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What collaborative planning practices lack and the design cycle can offer

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What collaborative planning practices lack and the design cycle can offer: Back to the drawing table

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Abstract

This article critically discusses the premises underpinning the collaborative ideal, which has become central to Western spatial planning practices. With their emphasis on a structure which focuses on the problem, actors, deliberation, agreement and acceptability, collaborative processes produce conservative choices. However, this approach might not effectively address the big challenges confronting our metropolitan areas and regions today. Instead, the essence of choosing how to respond in the face of long-term challenges is a thorough analysis of the situation (beyond just the actors' wishes), generation of a wide array of possible actions (more creative than mere compromises), and arriving at decisions which demonstrate vision and leadership. This resembles the design cycle, which we claim enriches the collaborative model. We propose principles for a more creative governance which suggest emphasizing the exploitation of an area's full potential instead of solving its specific problems.

Keywords

collaborative planning, communicative turn, critical, design cycle, place potential

Introduction

As an ever-more assertive world population congregates into ever denser and larger metropolitan areas, traditional sectoral land use management needs to be replaced by more creative methods for combining claims on space. Only then can we respond to the highly complex issues of equality, liveability, energy transition, climate change and sustainability.

Good planning mobilizes coalitions to deliver rich and smart ways to adapt the built environment we live in. In the pursuit of making such urban places better, planners make decisions about the 'what' and the 'how' questions: *what* is it we want to achieve and

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how can we move together towards that improved outcome. Historically, the ‘what’ has been vital to planning, but as the collaborative and communicative sides of planning have been receiving increased attention today, the ‘how’ – the process – has been over-emphasized at the expense of debate on the best ‘what’ – planning outcomes. There are several explanations for why the discussion about the ‘what’, which once was the core of planning as well as urban design, has withered, as we will discuss in the next section. The collaborative ideal has since firmly shaped planning practice in Western democracies.

Collaboration is indispensable for producing effective action in a system where power is fragmented. However, we have put the pursuit of inclusive, empowering, equitable, informed interactions around the proverbial meeting table (resulting in firm agreement) before advancing insight into *what* is on that table. What should be on the table is an ongoing exploration of a place’s potential in an attempt to achieve high-quality outcomes.

A ‘place’ in this article is any physically delineated part of our built environment, which can be of any scale (street, square, district, town, waterfront, shoreline, metropolitan area), including how it operates, and the values it has for people. A place is a social construct pertaining to a part of physical reality, forged by individuals or groups in everyday life. But for well-informed strategic planning decisions, the place may need to be redefined deliberately and professionally.

We argue that the place and its present and possible future quality tend to be overshadowed by processes that centre around people and what they want. In their response to the criticism of collaborative planning, Innes and Booher (2015) acknowledge collaborative planning’s emphasis on process, deeming it inevitable as attention for ‘desired outcomes would undermine the very commitment’ to good processes (p. 206), and stress that the process and its outcome are deeply integral to one another in a Giddensian way: the properties of the process define the outcomes that drive that process.

This article first discusses several key tendencies which dominate the debate in developed countries on process-focused planning, and which reveal a particular perspective on good planning. Central to planning practices and the academic debate are problem-induced coalitions which yield solutions (in that order), the quality of which materializes in their agreement. This, in turn, depends on how well the solution fits their preferences at that time. Good outcomes in this paradigm are a well-supported agreement on what *the coalition considers* the best way to tackle their problems.

Complementing existing attempts to point out the limitations of collaborative planning, the second half of this article introduces concepts from the study of design as inspiration for good processes which produce substantively rich outcomes. Design is an exploration of possibilities – not politically by seeking consensus, but most of all materially, by understanding a place and the futures it holds. It gives centre stage to the dialogue with the object. This is in the vein of Forester’s (1988: 123–132) juxtaposing of problem-solving and sense-making, the latter being richer and explorative rather than reductionist and ignorant of the contested nature of problem definitions. However, if we want high-performing outcomes which address complex metropolitan challenges, the sense-making process needs to focus on potential rather than on problems.

We conclude our article by arguing that today’s spatial challenges call for planning practices which strive for creative governance, where the process design is geared to

generating collaboration inspired by a rich exploration of an area's possibilities. This takes coalitions which are wider than the assumed problem definition suggests, to generate an abundance of perspectives and a richer repertoire of place improvement strategies to choose from. Agreement across relevant groups is a hallmark of good planning, but it must be done by maximizing the exploitation of a place's potential.

What the collaborative ideal was meant to fix

What explains the popularity of collaborative planning in Western countries? The communicative shift found fertile soil and has changed both our theoretical thinking and planning practices profoundly. A product of the 1980s, the collaborative ideal of actors working through deliberative discussion to achieve joint agreement has inspired many communities and policymakers across the globe. Its rise is as much due to the context from which it emerged, as it is from the quality of the idea per se. Collaborative planning is borne of the confluent disappointment in the ideals of modernism, the right-to-the-city movement, neoliberalism and post-positivism.

Social problems in the rationally planned parts of cities led to the belief that the rational approach itself had caused these problems and was to be avoided. The communities of New Towns and large-scale high-rise districts struggled to find balance, and the overrepresentation of specific subgroups led to persistent social accumulation effects. The imperfections of their drawing-table logic became clear and the high expectations before their construction may have aggravated the criticism levelled against these neighbourhoods. However, though the old parts of a city were cherished and improved if they became socially problematic, drawing-table districts received less understanding and care. It became common to refer to modernist neighbourhoods in strictly pejorative terms.

