2. Toward a new model of spatial planning

The concepts of regional and spatial planning have undergone substantial changes in the past decade.

Despite a broad variety of planning traditions in Europe, there exists a general consensus in academic, social and political circles that statutory planning is in the midst of a theoretical and practical re-examination and transition.

2.1. The “crisis” of regulatory planning: from a command and control to a pro-active approach

The conventional view of spatial planning tended to associate it with a regulatory mechanism and a sectoral approach. Most frequently, statutory urban or regional spatial planning was directed toward anticipating growth, protecting natural resources and the countryside and co-ordinating basic infrastructure. Early European urban laws projected relatively static zoning techniques and maps to plan land use and achieve equilibrium among regional components.

These, however, proved inadequate as long-term regulatory mechanisms to guide the development of cities and countryside. They more or less provided a framework for securing the balance between sometime competing components of a region during a limited span of time. They were also effective in providing ground-rules for construction and transformation of the territory.

But the ever-increasing complexity of social phenomena and rapid acceleration of change revealed the inadequacies of such conventional approaches in anticipating new needs and priorities in an appropriate time frame.

In recent years, a new attitude to planning has emerged featuring a willingness to develop a more positive, project-oriented approach. In addition to addressing such basic issues as the regulation of land-use and aggregating sectoral policies such as housing, transportation, business activity or other infrastructure, the plan is also conceived as a process to anticipate the character and location of key features of a region and to design the most efficient means for their execution and realisation.

The plan is now understood as a “project of a city or region”, a democratic expression of what the territory should be and a frame of reference for collective action. Territorial entities, such as cities and regions, are acknowledged as historical manifestations with diverse features and their own evolution rather than following a predetermined linear process. The new planning tends to move beyond a “command and control” regulatory statute establishing the rules of the game. It has also acquired the character of a type of “contract” binding and directing the social agents of a particular spatial entity to a joint vision for their area.

As a result of the experience provided by these new plans, a number of criteria and policy options have begun to crystallise and become the first signs of renewal of the traditional approach to spatial planning:

- The plan is conceived as a tool linked to intervention in a given territory and as a consequence it is to be understood not only as a legal instrument or a public investment plan, but also as an operational and programmatic tool for the development of public policies as well as of private investment strategies and local initiatives.
- Local administrations are expected to play a pro-active role in both the drafting and execution of the plan.
- Horizontal co-operation among cities and regions acquires a prominent role in modern spatial planning, as vertical and hierarchical dependencies between territories become less rigid in the context of globalisation.
- The concept of sustainability is central to spatial planning as it incorporates long-term objectives for the territory as well as the integration of social and environmental with economic considerations.
- Spatial planning is closely linked to the concept of strategic planning both in its medium and long-term goals as well as in the broad partnership of local actors and co-ordination of initiatives which is involved.
2.2. Regional policies: from assistance to initiative

As a theory underpinning conventional planning, the explanation of spatial and development phenomena as linear processes based on the accumulation of certain key production factors proved inadequate to understand European and global spatial transformations. The prevailing paradigm was unable to factor in the development of new centres, peripheral to the core, or the impetus of certain medium-sized cities and networks of cities. At the same time, conventional spatial planning and development policies, despite the magnitude of resources transferred to areas lagging behind, and notwithstanding the many successes, were also unable to provide a framework for the sustainable reduction of regional disparities or differences between core and periphery.

The performance of cities and regions became less dependent on traditional production factors as they sought site-specific advantages that improved their competitiveness in the new dynamic of globalisation.

New information and communication technologies, the liberalisation of markets, increased mobility and the breakdown of barriers created new production systems that were more flexible, less hierarchical and less dependent on traditional production factors for their location. Geographic restrictions based on proximity continued to be significant, but not as decisive. A positive entrepreneurial climate, the quality of the man-made, natural and cultural environment, appropriate financial and technological infrastructure and services and the quality of human capital became decisive in the race to attract investments and employment.

Such a highly competitive environment also altered spatial approaches. In the 1990s traditional planning policies were complemented by local strategic initiatives to promote economic growth and competitiveness. The main objectives of spatial planning became stimulating economic growth, reducing vulnerability of the regional economy to external threats, assisting regional competitive advantages and the strategic management of the territory based on the concerted participation of socio-economic agents, whether public or private.

Strategic plans must now unite wills and intentions and co-ordinate initiatives from the region's economic, social and political agents. They must also contemplate diversifying productive activities by making use of endogenous resources and trying to attract external ones. Social participation and consensus are needed for the success of such an approach.

2.3. The critical role of regional and local communities

In the broader European and global contexts, it became both evident and necessary that local and regional authorities and actors should play an increasingly important role.

The Committee of the Regions in its 1999 opinion on the ESDP underlined the belief “that regional and local players are fundamental to reconcile the aspirations of their fellow citizens with the need for EU solidarity, inter alia by involving the socio-economic players who contribute to local development.”

