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Planning culture



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Studying planning culture contributes to a deeper understanding of planning practice by identifying the ways planners and planning institutions think and act on the basis of typical (societal) orientations and the associated value systems.

1 Introduction

The concept of planning culture has played a prominent role in discourses in planning science for several years (cf. Knieling/Othengrafen 2009; Othengrafen/Reimer 2013; Sanyal 2005). It often describes a change or transformation in planning practice or refers to the emergence of ‘new’ or ‘good’ planning cultures, including in the context of increasingly participatory or communicative planning (▷ Cooperative planning). Such examples tend, however, to focus on a general change in the understanding of planning in principle rather than offer an analytical exploration of planning practice. By way of distinction, the term ‘planning culture’ is also used as a concept to identify and understand the way planners and planning institutions tend to think and act. In particular, it involves identifying and understanding the regional traditions, norms, value systems, attitudes, and thought patterns which underpin and influence local or regional planning processes (▷ *Planning*).

2 Planning culture: a definition

In the recent past, research into planning culture has focused on the theoretical origin of the concept and the use of planning culture as an analytical concept in order to be able to empirically study planning processes and planning practice (often comparatively) (cf. Othengrafen 2012; Reimer 2012). Such approaches to planning culture are based on a meaning- and knowledge-based understanding of culture (Reckwitz 2000), according to which culture offers a society, organisation or group a typical orientation system consisting of specific symbols and artefacts (e.g. material forms of expression) as well as social beliefs, thought patterns, sensibilities, values, and meanings, which in turn manifest themselves in systems of symbols or artefacts and define the perception, thinking, and actions of its members (Thomas 2003). This can also be seen in the ambit of spatial planning – by introducing the notion of culture, spatial planning is seen as a cultural practice whose framework of action is shaped by local contexts and cultural structures and discourses (Levin-Keitel/Sondermann 2015; Othengrafen/Reimer 2013).

The exploration of planning culture as a concept dates back to the 1960s. Interestingly, cultural aspects were initially used to encapsulate the criticism of the rational planning paradigm that was emerging at the time. The notion of culture became powerful and appealing at that time, not least because it addressed those aspects of planning activity that a purely rational approach consistently ignored. The concept included, according to Friedmann (1967), subjective ascriptions of value and ways of perceiving things, ideological attitudes, intuitions, and traditions, which represented the main (legitimising) source for planners in decision-making processes and, as a whole, had a significant influence on planning activities. The notion was not directly addressed again until Bolan (1969) did so two years later. He used the term to describe the immediate institutional environment of municipal decision-making processes, thereby looking not least at policy-making cultures that represented a counterbalance to and impacted rationalism in planning. The notion of culture was adopted here to outline the elusive political influences on the process of rational decision-making (Reimer 2016).

Despite these early attempts to explore the notion of planning culture, it was not picked up again until the early 1990s. According to Booth (1993), planning should be understood as a culturally-determined process in which local planning practices are developed. These can be characterised by the specific interactions of political decision-makers as well as the meanings and expectations that policymakers and planners attach to the instruments used. According to this line of argument, planning practices can never be fully defined by their legal, organisational and administrative framework, but rather represent a sort of corridor of action which is perceived and interpreted by stakeholders (Nadin 2012; Reimer/Blotevogel 2012). The use of planning instruments, the implementation of planning strategies, the change in the principles of planning law and the production of the built environment are ultimately an expression of habituated (planning) cultures (Booth 2009), which only become tangible when executed in practical terms.

Simply put, planning culture therefore describes the prevailing patterns by which planners think and act, and the activities and routines of planning institutions at a certain point in time and at a certain place. Planning cultures include informal standards and values (habits, traditions, customs, perceptions, etc.) (> *Informal planning*) as well as formal rules and procedures (legal framework, case law, etc.), which are considered a result and manifestation of social traditions, ideals, and so on.

The objective of planning culture research is to identify these different patterns of thought and action along with their material manifestations and to integrate them in an understanding of spatial planning. Planning culture thus represents an explanatory approach in spatial and planning research, which sets itself apart from other theoretical approaches to planning (> *Planning theory*) by

- viewing spatial development processes as activities embedded in a culture, thus setting itself apart from interpretations of spatial planning practices based purely on organisational structure and thereby
- placing particular emphasis on the synergy of manifest elements (e.g. legal principles, administrative and organisational structures, planning frameworks, strategies, and concepts) and non-manifest elements (e.g. individual and collective ways of seeing things and internalised patterns of action) to contribute to a better understanding of planning practice.

