever-changing roles. Vice versa, who is a planner and what his or her planning role is, co-evolves in this same complex process and changes along with the definition and redefinition of planning boundaries.

The following section presents Niklas Luhmann's radical conceptualisation of uncertainty and the notion of assemblage thinking, inspired by Gilles Deleuze's work. In the third section, we offer a perspective on planning as a social system in continuous becoming that attempts to span between different systems of society. Planners do not have a fixed role in society but represent a multiplicity of potential roles. In the fourth section, we explain how planners performatively produce and reproduce these roles as means of transforming the uncertainties of crossing the boundaries between different systems into more manageable terms. The fifth section builds on this to explicate planning as a complex role configuration, arguing that planners, being infinite multiplicities, can hold various roles outside planning, which allows them to position themselves at the edge of different functionally separated social systems. In conclusion, we posit that planning can only be grasped as a continuously differentiating and evolving social configuration that is enabled by combining Luhmann's and Deleuze's perspectives.

### **Radical (un)certainty, assemblage thinking, and multiplicities in planning**

Notions of uncertainty and complexity are increasingly important to approach and to understand planning. Some scholars go even further to argue for a 'complexity turn' in planning theory which should show a greater appreciation for adaptive planning approaches positioned at the interplay of certainty and uncertainty (Skrimizea et al., 2019). Since planning is about changing the (expected) future (Abbott, 2005), an adaptive approach should thus allow planners to respond to both expected and unexpected changes in the social environment (Rauws, 2017). It involves understanding and managing uncertainties that arise both from the planning environment and the actions of planning itself (Abbott, 2000; 2005). This could mean meandering between controlling uncertainty and creating more certainty (Abbott, 2005), but it can also suggest acknowledging and embracing uncertainty as a critical precondition for effective planning (Rauws, 2017). Paradoxically, planners must push the boundaries of possibility to look beyond the expected future, i. e., to increase perceived uncertainties first (Abbott, 2005). Only by doing so will they make it possible to adopt a variety of roles necessary for an adaptive planning approach to work (Rauws, 2017).

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By bringing Luhmann and Deleuze into the picture, we can shed more light on planning's deep entanglement with uncertainty and complexity. We see German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's 'radical ecological approach to society' (Moeller, 2012, p. 7) as a fruitful way to conceptualise and understand planning. Planning scholars do not take up his work much, though significant parts are available in English translations. Notable exceptions are Mäntysalo (2016) on public-private-people partnerships and trading zones in planning, Van Assche and Verschraegen (2008) with an elaboration on planning ambitions and the limits of intentional steering, as well as Van Assche et al. (2014) focusing on power and contingency in governance and planning. While Luhmann's systems theory denies human agency as such and sees all systems (of which we potentially include planning) as operationally closed and self-referential, this does not deny the existence of a specific reality outside of a given system. On the contrary, Luhmann opens our eyes to the processes in which different roles are taken by actors within different social systems (Mäntysalo, 2016), how systems get in touch with each other, why they can be open for their environment while they are operationally closed and how they can be structurally coupled. Looking at planning, this helps accept the impossibility of intentional steering on the one side and see the potential to have influence in a society without a given centre on the other side (Van Assche & Verschraegen, 2008).

Luhmann's systems theory acknowledges a radical uncertainty: boundaries between systems can never be crossed. Uncertainty is a structural condition that enables the autopoietic reproduction of a system facing unpredictability (Luhmann, 1987). This turns the perspective around on changes from the within and available images of perceived expectations from the environment (which are other systems). What Luhmann notices for individuals in organisations could well be true for planners: 'career suggests a type of individuality in which the individual does not define himself through special, essential characteristics but individualises himself by observing how he is observed' (Luhmann, 2018, p. 86). He connects such second-order observation with self-reflection and other-reflection. This takes us interestingly close to observations about how planners are made based on shared communication using master signifiers (Gunder & Hillier, 2004) and planner's search for certainty and completeness in rationalising an inconceivable outside (Gunder & Hillier, 2009). In terms of Luhmann (1987), only unstructured chaos would be certainly uncertain. In contrast, every evolving structure, in which we include planning, transfers uncertainty into more or less certain expectations that can be dealt with in terms of decisions.

