Territorial planning system and urban development

From a deterministic to a strategic model

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Introduction

This paper shows how and why we passed, in the field of urban planning, from a “deterministic” to a “strategic” or a “participative” system. The line leans on an analysis of practices in the Belgian context which can be easily extended to the different European planning systems.

Where are we coming from?

Initially, the Belgian Law created a model of planning considered to be "passive" or "rigid". This model, representative of the conceptions of immediate post-war years, was built and implemented during the Fifties and the Sixties, in a quasi-similar way all over Europe. It was established in a context of optimistic growth, by centralized States holding the main control levers, able to mobilize important financial means to launch public operations which were strongly supporting the territorial development. This model answered a determinist vision securing a future guaranteed by the continuing of growth. It consisted of controlling the process of spatial transformation by:

- creating a normative hierarchical frame with binding effects from national to local level,
- regulating strictly a limited number of parameters - mostly economic, social and aesthetic –,
- using a few number of tools – zoning plans at different scales and public financing of the territorial development -.

Characteristics of today’s planning system

Since late Seventies, the institutional evolution of Belgium could be considered as a caricatural example of broad transformations taking place all over Europe, at least regarding some radical change in the role of the former European “centralised” states. Notably, in the field of land-use and urban development legislation, the
former Belgian national Law underwent a radical shift to autonomous regional approaches, constituting a complex multileveled system which integrates a wide range of “partners” and parameters without strong consideration for hierarchy between these.

An other reason of such a shift was also certainly the inability of the former “productivist” vision of the development to open in the new societal stakes, even if this former territorial management system may certainly claim certain efficiency, as we saw it. Among these new societal stakes one can quote:

- The need to manage simultaneously the short and the long term outcomes with the goal to treat phenomena globally and transversely.
- The environmental revolution which infers constraints of caution, economy, and possible reversibility in every intervention on the territory considered as a common heritage, not to compromise the potential of development for future generations;
- The perpetual restructuring of the economy (including agriculture) and the persistence of a permanent crisis state;
- The demographic changes (decline in the birthrate and ageing of the population) which require an adaptation of the conception of the territorial management still based on objectives of growth and performance;
- The necessity of choices shared by all the actors, considering the individual and collective aspirations in their identities and in enhanced self-determination.

This generated a bottom-up "iterative" and "integrative" model, also called “strategic” or “participative”.

In such system, the decision-making framework and the means have to be adapted constantly, in order to:

- qualify the decision in an unstable real context;
- optimize the action according to partial or intermediate objectives.

**Short description of the Belgian planning system**

The new planning system in Belgium comprises in fact 3 autonomous regional systems. Practically, within the 3 regions (Walloon, Brussels and Flemish regions) and at each administrative level (mainly regional and local), the planning process lends itself three types of complementary tools:

1. **Strategic plans** (more precisely “schemes”) expressing the political intentions on the territory that are more or less long term. They are tools for strategic orientation binding only the public authorities who elaborate them. For the private operators, they constitute more or less a base for negotiation, according to the constraints arising from the (eventual) binding executive plans and regulations at the regional or local scale.

2. **Binding executive/destination plans** defining graphically and rather precisely the destination and/or the morphology of construction or equipment in a precise perimeter (sector, neighbourhood unit, …).
3. **Urbanistic rules** which are legal written documents, binding all the operators involved in territorial development, as the above executive plans. They constitute also a base for public control and intervention. Complementary to the plans, they describe morphology, texture, organisation … of both territorial development and urban design.

Due to local constraints, regions develop however **specific approaches**, namely regarding their political objectives and interactions between different territorial levels, so that the Brussels and Walloon planning systems are somehow considered as "**models with a zoom effect**", while the Flemish system can be described as "**patchwork model**".

**Challenges in a near future**

New territorial development approaches leads to new problems. The strategic planning appears fundamentally as a "holistic" approach and is necessarily complex. If such complexity constitutes the main advantage of this model, it is also doubtless very dreadful to manage. Indeed, as long as it is manageable, this complex approach of the territorial project certainly allows to end in richer results than would the traditional deterministic approach.

On the other hand, the complexity that is not mastered can return the totally ineffective decision-making and become an insuperable handicap compromising any attempt of realizing of the development project goals.

The complexity of the strategic planning process marks at several stages:

1. **In stage of elaboration of the project**, the complexity of the procedures and the wide variety of tools, each with its own sector-based objectives, brings to the light the question of coherence and of compatibility not only between various policies but also between procedures and tools in the context of ever more frequent court proceedings in order to settle the inevitable conflicts of interests.

   Evidently such an increase involves higher risks of imbroglios which may contribute to the abandonment of the project. Such complexity also risks of weakening the decision-making process more than strengthening it by dissolving it in the jurisdictional scrubland, the only result being the expression of truisms leading to the confirmation of **de facto** situations.

2. **In stage of negotiation**, the number of actors, both private and public, is growing substantially. It doubtless complicates the interactions between them, still each one pursues its own objectives and formulae of public-private partnerships often contribute to blurring the traditional dialectic between the public authority and the private bodies. From this perspective, paradoxically with regard to the fixed objectives of strategic planning, the evolution of territorial development seems more and more based on competition and gathering of short-term opportunities replacing the former concepts of territorial cooperation and mid / long term planning.

3. **In stage of control**, we see a real inflation of the legal frame supposed to supervise the increasingly complex procedures evoked above. Unfortunately, it often creates a general juridical insecurity at all administrative levels, which again inhibits every actor.
Conclusion

Strategic planning brings without doubt necessary flexibility into the planning process. Indeed, the process is supposed to involve a wide range of actors, taking care to encourage every project improving the general quality of life and social welfare. These should be finally the purpose and the social justification of any territorial development project. However, two frequent excesses of the strategic planning are to be avoided: such a process cannot be overshadowed by excessive complex procedures on one hand and, on the other hand, it cannot lead to complete deregulation by dismissing public authorities.

References


