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For a dialectic of planning pasts and futures: Theoretical courses and recourses in conversation with Patsy Healey

Simone Tulumello
Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universdade de Lisboa, Portugal
simone.tulumello@ics.ulisboa.pt

> New generation scholars live in a very different conceptual world than the generations who began to build 'planning theory' back in the mid-twentieth century [...]. It is a world of multiple empirical referents from across the globe, and of multiple intellectual strands offering new inspirations. Perhaps it would be helpful now and again re-connect these new intellectual possibilities to the history of ideas in our field, wide and open as it is. We would surely find some recurrent concepts, such as 'system', perhaps used in different ways and with different realities in mind, or that new concepts, such as 'resilience', are similar to older ideas about change and transformation. And we would find that many of our current concerns have a long history, including the meaning and uses of the term 'planning'. Maybe the 'new' is never so new as we think, yet the 'old' is never so persistent as we fear (Tulumello & Healey, 2016, p. 7).

In search of inspiration for this essay, I was leafing through the folder of my hard disk dedicated to the preparation of *plaNext*'s volume 3[1] and my email correspondence with Patsy Healey, the guest editor of that volume. Toward the end of one of the working files of the introductory article—a draft prepared by me and edited by Patsy—she added a comment: 'I thought we needed a concluding paragraph—these are my thoughts—maybe you have better ideas!' With some slight reformulation, that paragraph indeed became the concluding one of that editorial—a perfect conclusion to the long path that had brought to *plaNext*'s volume 3. And a perfect opening for this contribution of mine to *plaNext*'s 10-year celebration.

The path that brought to *plaNext* volume 3 began sometime in 2014, when Francesco Lo Piccolo told me that Jean Hillier and Jonathan Metzger were preparing a Festschrift for Patsy Healey's 75th birthday, with the idea of presenting it in Palermo. It would be a nice occasion to bring the AESOP Young Academics (YA) Network conference to Southern Italy, he added. At that time, the yearly conference would be organised directly by the Coordination Team (CT), of which I was a member; and the rest of the CT embraced the idea with enthusiasm. In March 2015, thus, the 9th YA conference 'Differences and Connections: Beyond Universal

Please cite as: Tulumello, S. (2025). For a dialectic of planning pasts and futures: Theoretical courses and recourses in conversation with Patsy Healey. *plaNext – Next Generation Planning*, 15, 35–39. https://doi.org/10.24306/plnxt/103

[1] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/3

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Theories in Planning, Urban Studies, and Heritage Studies' took place at the University of Palermo. Keynote speakers were, besides Patsy, Jean Hillier, Cornelius Holtorf, Laura Saija and Leonie Sandercock, while John Friedmann led a workshop with Laura Saija on planning research/practice/politics. Having coordinated the conference, I was the member of *plaNext*'s editorial board (which also corresponded with the CT at that time) tasked with leading the preparation of a volume; and we decided to invite Patsy Healey to be the guest editor. After some doubts regarding the commitment, she accepted saying, in an email exchange, 'it will help to keep me in academic mode!'—Patsy was at that time retired and was focusing mostly on advocacy and activism.

Working with Patsy was an incredible experience, not only because, as a post-doc researcher at the very beginning of my career, the opportunity to collaborate with such a 'planning hero' was thrilling; but above all because rarely have I met someone whose brilliance was coupled with such generosity and humility—the formulation of that final paragraph and of the comment that came with it perfectly encapsulates this. But the reason for quoting that paragraph at the beginning of this essay is not just about remembering those years and, with them, Patsy, roughly one year after her death.

That paragraph also perfectly expressed some issues, troubles, and questions that are pretty relevant for a journal like *plaNext* turning 10, that is, for the type of discussion that, I believe, is worth having when thinking of the consolidation of a planning journal by and for early career planners.

The call for the YA conference in Palermo was inspired by what was then a relatively recent attention, in planning theory and practice, on issues of geographical connections and difference—see, e.g., a *Planning Theory* special issue on insurgent planning (Roy, 2009), another in *International Planning Studies* on international comparative planning (Nadin, 2012), or Patsy Healey's (2012) reflections on the transnational flow of planning ideas and practices. While the increasingly tight dialogue between critical urban studies and planning theory—for which the likes of Ananya Roy and Oren Yiftachel had been pivotal—had pushed the latter to (belatedly) engage with matters of (post-)colonialism, and critiques of modernity and universalism, our goal was that of spotting, and addressing, some blind spots 'at the border between analyses of micro-practices of policy-making and critiques of urban trends' (Caruso et al., 2016, p. 220).

Indeed, the papers presented at the conference engaged with: the challenges of generalisation with which (modernist) planning is often fraught; communicative divides that emerge when planning is not attentive to local specificities; the spaces and places that remained at the margins of (planning) theory; the persistent Western-centrism of much planning and heritage policy; and the potentialities for planning education in bridging such divides (see, for the conference report, Caruso et al., 2016). Good news, almost 10 years after, is the fact that those issues, which were quite innovative and marginal by then, have by now become, in a sense, 'mainstream' to planning theory, research, and education.

But while space, in its manifold dimensions of relevance for territorial change and planning policy (variegation, differences, uneven development, travels, flows), has become an obvious point of discussion and contention in planning scholarship, it seems to me that much less is the case with time, which is the main reason for having used that paragraph to open this essay.