The problems in the *products* of the technical rational approach created distrust about the value of the various aspects of the technical rational *approach* itself: about the idea of working with an objective physical reality with its law-like mechanisms, and about central leadership achieving societal goals systematically.

This growing distrust coincided with a rejection of the idea that cities belong to capitalists and the otherwise powerful. Residents and other stakeholders felt left behind in many fast-growing cities. They had become powerless pawns in a grander scheme where profits on real estate and political esteem mattered more than the wellbeing of people. The right-to-the-city movement demanded influence for residents in urban change processes. Residents wanted to regain control over their cities.

The general disappointment in the products of modernism and the dominance of capital and politics caused communities to reject utopias as efforts to create ideal cities: utopias became suspicious. But every debate needs a belief in some golden standard. The communicative turn offered exactly this. Ever since the 1970s, more democratic processes have been promoted, not least those embodied by Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizens' participation, which visually suggests that co-creation by citizens is the ultimate ideal. This change made planners strive for the perfect *process* instead of the perfect *place*. Modernism seemed to have revealed that despite all our knowledge and ambitions, there is unfortunately no such thing as a perfect place.

This process-utopia aligned well with neoliberalism and the consequent reduction of government responsibility, which enables a truly free market (process again) between individuals, prioritizing wealth optimization over all other goals. Technical rationality conveniently fell into disrespect, as it could otherwise have challenged the quality of the outcomes of such free individual economic interaction. Communicative rationality and collaborative practices form a basic *amorality* towards their outcomes *a priori*, as any rationality must be constructed within the collaborative coalition; rationality is not a given, it is the outcome of a social process (Cooke, 1994). Accordingly, no actor can claim to possess a rationality which is better than that of other actors. In communicative rationality, the logic of consumer markets soon became part of the game.

In science, and the social sciences in particular, the concepts of objective and systematically tested truths also lost ground. Post-positivism suggested multiple truths can be found and no single claim can be superior. As a consequence, discussions on good city form perished in a hostile environment ‘claustrophobic relativism’ (Talen and Ellis, 2002: 38).

The relativism and pragmatism that stem from the trends listed above have become common in planning practice. They have left planning without a way to claim validity for assertions about the best kind of ‘what’ that planning should strive for. Elegantly put by Couclelis (2005: 1358): ‘Planning *for* the people is obviously no longer acceptable and planning *with* the people proved to be too complex, so planning *by* the people has become the rallying cry’. Talen and Ellis (2002: 38) argue that ‘Process theories leave planners without guidance when making many critical decisions in their daily work. [. . .] The planning profession appears weak, uncertain, and divided when it cannot articulate the key elements of a good city’.

What people did widely agree with was the wide societal sentiment on the best ‘how’, as citizens demanded and received greater equality of decision-making. The UK debate (in which writings of Patsy Healey were particularly influential) emphasized a need for broad involvement of institutional agency in the governance of land use. The US debate (notably Judith Innes) stressed the involvement of the community. Both assume that the actions agreed upon at meeting tables are by definition good outcomes.

The dismantling of government authority over rationally anticipating the future, and the deep disagreement within society on where to go next, makes us as a society less effective in preparing our cities and regions for some future challenges. Promising images of the energy transition, climate adaptation and sustainable cities are not found at meeting tables.

Western societies agree that the challenges our countries face are severe – but they also agree that great stories and governmental leadership are better replaced by individual power and market mechanisms. This confluence of views is ironic and risky.

The following sections expose the basic assumptions underpinning the collaborative ideal and show an alternative for each.

Assumptions about collaboratively making places better

Let us point out the assumptions underlying the collaborative ideal with the aim of casting some doubt on the conceptual model behind it. Important prior critiques have lamented its amorality towards its outcomes (mentioned by Innes and Booher, 2018), its

inability genuinely to resolve conflict (Hillier, 2003), the lip service it paid to neoliberalism (Purcell, 2009; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Roy, 2015) or predefined policies in general (Legacy, 2017; Silver et al., 2010), and the mediocrity of its outcomes. Is it possible entirely to avoid power asymmetries and have what Innes and Booher (2010: 35–39) describe as an ‘authentic dialogue’?

We propose to shift attention away from the context of the table, the actors at the table and how they should or do interact once they are at the table, and concentrate on what is *the stake on that table*. In other words, *what* in essence should a collaborative process seek to achieve? The stake is assumed to be mutual agreement among the affected actors on how to respond to a given problem. Whether the meeting table is surrounded by the community psychologically co-owning the place under debate (in the US tradition) or the institutions seeing that place as one of the many they have a responsibility for (the UK tradition), the collaborative process design assumes three things:

A priori problem-coalition clarity

The many studies conducted by Judith Innes (1995, 1996, 1998, 2004), often teaming up with David Booher, resulted from a deep, genuine drive to discover how to avoid land use conflict and promote fruitful collaboration instead. Her work shows many cases and formulates many recommendations on how collaboration could ideally produce action across coalitions of actors. These ideas have become highly influential and effective in land use conflict prevention and resolution.

Collaborative planning is proposed in a number of passages in their studies as beginning by getting *all the relevant participants* around the table. This is at the root of any planning process: who participates? The group is assumed to be a complete reflection of the problem at hand (Innes and Booher, 2010: 6). Every actor who has a stake in the problem should be represented. The problem is clear and it *a priori* defines who should be in the collaborative process and who should not.