3 Planning culture research: analytical perspectives

By viewing spatial planning as a cultural practice, the notion of culture becomes an analytical tool for a deeper understanding of planning practice. This means that planning cultures can be explicitly understood as institutional patterns reflecting the normative conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of spatial planning and guide the actual practice of planners. How exactly the various stakeholders see their roles and functions, how they perceive and handle problems, and in so doing apply certain rules, processes and instruments are thus what characterises a planning culture. This is situation-specific and context-dependent, which means that planning culture always examines and reflects local and regional practices. Although planning law and the planning system specify the basic framework for local (spatial) planning, the form it takes and

its actual physical implementation is context-specific and depends greatly on local traditions, views, values, and standards, which means it is only possible to speak of nationally homogeneous planning cultures to a limited extent.

The conceptual approaches to studying planning cultures vary in terms of their theoretical orientation (cf. Levin-Keitel/Othengrafen 2016):

- Based on the approaches of cultural studies and organisational studies (cf. Hofstede 2001; Schein 2004), planning culture research focuses on the analysis of manifest and non-manifest cultural elements, i.e. it seeks to explain the visible spatial structures of urban development, the architecture of a town or city (▷ *Building culture*) or the existing planning documents ('planning artefacts') as symbols or an expression of deeper values, attitudes, and traditions (cf. Knieling/Othengrafen 2009; Othengrafen 2012).
- Following on from the governance debate within spatial science (▷ *Governance*) and institutional theory, planning cultures can be seen as the 'totality of shared material and non-material manifestations, internalised values, and meanings as well as institutionalised forms of planning activities that can be defined in space and time' (Hohn/Reimer 2014: 324). Planning culture research understood in this way aims to reveal the interdependencies between informal and formal institutions and the path dependency of the regulatory systems of spatial planning they give rise to in a given place.
- Planning cultures can also be analysed using structuration theory, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between structure and action, with structures being both a condition and a result of social action (Giddens 1995) which constantly undergo change. The distinction highlighted by Giddens between a discursive and a practical awareness is also helpful, as the latter in particular can address the non-manifest elements of planning cultures. From a theoretical and practical perspective, planning cultures through observing planning practices, 'because it is precisely the actions in terms of established approaches and regular practices of the members of society that become the central point of reference in cultural analyses' (Hörning/Reuter 2004: 10). Planning cultures then refer to the dynamic interplay between social/cultural traditions and standards, cultural artefacts (especially the visible products/results of spatial planning and development), the interactions between groups of stakeholders (including their identity and their systemic social networks) and the planning context (major structures and regulations) (Galler/Levin-Keitel 2016; Othengrafen 2014).

4 Planning culture: unresolved issues

The current approaches share the view that the analysis of planning practices must not remain limited to the level of planning instruments. Alongside a structural perspective oriented towards planning artefacts and 'institutional technologies' (Reimer 2012: 70), there is also a perspective that focuses on the deeper dimensions of planning activities, which takes into account planners' values, standards, and ways of perceiving things. It is the interplay of both perspectives that makes planning culture research a major challenge. Linked to this are questions about how planning cultures might be experienced empirically. Planning cultures appear to be exceptionally complex

as a research subject, because the concept covers a multitude of potential analytical approaches, indicators and variables, the interplay of which is difficult to get a firm grasp on (Fürst 2016). A strict model with defined criteria and indicators is therefore not workable or even very helpful. Rather, it is better to use planning culture as an analytical or conceptual approach, which provides scope for influential cultural factors to be integrated in analyses of planning science.

Besides the problem of using the concept of planning culture in research, there is the question of suitable methods for studying planning cultures. Taking a look at other disciplines could be useful here. In the broader area of cultural studies, there are interesting approaches to how cultures are empirically experienced, which have only been used to a limited extent in the field of spatial and planning science. Sanyal (2005), for example, mentions thick descriptions (Geertz 1983) as a method of observing and analysing cultural practices. Studies by Flyvbjerg (2004) on phronetic planning research, which opposes positivist attempts to explain planning practices, could in principle be adapted to studies on planning culture, but its transferability in this regard needs to be further explored.

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