Similarly, we can adopt Deleuze's assemblage thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In this perspective, planning is a process of continuous and constant becoming (individualising, actualising). In other words, it asks us to think of planners beyond their transcendent properties and focus on the process of their evolution, emphasising the emerging relations they enter and the immanent properties that they generate. By doing so, we can recognise their capricious nature and accept that they can evolve in different, often unexpected, directions. Likewise, complexity is about becoming – about a world in flow in which change and transformation are perpetual (de Roo, 2020). For Deleuze, assemblage thinking prioritises exploring the possibility of relations between the (seemingly) unrelated and deliberate about improbable becomings of the past – about that which did not actualise, but still incorporates the potentiality for actualisation. In terms of spatial planning, it asks us to think beyond mere path-dependency and see past events and decisions still able to establish unlikely connections and effect unexpected outcomes. Therefore, the becoming of planning is not about tracing the contours of predetermined over-coded categories (Hillier, 2007), but about mapping performance and potentialities of past and (potential) future becomings.

As such, planning exists as multiplicities and does not hold a constant nature that can be

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described in terms of a policy or an institution. Multiplicity is primarily a philosophical concept. In terms of present research, we understand it as a whole spectrum of variations (roles) that planners take and may take, or a 'multiplicity of possibilities as simultaneously given' (Luhmann, 2018, p. 132). In Deleuze philosophy, multiplicity belongs to the virtual. The virtual entails all concrete forms of multiplicity that can be actualised. The actualisation process necessitates a dissociation of the virtual, a differentiation from which the actual is produced (Deleuze, 1956; 1966). In our case, this happens through the performances (communications and actions) of planning actors by which they continuously differentiate the boundaries of planning. In that way, the question that Deleuze poses to us is not what planning is, but what it does and what it might do (Hillier & Abrahams, 2013). The becoming (individuation) of planning, therefore, entails searching for more than presents itself in the actual, so new assemblages (roles of planners) can emerge and a richer world can unfold. As such, Deleuze's conception of the world is not that of orderly forms and patterns transcending the world of manifest difference, but that of assemblages creatively emerging in new and surprising ways from that difference (Deleuze, 1994; Tampio, 2010). The notion of virtual in assemblage thinking indicates the creativity and potentiality that characterise the individuation (becoming) of planners as something that is always unpredictable and indeterminate (Hillier, 2007). Virtual, therefore, implies the potentiality for the transformation of planning itself if we gain a good understanding of how planning is differentiated from other activities.

### **Planning as a (social) system**

Social systems, taking the perspective of Luhmann, are built up by communication in an ongoing process of defining and redefining the boundaries between system and environment. Each social system uses a different mode of communication and its distinct dichotomous code, such as government and opposition in the political system or true and false in the science system. While Luhmann has been little taken up or criticised for being conservative, others have acknowledged his theory's radical potential. Moeller (2012) observes the radical departure of Luhmann, taking him from philosophy towards theory, and stresses the contribution to conceptualise that theory is simultaneously about society as it is within society. Theory always remains unfinished (Moeller, 2012); it is always in becoming. Theories may hold a crucial functionalist necessity but are not making progress in the sense of reaching a higher or more advanced stage. A theory in this sense can only emerge from within the society and theorise about the same society, and it evolves along as society evolves. It cannot predevelop and induce a specific change but is itself part of the ongoing societal change. That said, Luhmann himself acknowledges the impossibility to perceive another system as such and intentionally move towards it step by step, but he well allows for radical trajectories and system transformations. This further implies that social systems have the potential to engage with themselves on their own terms and influence their own trajectory. In Deleuze's words (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007), 'a relation may change without the terms changing' (p. 55).

While Luhmann does not deny the existence of materiality and biological systems, his theory stresses the impossibility to 'see' these systems on their own, to grasp their own reality, or even to transcend system boundaries. In his view, society is functionally differentiated into operationally closed systems that are reproduced according to a particular type of communication, based on the form of binary coding (Seidl & Schoeneborn, 2010; Seidl & Becker, 2006; Van Assche et al., 2013). Each communication through which a social system is reproduced differentiates itself from its outside environment (other systems) as a distinct social function that codifies all relevant relations according to that function. However, systems can be structurally coupled, and they can influence each other. More precisely, external events (situations where multiple systems get in touch) affect another system's internal mirror image.

