

BOOK REVIEW

The Unconscious Dimensions of Planning

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Uncovering the Unconscious Dimensions of Planning: Using Culture as a Tool to Analyse Spatial Planning Practices
Frank Othengrafen
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Frank Othengrafen continues, in this book, the exploration of the unconscious dimensions of planning that he and Joerg Knieling, among others, have conducted in recent years, and whose results have appeared in some of his past publications (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009; Silva, 2011). For that reason, readers familiar with his previous publications will find here the same methodological approach and even some chapters derived partially from earlier publications, as is the case of chapters 3, 4, and 9. However, even with this overlap, the book is a positive addition to the planning literature. It is organized into three main parts or sections: conceptual framework; empirical results; theoretical model.

In the first part, Frank Othengrafen discusses the conceptual framework for analyzing cultures, based, to some extent, in his previous work and in the work he co-edited with Joerg Knieling. In chapter 2 (Spatial planning and development in Europe: the importance of cultural contexts) Othengrafen describes the importance of cultural contexts for spatial planning in Europe, and in chapter 3 (Contemporary spatial planning models and the absence of culture) reviews the contemporary planning models and theories and their explanations of planning practices, focused as they are on the formal structures of planning cultures, being thus unable to explain effectively the taken-for-granted thoughts, beliefs and routines behind formal planning practices. In chapter 4 (Culture as an organizing category: how to analyze culture and its impact on planning systematically?) Frank Othengrafen expands his conceptual discussion, offers an overview of how culture has been treated in other scientific fields, and shows the different functions of culture (e.g., empirical category; organizing category; practical tool) and how all of them can be applied to the field of planning practice. In the last chapter

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of this first part (chapter 5 - The interpretative framework: a general outline for the analysis of planning practices) Othengrafen presents the theoretical framework for the analysis of planning practices.

The second part compiles the empirical results of his analysis of the planning practices in Hamburg (chapter 6 – Planning culture in Hamburg, Germany: Between thoroughness, uncertainty avoidance and commercial pragmatism) and in Helsinki (chapter 7 – Planning cultures in Helsinki, Finland: local autonomy, romantic rural views and social justice); the research conducted in both cities is focused on two similar planning experiences (e.g., an urban redevelopment project and a strategic plan for future urban development) and the results are summarized in the last chapter of this second part of the book.

This more empirical section of the book is followed, in the third part, by the attempt to generalize these empirical findings and to deduce a theoretical model for the systematic analysis of planning cultures in other contexts. The result is the proposal of a culturised planning model with three main dimensions or analytical levels – planning artifacts, planning environment and societal environment –, which is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the structures, processes and results of planning practices. In this three layer model, the most visible analytical level – planning artifacts – is constituted by the visible planning products, structures and processes (e.g., nature of distinctive visible urban structures; nature of planning systems; nature of planning products). The level ‘planning environment’ includes shared assumptions, values and cognitive frames that are taken-for-granted by members of the planning profession (e.g., nature of spatial planning’s core mission; nature of policy frames and policy making; nature of planning). The level ‘societal environment’ includes underlying and unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings which affect planning (e.g., nature of

time; nature of Nature; nature of welfare state; nature of society). The author provides three tables with detailed specifications for each of these cultural dimensions, and the respective research questions, which will certainly prove helpful for those interested to conduct empirical research based on this theoretical framework.

In sum, Frank Othengrafen uses the concept of culture and the culturised planning model (e.g., the different values, perceptions, traditions, attitudes and habits that affect planning practice) as a tool for the interpretation of spatial planning practices. The use of this theoretical framework in the comparison of these two different planning contexts is a good illustration of how to apply the proposed analytical framework in concrete empirical situations. As such, Frank Othengrafen offers an important contribution to our understanding of planning structures, planning systems, planning styles and planning practices, in different cultural contexts. Although primarily focused on conventional spatial planning practices in Europe, I do think that this theoretical framework, and the empirical examples provided in the book, will prove helpful for all those faced with the need to interpret current practices within the e-Planning paradigm, in Europe and in other parts of the world as well.

Nonetheless, as Frank Othengrafen recognizes at the end of the book, this theoretical model should be seen no more than a framework of reference, one that offers categories to be used by different researchers, and one that do not cover all dimensions that make up a culture, any culture. For that reason, as he proposes and I agree with him, anyone interested to apply this theoretical framework in the analysis of planning practices, or e-planning for that matter, should be aware that more research has to be conducted to identify further meanings, emotions, or habits, and aware of the fact that he or she will make use of this theoretical framework based on his/her own personal and cultural background.

REFERENCES

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