In reading some of the articles from volume 3 of *plaNext*, like Meike Levin-Keitel's (2016) discussion of 'systemic constellations' and Aoife Doyle's (2016) review of 'resilience' conversations in planning, Patsy Healey felt the urge to turn the eye to the past to consider

the histories of 'new' concepts that often taste like old wine in new bottles—for another paradigmatic example, see how the smart city has its genealogies in the long history of urban techno-solutionism (e.g. Angelo & Vormann, 2018). The articles by Ignacio Castillo Ulloa (2016) and Cora Fontana (2016), for their part, contributed to the problematisation, in the field of planning research, of ideas about linear progress. Ulloa's Lacanian reflections on the recursive presence of modernist ideas and Fontana's reconstruction of the penetration of neoliberal ideas into slum upgrading suggest that the timeline of planning theory can hardly be described as a progressive advancement toward knowledge. Rather, the history of planning is made of intersecting waves of dominant and alternative ideas, whose hegemony is very much linked with, though not completely determined by, the broader political economy. And those waves of theories tend to overlap in complex ways: for instance, the decline of the hegemony of modernist planning in times of neoliberalisation was followed by the dominance of entrepreneurial urbanism and financialised planning policy, but also by the rise of any number of pressures for opening up the planning field to diverse, insurgent voices (see again Roy, 2009).

Making sense of this, and other, disjunctions calls for a different understanding of time and, for that matter, capitalism; one attuned to recurrencies and repetitions as well as to novelty and conjuncture—Giovanni Arrighi's (2010[1994]) understanding of cycles of capitalist development is a milestone of such a critical attunement. This means opening ourselves to a dialectical lens capable of making sense of history as the result of struggles that never completely close the political, and indeed theoretical, field, rather always opening new fields of contention. Alvaro Buitrago-Sevilla's (2022) history of 'planning against the commons', that is, of the role of planning in commodifying communal resources and practices, is a powerful example of this capacity. By anticipating the conventional 'birth' of (European) planning to the process of British enclosures, Buitrago-Sevilla's detailed history shows how the appropriation of existing commons never actually stopped the capacity for commoning, rather always pushing new communal practices—which would, sooner or later, be appropriated in return. With a different focus, on assetisation and financialisation, the recent book by Maria Kaika and Luca Ruggiero (2024) on class struggle and land in Milan is another example of a renewed attention of spatial scholarship to a less linear, and more dialectical, understanding of time in urban development.

But while critical planning and geographic scholarship have begun to address the past dialectically, much less is the case vis-à-vis the future. For all its courses and recourses, the relation of planning with the future has always been pretty complicated, if not fraught. For a discipline founded on the normative goal of shaping spatial development in the future, and for long time centred on the practice of modelling future needs and designing how to provide for those needs, planning has been recursively accused of having lost sight of that very future: this was, for instance, the core reason that brought Sam Cole (2001) to call for a collaboration of planners and futures scholars; and it was again at the core of a call for a very recent special issue of *Journal of Planning Literature* edited by Tomas Sanchez and Mai Nguyen (2025).

And yet, I would like to suggest here that the problem is less that planning has lost sight of the future, and more how it (still) looks at the future. Despite several decades of problematisation of ideas about linear time and progress in the social sciences and humanities, planning practice and theory are still dominated by an understanding of future as a space for progressive development rather than as an open field for dialectical struggle: 'what if […] planners were asked to reimagine our long-term future[?],' asks the aforementioned call for papers; 'planning has the power to reshape urban environments,' states the theme for AESOP's 2025 congress.

This is a question with which Andrea Pavoni, Lavínia Pereira and I (2025) have recently engaged in a contribution to the special issue of the *Journal of Planning Literature*:

> Planning has always and still is centred on ideas about a progress from a gone past to a non-yet future, its present is supposedly able to produce, within a precise 'ontology of action' that rests on an uncontested relation between planning and acting, making, and doing (idem, p. 50).

Planning theory has, during the last few decades, indeed discussed and problematised issues like public good, expert knowledge or technical expertise, in so doing becoming increasingly attentive to the politics of spatial development—the debates about communicative versus agonistic approaches or the arguments for insurgent planning immediately come to mind. However, very little has been said and done regarding planning's 'ontology of action'. Even the shifts from land use zoning to strategic planning, or from comprehensive to targeted intervention, while changing the scale of at which planning operates, have not really challenged or changed the very idea that planning is about deciding (collectively) on a (desirable) future and working to achieve it—an idea deeply centred on Enlightenment conceptions of future and progress, once again.

If time, rather than linear, is dialectic, then planning should be focused less on 'planning the future' and more on seeking the possible futures that are already in the present and giving them space and possibility. This is, fundamentally, what the project of abolition—with which planning has only incipiently articulated (e.g. Bates, 2018)—is about: rather than offering a precise utopian framework, letting a new system emerge from the dismantling of the previous, oppressive one (cf. Gilmore, 2023). Or, with Harney and Moten (2013, pp. 74–75):

> planning in the undercommons is not an activity, not fishing or dancing or teaching or loving, but the ceaseless experiment with the futurial presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible.

How to reimagine planning as not an activity, but an experiment? As Patsy Healey hinted in that paragraph above, this would probably be easier if we just stopped for a moment and considered the past not as something we are going away from, that is, separated from us and open to analytical capture; but, rather, as a set of experiences and possibilities that are with us in a myriad of different ways, including, importantly, in the form of all those futures that never came to be—say, the futures that were being built in past abolitionist struggles and are an inspiration for present ones. The past and future, in this sense, are always already nested within the present—something that is pretty obvious to many non-Western cosmogonies, with which planning has only rarely engaged. Less than re-envisioning the future, then, it is here and now that we can wrestle with futurity: what we need is a dialectics of, rather than plans for, the future. A journal like *plaNext* turning 10 is the perfect place for this, I believe—but, and I am pretty sure Patsy would have agreed with me, it is not for me to say to new generations how they should engage with this very endeavour.

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