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What happens outside of a system is transferred into the system's communication and its code. To use an example, the economic system uses the value of money, payment, or non-payment, as the basic code to build up its system. To understand and to deal with other systems, it needs to transfer them to its own code. If nature gets a monetary value attached to it, the economic system produces its own mirror-image and can deal with it. On the other hand, communications of the legal system, unlike other social systems such as the economy, codify something as legal or illegal. This means that different functional systems relate to and interpret reality through different perspectives grounded in a particular logic of dichotomic distinction (Luhmann, 2004; Seidl & Becker, 2006). If we understand planning as a distinct social function system, all planning communications could potentially carry the code of planned/unplanned. However, this does not mean that everything that planning is about comes down only to that what is planned and that the unplanned takes no part in it. There is a logic inherent to the planning system (if we perceive it as such) by which it refers to all relevant communications with its environment as either being planned or not.

Deleuze speaks of these systemic codes as a form of territorialisation. The territory is developed through processes that structure assemblage towards uniformity by reinforcing common features and reducing the individuality of its elements and connections between them. In other words, they can be said to strengthen the structure of assemblage by orienting it towards a standard function and consolidating the heterogeneity of relations that are constitutive of it (e.g., establishing principles of functioning). In the social world, territorialisation can be used to describe 'the creation of meaning in social space through the forging of coded connections and distinctions' (Brown & Lunt, 2002, p. 17) into some form of uniformity and consistency (Hillier, 2007). On the other hand, what Deleuze describes as deterritorialisation understands the process of destabilising the structure of assemblage by individuating elements and relations that constitute it, i.e., it is about the elements of assemblage taking on autonomy from it. The idea is to think of planning as continually changing and evolving both by structuring processes that strengthen its function and expand the system boundaries and by those that go against it, that want to break away and pull it apart. Indeed, Hillier (2007) writes that the Deleuzoguattarian frame is concerned with processes through which the existing forms of planning transform. We should think of this structural transformation as twofold. On the one hand, planning transforms through recursive processes of codifying (differentiating) what planning, the planner, or the planned is. On the other hand, it is concurrently transformed through processes that resist codification (differentiation), working to unsettle and remove the boundaries between planning as a system and its environment. Both types of processes appear continuously and simultaneously in the becoming of planning – they are intrinsic to its emergence.

Therefore, we see planning as such a system that constantly reproduces itself in diverse forms of communication (or territorialisation, in Deleuzean terms). Here, we include policy documents, strategies, and ultimately, plans. Mäntysalo (2016) uses Luhmann in a straightforward way and points to a significant problem from this perspective. Planning, in essence, tries to span between different systems and their modes of communication. Taking the core of Luhmann, this is an impossible endeavour and almost certainly doomed to fail. Indeed, we cannot comprehensively and unambiguously say what contemporary planning is, but only what we expect it to be. Luhmann, therefore, emphasises the need to acknowledge contingency into planning (Van Assche et al. 2014). However, this does not need to be contradictory in more hands-on thinking. Suppose we perceive planning as a not or not yet fully functionally separated system of society (a system in becoming). In that case, the planner itself is not a role but a configuration of a multiplicity of potential roles.

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Planners, individually or collectively, can take roles and the associated modes of communication and codes of other systems. However, this has limitations. If planners continue to take a specific role related to, e.g., the economic system, they remove the boundary between the planning system and the economic system, and ultimately, planning ceases to exist. The discipline's constant struggle to self-define and self-position emphasises that planning tries to achieve the impossible and is thereby characterised by ongoing role struggles and turns in the wheel of possible or desired roles across spatial and temporal scales.

'Without uncertainty, there would be nothing left to decide; the organisation would come to an end in a state of complete self-determination and would cease to exist for lack of activity.'  
(Niklas Luhmann 2018, p. 159)

Luhmann's theory of social systems poses challenges to planning thought that we see as cornerstones to reconceptualise planning as a continuous process that is like navigating uncharted waters (Lamker, 2019b). For systems that are only structurally coupled, intentional steering gets impossible. Traditional conceptions of public planning administration, but also the internal composition of large university planning schools in Europe, resemble the double challenge. People with different backgrounds are brought together physically (or organisationally), and the communication – or system-building – that occurs between them is then termed planning. However, little certainty is reached about the implied almost magical processes of 'intra-discipline interdisciplinarity'. To date, system/environment differences seem to exist as much between different departments within planning administrations or planning schools as from them individually to other systems. While the positive aim might be to achieve the best possible openness and coupling potentials between rolling wheels of roles, this can lead to the highest level of complexity. For Luhmann, a system is hypercomplex if it seeks to grasp its own complexity and thereby produces new options for reactions (Luhmann, 1987). Planning becomes hypercomplex if it plans not only itself but also its effects in its system. If society is a hypercomplex system (Luhmann, 1997), planning aims to be a steering force in society by mirroring this hyper complexity in its own system.