This is a problematic assumption. In practice, the alleged problem is rarely undisputed or unbiased – problems are a projection of a particular group on the world-as-it-is. What is worse, a deceptively logical coalition may be unable to find a solution, just a poor compromise. Problem-complete coalitions are not always the most effective ones. Although good process design might encourage them out of their preoccupations and habits of circular thinking, they still bring a predefined cluster of perspectives to the table. Problems are typically not solved within the paradigms which caused them in the first place.

Instead, by bringing unconventional participants into the process, new energy and new outlooks can be found, as shown by Nemeth and Goncalo (2011). High-quality outcomes require coalitions which are dynamic during the deliberation stage, with participants joining in or backing out, depending on the content of the debate. We want to point out a Giddensian duality here. Any coalition of participants will define the problem in a certain way, but at the start of a process the problem will have already defined the coalition. Accordingly, a certain preconceived vision of what is wrong limits the creativity in the process, because it immediately becomes confined within the problem-frames of the invited set of participants. A problem-complete coalition is bound to confirm the status quo and talk around in circles.

The *a priori* problem definition and consequent coalition composition is never neutral or innocent, because it drives the search for solutions in certain directions. The composition of a truly creative coalition is likely to be dynamic.

Problem precedes solution

Any given coalition will only be able to perceive particular problems and arrive at particular solutions which fit in its frame of rationality, but it will be ignorant or resentful of radically different perspectives. That is the consequence of a communicatively forged rationality. Therefore, the coalition's composition defines the level of creativity available for finding solutions.

This raises some questions. Is it correct, then, to assume that the best beginning to a process is necessarily a 'problem'? Should the solution to that problem be the process's end-product? Do perceived problems even exist separately from proposed ways to fix them?

It is tempting to assume that problem comes before solution. In other words, the evaluation of the recent, the past and the present results in a problem definition. Once the problem has been defined, the debate can commence. Or can it? Is our ambition for the future really derived from what we see in the present?

Our expectations for the future are what we identify as the present and as being problematic, according to Hajer (2017), referring to the concept of 'fictional expectations' by Beckert (2016). The future defines the present and even the past because our expectations make particular information visible and give it value. Expected environmental problems, climate change and food scarcity steer our gaze towards erosion, pollution and salination. If a given scenario cannot be imagined, the phenomenon would not be noticed, let alone be problematized. It is the imagination of what might be which builds realities and it builds the communities which have a stake in these realities.

An anticipated future may be a different way to begin a coalition. Regardless of whether this is a disaster scenario or a utopia to strive for, images of the future is what causes people to collaborate. The problem definition is a derivative of that. Future defines present. If presented persuasively, a fictional expectation, being uncertain by definition, can spark actors to seek each other out and collaborate, to see if they can make their place better.

Clarity on what options are acceptable for coalition members

Then there is the assumption that the participants in a collaborative process enter it with a certain interest that they will defend and use as a reference when discussing proposals in the process. Knowing what you want is an important premise of neoliberalism and collaborative planning practices tend to assume that clarity and stability are preferred. A preference for clarity implies that participants in a planning process have a clear yardstick against which to measure whether a proposed option is acceptable or not. For example, a nature conservation organization knows exactly how much damage to a wildlife refuge is acceptable. Moreover, it is assumed that the yardsticks will remain more-or-less the same as the participants in a process will retain their original yardsticks.

In reality, a yardstick is absent from discussion because opinions are ambiguous and responsive to what happens in the debate. Planning a vacation with a group of friends will reveal this exactly: the individuals' initial preferences will immediately start to change when they review the options available. Sager (1997) presents this as preference ordering. For any given situation, a set of options on how best to act will be ordered from the most preferred to ever less acceptable options. The orderings differ between people and organizations. When orderings conflict, whatever option is chosen will disappoint part of the participants.

In a process of synchronizing orderings, participants will have to let go of previous positions, be open to unexpected ways forward and commit to options which are not ideal but are the best nonetheless, given the debate within the coalition.

Frames, feelings and factors for acceptability change constantly due to reconsiderations during the process. Sometimes this is done formally and explicitly by the participants, but more often this is simply a shift in the group-think which just happens. People's opinions are mistakenly thought of as unambiguous and constant, and apart from being ambiguous and dynamic, the mental yardsticks against which participants compare proposed options are conservative by default. Behavioural economists have shown that consumers are very bad at predicting the well-being increase they will obtain from choosing to make a certain purchase (for instance, see Loewenstein and Schkade, 1999).

In classic collaborative planning, this will result in the participants holding strongly conservative positions, unless the conventional is so strongly rejected that the new is idealized as the perfect solution. Behavioural economists show that the satisfaction derived from a new car or a higher salary, although anticipated with great expectations because the previous state bored us so much, appears to wane very quickly (for instance, see Parducci, 1995). This is the anticipation effect. We get used to a newly acquired situation very quickly and start seeing the downsides within days.

Collaborative planning practices draw from an idealized image of how people rank options. They are assumed to be able to review what will work out well for them rationally. In reality, they are caught in the glare of what they perceive as the problem and make imperfect inferences on how to respond.

Agreement is the highest goal

Logically following from the process-centric utopia that collaborative planning strives for, the highest achievable outcome is also defined in process terms, that is, agreement. When agreement within the coalition is achieved, the coalition is successful. Innes and Booher (2010: 28) say that they were strongly influenced by Fisher and Ury's (1983 [1981]) *Getting to Yes*. Agreement is vital in a world of interdependency and dispersed power, where without broad agreement, no joint effort can be effective.