### Reflexive reproduction of roles in planning

Taking a system's perspective leads to considerations on reflexivity and the potential for uncertainty absorption and reduction as well as the concept of roles to capture communication and action. Being reflexive is to produce additional options for comparison (Luhmann, 1966) and transform uncertainties into more manageable terms (Luhmann, 2018). Mechanisms get reflexive when applied to themselves, for example if we plan planning (Luhmann 1996). Such reflexive mechanisms enhance effectivity. They add to decision-making by increasing the ability to act in complex conditions. In more practical terms, this means sharing responsibility, separating tasks, or bringing different skills and knowledge capacities in interaction (Luhmann 1966). This way, more space for process innovations emerges, and the capacity for acting in complex real-life situations enhances without leaving the system's boundaries (Lamker, 2016). Being reflexive in planning relates to planners themselves and how they produce and reproduce alternative options for comparisons within planning. In other words, how they actualise the multiplicity of the virtual. This takes us further to what Mark Purcell (2013, p. 29) describes as the 'new land' for planning with its rhizomatic multiplicity and properties of becoming, flow, and desire. Luhmann's perspective helps us understand why uncertainty is not a problem, as it is something to be reduced in many accounts of planning, nor is it only something that planning needs to embrace and use. It is more than that: it is the fundamental precondition for any organisation to exist. Therefore, without uncertainty, we would not have planning and we would not be able to recognise it.

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Luhmann borrows the classical concept of uncertainty absorption from March and Simon (March & Simon, 1958) to explain that ‘uncertainty absorption takes place when inferences are drawn from a body of evidence and the inferences, instead of the evidence itself, are then communicated’ (p. 165). This means that decisions (including planning decisions) do not communicate the uncertainties of a decision situation, but only the decision itself – the choice among alternatives, which becomes the point of departure for subsequent decisions (Seidl, 2005). While this dramatically simplifies decision-making complexity, it does not mean that uncertainty is ultimately recued when a decision is made. Since decisions are contingent on subsequent decisions, there is a constant need for planning and planners to produce them. Every decision generates the need for further decisions (Luhmann, 1992; Schoeneborn, 2011). This creates a chain of reductionisms that does organise the complexity of decision-making but at the same time also increases uncertainties that surround it.

We can shed more light on this issue by recalling the Deleuzean concept of virtual. Since a decision is only actualised through subsequent decisions connecting to it, it can be asserted that decisions exist in two forms: actual – connected to other decisions, and virtual – on the way to actualisation (Baecker, 1999; cited in Seidl, 2005). To remind the readers, for the virtual to be actualised, it must be individuated, dissociated. In planning, a range of alternatives has to be reduced to a single choice (a decision). By doing so, something that is not communicated in an actualised decision always remains. Therefore, the actualisation of the virtual is never complete (something always remains to be actualised), which is why a decision continues to be both virtual and actual<sup>2</sup>. Uncertainties that are absorbed by an actualised decision continue to be part of the virtual (awaiting their actualisation) and are in that way preserved in autopoietic systems. Absorbing uncertainty is a decision process that creates uncertainty for future decisions (Luhmann, 2018). For autopoiesis of planning, this indicates that every decision can connect not only to previously actualised decisions, but also to virtual decisions that are not yet actualised, which can lead to new and unexpected directions of planning reproduction.

Such a system’s perspective on reflexivity leads to critical questions about the potential of agency within planning. To move forward, focusing on the actual and potential roles of planners opens useful connections. Luhmann’s social theory does not use a human agency as such and leads us to abolish the idea of a given role for a specific person altogether. In early writing, he criticises structuralist philosophies of society and advocates for a political philosophy based on roles (Luhmann, 1970). Roles are mere actions of someone that can be perceived by many and interchangeable other human beings (Luhmann, 1987). They represent ‘a comprehensive pattern of [expected] behaviours and attitudes, constituting a strategy for coping with a recurrent set of situations’ (Turner, 1990, p. 87). In a functionally differentiated society, human beings do not hold a specific position (like aristocrat and peasant) but take on distinct roles that can be observed and described (Luhmann, 1977). This is both a precondition for a functionally differentiated, complex society that opens the potential to communicate a public opinion about, and especially against, structurally prescribed roles (Luhmann, 1970). A role is built up by communication and action along a boundary that continuously produces and reproduces itself. The term role is open to transcend in two directions of abstract values and concrete persons, but is neither of them (Luhmann, 1977). Production and reproduction of roles allow for temporary stabilisations, though uncertainty remains an irreducible structural condition. As Luhmann names it, any structure’s function is to reproduce a system in autopoietic terms especially considering uncertainty (Luhmann, 1987). Luhmann’s systems theory sees reflections on the abstract level as crucial to gain

<sup>2</sup> Which is opposite to what Seidl (2005) suggests, i.e., that decisions cease to be virtual once communicated in ensuing decisions.