But when coalition members do get to *Yes*, what exactly do they achieve? Within the limits of their collective, communicatively forged problem rationality and the process design they were applying (including the choice for a particular coalition composition), they found a mutually agreeable plan for action. A plan they all *assumed* would turn out to be *the best conceivable* way to respond to the challenge at hand. This is an amoral approach to the quality of a planning process: the fact that all participants agreed makes

the plan a good plan. However, an ethically well-designed process does not necessarily generate good outcomes. The behavioural–psychological work of Nemeth (1995, 2018; Nemeth and Goncalo, 2011; Nemeth et al., 2001) has shown that a straining for consensus makes poor decisions because it leads to group-think (see the work of Janis, 1972), whereas dissent widens scope, enriches the number of options taken into account and the quality of the considerations used to make a decision.

In sum, whereas modernism held strong beliefs about the project management and concrete outcomes defining good planning, the current dominance of collaborative planning theories and practices present us with no moral norm to shape the outcome, replacing it with a moral norm to shape the process. To quote Dobrucka (2016: 159), ‘Contemporary planning ideology is founded on the belief that correct processes [*how*] are supposed to provide results [*what*] which are generally acceptable’. The thus legitimized reluctance to define what quality standards the future physical outcome should meet is problematic. Indeed, the ‘hesitant attitude adopted by many modern planners [. . .] can be as destructive as the top-down interventions that are regarded with such suspicion’ (Dobrucka, 2016: 153).

Creativity and persuasion can go a long way

Clearly, collaborative planning has effectively enabled coordinated action to complex land use conflicts in a great number of cases. Complex situations, however, may require creative leaps and strong leadership. The most loved urban landmarks are not the product of problem-driven coalitions. Rotterdam is one of them and illustrative of why the premises of collaborative planning explained above may not result in the best places. It is an example where strong leadership and a persistent campaign generated highly appreciated places.

Today, Rotterdam is heralded as an architecturally bold city, which rose from its post-war and post-industrial ashes with a spectacular skyline created by the world’s finest architects. It has a form and a reputation that few could imagine back in the 1980s. It was a time when the city centre was just about to be rediscovered. Dutch spatial policy had favoured suburban and New Town developments for a long time, assuming that the city centre would be unable to accommodate high population densities and the accompanying traffic flows; but that had been to the detriment of the city centres. The newly appointed head of the Rotterdam planning department saw the potential of the abandoned warehouse docks across the Meuse River at its South bank. The docks were not connected to the city and were unattractive, but Riek Bakker foresaw the reappraisal of the city centre and proposed to use the docks for a radical plan: spectacular high-rises overlooking the old town and providing it with a dramatic backdrop. A landmark bridge was to connect the old city centre with the new towers.

The ambition was bold and many thought it was unfeasible, un-Rotterdam, un-Dutch even to think in such heights and densities. But Riek Bakker continued to convince people. Riek Bakker and Teun Koolhaas presented their vision in 1984 with help of a photomontage showing big white blocks and a brand-new bridge on the old docks. It took Riek Bakker’s persistent communication and persuasion (Sulsters, 1993) in particular to win

the room over. Some complained at the time that she just would not let go and ignored their objections. However, if she had rather concentrated on options which were easily agreed upon, Rotterdam's fate might have turned out very differently.

Certainly, the towers and the Erasmus bridge, which are now thought to be so characteristic of Rotterdam, eventually needed collaboration among a wide coalition of stakeholders. Many also eventually agreed with the plan – otherwise they would not have participated. However, the coalition nor the problem was the start. Neither did the plan emerge from a collaborative debate where agreement was the holy grail. Ms Bakker's utopia was the energy that kept the process going. *Her utopia defined the coalition*. The solution preceded the problem – it exposed the problem. The utopia did not stem from a problem-based coalition. The coalition formed around the idea.

Similarly, New York City's high-line elevated freight rail road is still there because of the efforts of Robert Hammond and Joshua David (David and Hammond, 2011). The Golden Gate Bridge would not be here without the incessant campaigning of Joseph Strauss (Cassady, 1986). The revolutions brought about by Steve Jobs (Isaacson, 2011) and Elon Musk (Vance, 2015) are as radical and against the current. They campaigned for proposals which were difficult to accept because their impact was not yet comprehensible, imaginable or acceptable. They went against the current but there is wide appreciation for the outcomes of their efforts now.

Yes, strong leadership and radical proposals are easily criticized, but they have had many successes as well. Likewise, good cities may take an extensive struggle to create. The question is who and what takes part in the struggle. Collaborative planning has been criticized of being conservative: problems are defined and solved within the dominant belief system which caused, or through neglect allowed, the problems to happen in the first place.

Figure 1 visualizes the mechanism of challenging the dominant system that produces the familiar built environments and trends (e.g. sprawling cities, car-oriented infrastructure or fossil fuel-based electricity production) and is highly stable (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Luhmann, 2006; Morgan, 1986), because it is self-referential: the system only sees possibilities which reproduce its flaws (Van Assche and Verschraegen, 2008; Van Herzele and Aarts, 2013). Put in the terms of Coleman et al. (2007), a dominant system of beliefs constitutes an 'attractor' which reinforces itself and may not transform unless compelling new attractors are successfully advocated for (Van der Stoep, 2014). This is not easy. The framing exercised by the dominant system makes people in and around that system deaf and blind to alternative views – unless that alternative attractor is presented in a way that is convincing, understandable, credible and believable to people in the system, and at the same time sufficiently transformative to make a change happen (Benford and Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993; Hajer, 1995; Hanke et al., 2002).

The dominant system itself is constituted around a conglomerate of stories (Hajer, 1995; Throgmorton, 1996; Yanow, 2000), which are reinforced by the system itself. 'Story' sounds innocent enough but it is an 'all-pervasive, yet largely unrecognized force in planning practice' (Sandercock, 2003: 12). Stories steer our gaze, comment, criticize, explain and promote (Van Dijk, 2011).

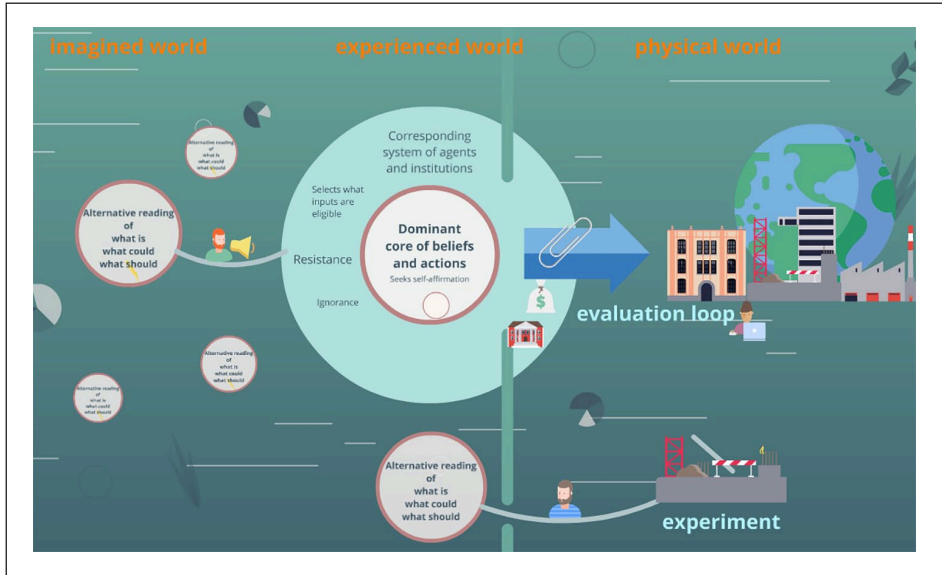


Figure 1. Visualization of the dominance of certain routine ways of treating spaces and how to challenge them.
Source: author.

Some stories are so compelling that they will be adopted because they appeal to a system’s logic and insecurities. But more often than not, it takes persuasion to attract attention, to make the dominant system look less logical and let the new ideas take root. And only when the alternative is presented in a story that connects new perspectives with what people find familiar within a system, will change happen. The new idea needs to be told (and proverbially sold) well (Benford and Snow, 2000; Myers and Kitsuse, 2000; Shipley and Michela, 2006) in order to generate resonance. Advocates or policy entrepreneurs are the agents who can make this happen.

Collaborative planning invites certain stories to the table (story-gathering, according to Sandercock, 2003: 15) and if the actors around the table are the *existing* problem-holders, the stories they will forge as catalysts for change (Dunstan et al., 1994; Sandercock, 2003: 18) may miss a whole array of good ideas.

For planners, the question is not how to reach agreement, but how to turn planning processes into the locus which challenges the dominant stories by devising alternative ones – better ones. What process designs can effectively generate credible and appealing alternative stories on people, places and how to treat them? Can the responsiveness of the dominant system to new views be increased? What are effective strategies for policy entrepreneurs to connect to and then challenge the dominant system?

Imagined spaces gravitate towards a joint dominant core of beliefs on how best to carry out spatial planning, in turn producing certain investments and regulations in physical space. The dominant core is challenged by alternative options, but the system of agents and institutions built around the core filters what is allowed to enter the system.

Alternative options will need experiments or effective policy entrepreneurs to be able to challenge the dominant system.

We have to enrich planning practices through the rediscovery of the transformative role of zooming out in time and space, inviting unexpected actors to the table and using powerful images and leadership as ‘gifts’ (Boyer and Hopkins, 2018) or ‘signals’ (Hopkins and Knaap, 2018) to inspire the debate. This would increase the chance of reaching positive tipping points when windows of opportunity open (Kingdon, 2003). Devisch et al. (2018) in their Introduction show that participation in planning means more legitimacy in decisions, as marginalized needs and groups become visible and audible and new knowledge is developed and assembled – that enriches decision-making. Forester et al. (2013) discuss how diverse expertise and participation (‘designers and activists’), both being crucial, can work together in a mutually enriching way. In the Albuquerque Project they describe, stakeholders elected representatives who worked with experts on analysis of the situation and drafting of proposals how to act. Similarly, the chapters in Devisch et al. (2018) show how close designers and citizens have worked, learned and reflected, and how important the relationships between participatory initiatives (whether labelled as *charettes*, Living Labs or self-organized initiatives) and governments are.

The challenges of the coming decades call for a rehabilitation of the visionary, yet planners have lost their inspirational ambition, only to become spectators (Devisch, 2008), trend watchers and observers (Portugali, 2000). Concepts from design theory can help.