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options for comparisons (Luhmann, 1996). A structured procedure, such as those established in planning, can produce both critique and alternative within an own complex system (Luhmann, 1983).

Following the Deleuzian lines of emergence, a role appears as a performative function of planners and planning. That is, instead of assigning them pre-defined roles founded on the conformance with a set of a priori determined competencies, planners become designated with (they claim) distinct roles by performing their actual capacities. Surely, this conceptualisation entails the dangers of reductionism (the issue of signifier vs. signified, i.e., narrowing down a performance to a role), but this happens to a much lesser extent since a planning role is defined by the performative 'what it does' rather than by the determinist 'what it should do'. In that way, the complexity of decision-making may be decreased, which results from the understanding that performance is collectively recognised as a specific function (a role) within a given assemblage, but uncertainties nonetheless remain.

### **Taking planning forward: planning as a complex role configuration**

Luhmann's and Deleuze's ideas enable taking a perspective on planning as a multiplicity of roles grounded in constantly evolving self-descriptions and self-developed meanings. Furthermore, operational closure first allows for a diversity of roles to be taken outside of the respective system (Luhmann, 2018). Anyone having planning roles within planning can have various other roles outside of planning in which she or he does not hold the same mastery (Luhmann, 2018). Even more, 'the concept of person presupposes that every person can play many different roles' (Luhmann, 2018, p. 68). Luhmann does not deny the existence of persons as such, but he denies the existence of a unitary and autonomous 'thing' like a person. In any empirical prospect, it remains impossible to combine psychic and social operations (Luhmann, 2018). On the contrary, and concerning career paths, he even asserts that a person 'individualises himself by observing how he is observed' (Luhmann 2018, p. 76). Such a second-order observation regularly draws and changes boundaries between the person and its environment (other persons).

Roles are factual and temporal interpretations (Luhmann, 2018). This enables conceptualisations of planning that use distributed and networked leadership by enacting different roles even in highly regulated public administrations (Lamker, 2019a). Such a perspective on (potential) roles of planners inspired by Niklas Luhmann is better equipped to cover contemporary perceived realities than previous clear-cut conceptions about planning as means to achieve pre-defined ends. Jean Hillier observed that Deleuze takes us forward to using theory and practice together because of their non-linear and not straightforward relation (Hillier & Abrahams, 2013). In the same line, Luhmann develops a theory of society, the most ambitious goal possible for a sociologist, but comes closer to actual perceptions about the messy and non-linear day to day planning practices that aim to provide certainty in an inherently unpredictable world (Gunder & Hillier, 2009). To be even more explicit: 'Spatial planning [...] requires theories that seek to directly engage with the world, as it is, not what is ought to be' (Gunder & Hillier, 2009, p. 193).

This opens our perspective to understand why we continue to talk about planners over decades but tend to imply rather different people and focus on rather different roles. Decades of planning scholars have tried to narrow down definitions of what 'a planner' is or what '(spatial) planning' distinguishes from other activities. This reminds of Alexander's (2016) statement that there is no planning as such, but only planning practices. However, instead of separating planning into a set of divergent practices, we see it as a complex configuration of

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roles at the edge of different functionally separated systems. What Luhmann describes for social systems does also hold true within planning. Planning faces systematic and irresolvable problems of intentional societal steering with a fluid definition of planning itself and planners' roles in society (Van Assche & Verschraegen, 2008).