Rediscovering the design cycle

The vocabulary used in planning, which has eclipsed the substance of the matter as a consequence of the process-centred trend, concerns the quality of places. Although the US collaborative planning research reveals more strongly place-based community practices than the UK studies, both run the risk of a tunnel view on process and people at the expense of places and their rich exploration.

Very relevant concepts are found in the discipline of design. Sadly, these two worlds fail to merge. Talen and Ellis (2002: 38) state that ‘[t]heories on good city form [. . .] have been relegated to the level of urban design [and] failed to become integrated as an essential component of mainstream planning theory alongside [. . .] other theories for planning’. Gunder (2011), Banerjee (2011), Anselin et al. (2011) and Steiner (2011) in their commentary papers in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, and a similar debate on what role urban design should best adopt and who it should serve, developed in the *Journal of Urban Design* (Childs, 2010; Graffikin et al., 2010; Madanipour, 2006; Schmidt and Németh, 2010) the year before, present planning and design as *separate disciplines*. However true, these texts thus do not help us understand the need for the relevance of design concepts for planning practice.

Any form of planning is a search for mutually agreed upon ways to make places better. It is meant to govern the public good of the liveability of city and landscape. That public good needs a custodian to prevent the tragedy of the commons from happening. Without structures to coordinate collective action, space will be poorly used. Because the physical elements which make up our cities and landscapes function interdependently and

Table 1. The key steps in any decision-making process, and the variety in words used to refer to them.

	Creative confidence (Kelley and Kelley, 2017)	School design thinking for teachers website	EQTribe website	Interaction Design Foundation website
Why take action	Inspiration	Discovery	Understand	Understand
What is here	Synthesis	Interpretation	Explore	Observe
What could be	Ideation	Ideation	Ideate	Ideate, test
What best to do	Implementation	Evolution	Materialize	Storytelling

Source: author.

Indivisibly, we need to coordinate our Irrevocable investments, despite Imperfect information about the future (Hopkins' Four I's: Hopkins, 2001, 2007).

This requires agreement to make places better. The process matters very much, but process is still only a means to making a better place. So *what* does a coalition want to see become reality? And conversely, what is the content which induced the process and is evolving in it?

In the more object-oriented realm of Design Thinking, the generation of a design process's purpose is conceptualized in the design cycle. The design cycle has been structured in various ways and although the phases are labelled differently across various authors, the cycle is in essence as shown in Table 1.

These phases have strong parallels with how planning processes are conceptualized. Van Buuren (2009) discerns image-formation, will-formation and agreement-formation as central to the reaching consensus. Hillier (2011) derives the phases of tracing (what is), mapping (what could be) and *agencement* (what should be) from Deleuze and Guattari (1987). The first two notions resonate with concepts found throughout Foucault's work: genealogy (what is) and *dispositifs* (what could be). Hillier also shows that Hames (2007) defines planning as an act of 'strategic navigation', structured similarly by 'sensing', 'making sense', 'designing' and 'enacting'. Couclelis, in her 2005 analysis of the use of land use models for planners, also discerns applications aiming at 'what may be' (addressed in scenarios), 'what could be' (addressed by storytellers) and 'what should be' (addressed in the act of visioning) – just as Börjeson et al. (2005) discerns predictive, explorative and normative scenarios.

The design cycle appears to reflect the very basis of intentional action, present in many guises. The phases are also found in the organization sciences in the highly influential Four I-model which describes how managers find new directions: intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing (Crossan et al., 1999). Under the label of problem-based learning (PBL), a strongly parallel phasing is also widely promoted among teachers of medical students in particular (Schmidt et al., 2011), but more generically for university teaching as well (Edens, 2000).

A myriad of disciplines which study decision-making and problem-solving use essentially the same cycle, albeit with different words. Accordingly, any process of getting from a desire to a decision contains the following elements, put as neutrally as possible:

- A *dissatisfaction* of what is, either because of awareness of an appealing alternative, or because the place frustrates its current use (collaborative planning practices tend to start at a later stage, omitting the power of the first);
- An *understanding* of the mechanisms and interrelations between the various elements of a place and its context, to be enriched by deliberate analyses;
- The *generation* of a repertoire of options, showing how a place could be improved, often urging a redefinition of the source of the *dissatisfaction*;
- A *convergence* spiralling towards a preferred option, which gains dominance, is granted the status of ‘plan’ and because actors choose to behave according to the dominant option, it becomes reality.

The last two elements show the importance of the image of the future to guiding change. This image is the fuel which drives processes onward and the glue which holds coalitions together. Contrary to design practices, where the divergence phase is appreciated and ways are sought to make the repertoire as large as possible, divergence in planning practices is typically avoided because it can be an unsettling, confusing and complicating process. Collaboration benefits from reducing options, identifying common ground and converging interests as quickly as possible.

Does the collaborative planning ideal benefit the built environment and the communities it hosts from the richness emerging from a well-conducted design cycle? When it promotes problem-centred coalitions and when it represents a converge-to-agreement tendency, it wastes good optional courses of action – alternative to the ones discussed or chosen. The alternatives remain unused, undiscussed, unknown and therefore do not have the chance to materialize. A poor divergence phase impoverishes the discussion, degenerates the quality of our decisions and eventually the places we live in. We must create time and space for more stories to be explored.

With the design cycle and storytelling being so fundamental to deliberate human action in uncertain and complex situations, and by extension spatial planning in particular, it would make sense to pay more attention to the design cycle to overcome the shortcomings of planning approaches, such as the collaborative one.

Making potentiality matter again

The truth about what will work is found in the creative cycle of people in *dialogue with the object*. Neither of the two should be omitted. Agreement without understanding the place will lead us astray, but models of places without social interpretation are equally meaningless. Meetings and models need to contribute to an exploration of what could be.

Technical rationality believes the truth about what will work is out there, in scientific models and predictions. Communicative rationality assumes that the truth of what will work is inside us individually, in our organizations and coalitions, expressed and merged in a process of deliberation. A ‘third way’ has yet to be found, although an outcome focus on ‘adaptive’, ‘resilient’ (Eraydin, 2013) or ‘sustainable’ approaches in a broad sense seems to be unavoidable. Nevertheless, what would the new approach even be if these values are key?

It is the ideation phase which matters in our argument. Ideation is the generation of as many ideas about ‘what could be’ as possible, without being too quickly invested in only one or a few alternatives. Ideation lets go of the previous restrictions which limited creativity and the improvement of places, spurring unprecedented new perspectives. It is often described as a divergence phase: the flare of options widens as more ideas are put on the table. Brainstorm techniques help expand the circle of possibilities wider and wider.

We must creatively enrich collaborative practices with a focus on content exploration. We have to generate more options and accept that there are ways other than agreement, to tell a good plan from a poor one.

Design thinking holds a number of fundamentally different perspectives that we think are highly relevant for planning processes. Inspired by those, we propose three ways to reinstate the importance of the ‘what’, and therefore the place, in the planning process.

Reject problem-fixation: let place performance take centre stage

When the problem is the centre and beginning of a process, participants assemble when things break down and they will tend to jump to solutions. The sooner a fix is found, the more successful the coalition was, one might say. The haste to solve a problem was already pointed out by Forester (1988) in his chapter on design. He demonstrates that the problem-solving approach presupposes clarity about the problem, whereas the situation and the various ways to approach that situation are in fact extremely ambiguous – hence Forester’s plea for a sense-making approach. Sense-making is the interrogation of what exactly we are dealing with. This is much wider than just analysing the problem. Sense-making circles the problem, zooms out in both time and space, and takes the time to make sure we know what the situation is.

In addition to Forester’s point, we would indeed advocate not thinking about ‘fixing a problem’, but rather applying ‘sense-making’ and then finding potential ways to *improve how a place performs*. The ‘what could be’ phase should be about two things: (1) reviewing the place holistically in all its aspects, not just the problem-relevant ones and (2) thinking of a place as acting to deliver societal services.

As for the former, the problem-solving frame selects only the problem-relevant data and blocks out other information. But in finding inspiring ways forward, initially peripheral information may be of vital importance. A more encompassing place review will enrich the assessment of the place and reveal potentialities which can be capitalized on while improving the initial problem. This leads to more integral and rewarding options for action.

The second point introduces a more neutral alternative to ‘spatial quality’. The word quality suggests normative and personal opinions which are difficult to define or discuss. ‘Performance’ is more utilitarian. It connects to the services approach adopted in ecology and landscape research (well explained by Costanza et al., 1997, and in Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2015 [2005]), where the benefits people derive from ecosystems are pointed out. These benefits are taken for granted, but on closer inspection are a service delivered by the ecosystem. By extension, a place can be acknowledged as performing, in that it similarly serves people – it enables people to meet, to get home safely, to start a business, but it also allows natural resources to regenerate and ecological values to thrive. Without the properties inherent in a place, this would be possible.

A place makes things possible. A place performs in such a way that it enables us to develop certain activities.

Thinking in terms of ‘improving place performance’ thus begs for a wide, continuous and more factual review than quarrelling stakeholders typically are interested in. A more encompassing perspective exposes richer ways to transform a place. ‘Problem’ and ‘solution’ are deceptive, value-laden and simplifying words, which limit creativity. ‘Improving place performance’ and ‘transforming a place’ evoke a wider and more objective perspective. ‘Improvement’ does not have the ring of definite and complete eradication of something unequivocally negative that ‘solution’ has. ‘Improvement’ is always possible, has no end and potentially covers all aspects.

The place performance approach starts with the place and what the place is capable of becoming. It is respectful, appreciative and caring. It considers all aspects, whether in the past, the present or the future. It is non-partisan, just striving for improvement – bringing an area’s potential into the debate, attracting a group of participants attracted by this potential, rather than the problem. It is a kind of thinking in the vein of the ‘affordances’ introduced by Gibson (1979). Lynch (1984) presented five dimensions of, what he also explicitly called ‘performance’: vitality, sense, fit, access and control. He also presented two ‘meta-criteria’ efficiency and justice. Today, we can choose other performance indicators, like the Twelve Quality Criteria the Gehl Institute provides, but they all are a reasoning that credits places from allowing people to live their lives.

Reject solution-fixation: thorough exploration of potentiality-space

Each place is used and structured in a certain way. For example, a neighbourhood park may be equipped with ponds, lawns and shrubbery for aesthetic purposes, and benches, a fountain and a kiosk to make it a suitable place to meet. In a path-dependent way, the present state of the place is accompanied by a wealth of additional potentialities: a cloud of potential adaptations which could be implemented which will increase the place’s performance. One of the park’s lawns could be expanded to allow for a baseball diamond and the plantings could be made more indigenous so that they support a population of rare insects. But this potential is not boundless. Depending on the local climate, winter use and tropical foliage may lie outside the realm of possibility.