We must note here that we use a definition of planning that is broad and narrow at the same time. It is broad in the sense that we see planning as a social activity happening within society. Therefore, it can be done through a multiplicity of specific planning roles. We see an ongoing differentiation process to form a planning system with its own codes but have not yet arrived there. In minimal terms, what we recognise as planning practice fulfils the societal function of setting topics, thereby absorbing uncertainty, and providing a structure to deal with it (Luhmann, 1970). Such a view situates planning within society and would not separate it as a distinct system. Studies using Luhmann to look at planning practice – like Wenk (2012) for Germany – see planning as something in a societal discourse that works in a diversity of forms and under versatile codes (Wenk, 2012). This would be impossible for Luhmann in a pure understanding. It may, however, be that planning is either still evolving as one or that different planning systems have evolved using the same term 'planning' and therefore causing some of today's confusion about the potentials of planning to tackle global challenges. Suppose planning's goal is to coordinate and steer other systems. In that case, success could at best be distinguished between influencing and not influencing (in a determined direction, also understood as planned/unplanned in a hands-on way), with many empirical questions left about causality and about recognising a direction as such. Perceiving planning as a complex configuration of roles solves this tension insofar as it allows to open up Luhmann's theory for use within planning theory as they help analyse how planning constantly aims to find overlaps to role configurations in other systems – and how and where tensions arise.

### Conclusion

The evolution of planning represents a self-reflexive improvisation process heralded by intuition and contingency and framed with uncertainty, multiplicity, and complexity. Success in planning should be seen much more in relation to self-steering results within planning than in light of the planning environment (cf. Van Assche & Verschraegen, 2008). In other words, planning changes through a varied search for meaning and understanding of planning. Developing options for comparison needs inclusive processes, open communication, a strong process to connect them, and transparent and, therefore, contestable decisions. Luhmann (1970, p. 23) has early noticed that participation in building public opinions is nothing like straightforward and, in practice, more 'participation by management' and involvement of those who know how to valorise their information, constellations, connections, and their votes is needed. A problem that has, until today, puzzled a generation of communicative planning theorists. Luhmann stayed brutally analytical and would emphasise the limits of planning as intentional steering and the flawed image of pre-thinking a better future and then realising it. On the other side, his work holds radical ideas that open pathways to challenge otherwise non-questioned structures (Moeller, 2012). Even more, planning is most plausible considering ecological crises, and society should not be regarded as unchangeable (Luhmann, 1997). That said, Luhmann does not advocate against planning but sees it as one of many social processes that influence spatial development (Lamker, 2016).

Mäntysalo (2016) provides a convincing switch for planners that first sounds harder to implement, but is a turn that allows supporting agreement on planning steps: 'It is thus not just a question of 'should I agree?', but 'am I entitled, in this role, to agree?' (Mäntysalo, 2016, p. 155). It is not a question of being a planner or not, as we see roles as factual and temporal

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interpretations (Luhmann, 2018). This change opens the potential to align roles with other systems and points to the diverse nature of planning. Planning can neither be grasped as its own functionally differentiated system nor in a specific role. On the contrary, an evolving and changing configuration of roles within planning allows for influencing other systems in the constant transformation along the boundary between what is deemed planning and what is not recognised as such. Planning, as well as utopia, are escapes to a not yet actualised and uncertain future with the implicit hope for alignment in society as the future becomes present (Luhmann, 1997). This way, planning realises a future in today's communication by blurring boundaries between what is past, present, and future – and ultimately what might become and 'what might happen, if...' (Hillier, 2011, p. 515).

Finally, Niklas Luhmann's theory provides us with a message of hope. We can never stop planning. Otherwise, planning as an organised social system of communication and action would cease to exist for the impossibility of distinguishing between the system and its environment. As long as we continue delineating planning from other activities, will the planning be a lively practice. At the same time, Deleuze's assemblage thinking offers us a novel and valuable perspective to reflect on this. It tells us to 'revamp flows and dare to think bringing differences together, emphasising tensions and creativities... connectivities, relationalities, and their foldings and unfoldings' (Hillier, 2007, p. 1). Only by doing so can we recognise the complex uncertainty of emerging relational dynamics of spatial planning and think of novel roles for planners in the process (Hillier, 2007). Assemblage thinking, therefore, refers to a type of thinking 'which allows disparate points of view to coexist; which has a concern for indeterminate essences rather than contoured, ordered ones; for dynamic or emergent properties rather than fixed ones; and for allowing intuition and uncertainty, multiplicity, and complexity rather than systematic certainties' (Hillier, 2005, p. 291). This may not sound simple for those looking for idealised end-states to be imagined, developed, and implemented (in a linear manner). The challenge is how to bring together a dynamic perspective on planning which evolves with the complex context and its surrounding uncertainty, with planning practice that is perceived as rigid and slowly evolving. Still, it gives motivation to all those who engage in the complex and uncertain endeavour of planning. Above all, it is valuable to notice that the final words of Hillier's article (2005, p. 293) still provide a hopeful message for the future of planning: 'Work in Progress'.

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