It is this realm of possible adaptations to a place which has been referred to as ‘solution-space’ (by Rittel and Webber, 1973, already, and later in Dorst and Cross, 2001; Lawson, 1979; Maher and Poon, 1996), parallel to the mathematical concept which refers to a multidimensional space containing admissible solutions to a given optimization problem. However, given the desire to avoid a problem-solution funnel, we could rather term the realm of viable possible ways to improve a place the ‘potentiality space’. It contains the alternative ways a place may be designed and function.

Problem-focused planning, regardless of how communicative or collaborative, turns a blind eye to the more broadly defined potential of a place. A problem-oriented coalition may arrive at an agreement after a solution-oriented process, but choose a suboptimally performing proposal nonetheless. When the potentiality of a place is more thoroughly explored, unexpected futures and actors can be discovered.

‘Potentiality space’ makes us aware that the range of options is never straightforward. Potential options do not present themselves. They need to be taken from the unexplored



Figure 2. The 'Omgevingswijzer' place scan that has been used throughout the Netherlands in infrastructure planning processes.

Source: www.omgevingswijzer.org.

parts of potentiality space, brought into the coalition's consciousness and added to the flare of options under consideration. That is what designing is, and that is what good decision-making processes need.

There are tools to help broaden the scope. The Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management uses a place-scan (Figure 2) to ensure a complete review of a place and how to improve its performance. It is a radar diagram with 12 segments. Four segments point to people-related aspects (land use, spatial quality, social relevance and well-being), four to profit-related aspects (accessibility, investments, business opportunities and immigration) and four to planet-related aspects (water, soil, energy and ecology). Each potential way to improve a place's performance is scored on all 12 aspects to get a broad indication of the proposal's performance. Tools like these help avoiding tunnel vision.

The designerly way is to explore a situation and its potentialities thoroughly, without chasing a solution (choosing how to act) yet. Both the problem and solution co-evolve continuously in an iterative and tentative manner. As Maher and Poon (1996) and Dorst and Cross (2001) clearly show, a draft solution will shed new light on the situation, and thus on any of its aspects deemed to be problematic, leading to new ideas about how to act and so on. Luck (2012) shows that it is an extensive learning process for all those who find themselves involved in a process. This attitude helps a discussion escape the tunnel vision that is so easily contracted in a collaborative process.

Reject problem-complete coalitions: find content-complete coalitions

The collaborative ideal wants a coalition to be complete, but because it gives the problem centre stage, it suggests that the coalition foremost has to reflect the *problem* at hand properly. 'All' the relevant actors must participate. This suggests a completeness, but one which is incompletely defined. There is no completeness from the potentiality-space

perspective, because that particular problem-relevant composition – like any composition – limits a coalition's vision of the full richness of ways a place can be improved. A problem-complete coalition's perspective is limited to the direct problem and builds a group which will fail to perceive radically different ways to approach the situation.

Alternatively, coalitions will want to draw on unexpected views so as to reveal the wider reality which could hold unexpected keys for improving places. A complete coalition is then one which covers all the potentialities a place possesses. However, because that is the outcome of the process instead of the start, the right coalition is impossible to define a priori. The aforementioned 12-segment place-scan could also be applied to assess a coalition. For example, are ecology advocates participating, even though the place seems to be just about accessibility problems? Once at the table, these seemingly irrelevant or peripheral actors may perceive ways to add ecological value to a proposal, possibly with positive spin-off effects for social performance or business opportunities as well.

Conclusion: features of creative governance

Collaborative planning practices have been influential and for good reasons. They satisfied the legitimate call for more involvement of people in processes felt to be dominated by those in formal power or by the owners of capital. The approach was implemented into legislation and procedures, and it brought a wider variety of actors around the table in a more equal manner than previously. Opinions and interests became more valuable than models and calculations. The *what is* and the *what should be* became defined in a more egalitarian manner.

The wickedness of spatial problems defies working from one objective 'correct' rationality – collaborative practices were an acknowledgement of this. But that does not mean that every result is equally valuable. There still are good and mediocre ways to invest in places. Rationalities that boost the potential performance of the places we live our lives in need, and deserve, to be searched and found. The richness of the result depends on who participates in that quest and how they mutually learn while conducting the search. Actors related to a seemingly apparent problem do not always arrive at optimal outcomes when agreement among them is not the only indicator of 'good' decisions. They will not do so, if they remain confined in the bubble of their original narrative rationalities and do not explore the rich potentialities of a place – the *what could be*.

An elaborate explorative divergence phase is vital for making sure that opportunities are not missed. The matter on the table needs to be defined and addressed more creatively, to avoid lock-in and self-referential affirmation of problematic situations. This takes more than just giving the steering wheel back to citizens. It is so much more than the ladder, the citizen, the event. The question remains, is participation in designing truly new outlooks on the future best done by the owners of the assumed problem?

If we want to solve the challenges of our ever-more densely populated world (food, liveability, energy, water management and climate change) we have to be much more creative than before. Beyond the overcorrected opposite of technical rationality which undervalues skill and leadership, imagination is a far more mobilizing force than analysis, and agreement is not worth much when it limits our imagination to poor proposals.

Making high-performing places should become our moral ambition, in a context of collaborative processes.

Place performance, potentiality space and content-complete coalitions are ways to enrich our view and avoid mediocre solutions. They are ways to allow ourselves to chase utopias again.

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