Closer relations at all levels are now needed between towns and regions and between national and European authorities because these cities and regions are increasingly dependent on both global forces and Community decisions and developments.

This growing local and regional importance is manifested in two major ways:

- In an integrated European territorial perspective, cohesion can only be promoted if it takes into account the development opportunities of individual regions. Gradual reduction of regional disparities, diffusion of growth throughout Europe, sustainable preservation of its regional diversity and characteristics, putting to value this richness and diversity of territorial endowments are all objectives that promote economic and social cohesion, but also improve the competitive position of Europe as a whole. Regional and local actors are to a large degree responsible for safeguarding and promoting this diversity that is one of Europe's greatest strengths and attractions.

- The attraction and promotion of firms is still dependent on some site-specific characteristics, such as economic, social and technological infrastructures, qualified human resources, flexible and efficient institutions and the quality of life. These cannot be promoted through a top-down approach, but require an alert and mobilised local society. Regions and, above all, cities and towns must establish communication links between the diversity of social groups to assert and promote their own identity. Local societies can also more appropriately manage the global flow of information and adapt new information and communications technologies to their own needs integrating the vast array of interests and cultural communities.
2.4. Solidarity and co-operation among territories

The increased competition between territories may at the same time open opportunities for areas that have previously been marginalised or present new risks of marginalisation. Developing new mechanisms of European solidarity and co-operation is required not only for a more balanced EU growth and welfare but also for improving the competitiveness of Europe as a whole.

European regional policy considers inter-regional co-operation as a suitable means of avoiding dispersion of resources and initiatives. A major objective is establishing a balance between competition and co-operation through networks of mutual advantage.

Co-operation between regions, for example, can help overcome counterproductive competition through dissemination of best practices of common interest to regions. It also helps define a suitable framework of decision-making to improve spatial organisation of the widely diverse EU territories.

2.5. Environmental concerns and the sustainability paradigm

An increased awareness of the need to preserve environmental and natural resources and adoption of the principle of sustainable development coincided with the preparation of the ESDP. Integration of economic and environmental concerns within spatial planning became accepted doctrine.

As stated in the Brundtland Report, sustainable development is a process of change in which exploitation of resources, the orientation of technical development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both the current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.

In this context environmental and economic considerations are not necessarily in conflict. It is essential through spatial planning to identify development options that ensure compatibility and reinforcement between environment considerations and economic objectives.

In this sense and in the further recognition that environmental quality is a key consideration in the location of leading market activities, the environment becomes a key economic concern for an area that can strengthen its global competitiveness.

---

Defining sustainable management of coastal heritage

The three partners of the TERRA CZM project investigated and defined the concept of a region’s environmental carrying capacity as central to the management of their coastal areas. Their main development concern was the promotion of nature tourism based on the natural beauty of sensitive dunes and lagoons while at the same time preserving their environment.

The definition of a threshold carrying capacity was fundamental to attempting to regulate the flow of visitors in fragile wetlands and dunes as well as to control the rapid development of private vacation homes. In parallel with studies conducted to estimate the existing state of pressure, the three partners implemented specific projects to demonstrate the practical application of the sustainable development concept: in Faro, the partner rehabilitated a pier to regulate, by limiting shipping, the flow of tourists in the “lagoon”; in Flanders, a specific dune area was rehabilitated for leisure and conservation activities and in Kavala an observatory was established in the prefecture to manage the integrated development of the area.

2.6. The strategic character of modern spatial planning

The emergence of this new type of strategic planning model in recent years widened the concept of and discussion on spatial planning. It led local administrations to overcome their confinement in traditional roles of service-providers for the local population, by posing far-reaching concerns pursuing more ambitious objectives regarding economic and social development.

Secondly, it stressed the value of long-term social concertation for a region against the delusion of short-term spectacular individual projects of limited scope. A region’s ability to advance on major planning priorities is largely a product of the social agents’ commitment and identification with the targets proposed and their economic and organisational ability to efficiently manage these priority projects.

Both issues – global vision and social mobilisation – refer to the need to support spatial planning based on a new social dynamism capable of overcome the strictly regulatory view of statutory plans.
A number of key requirements in this strategic approach towards spatial problems are identifiable:

- The adoption of a “strategic” viewpoint enhances the detection and regulation of the most relevant and innovative processes for a regional restructuring policy. This means assigning priority (in both space and time) to actions with the greatest transformation potential, which can project a spatial plan not only into a rationalising frame of reference for regional decision-making, but also as a tool for encouraging regional policies.

A strategic approach to spatial planning also requires a clear definition of objectives for the plan and issues that should be laid in the hands of other regional government instruments. Accordingly, a plan must distinguish between essential and negotiable items and those that are binding or merely indicative.

- A comprehensive approach at a dual level, which, on the one hand, fosters understanding of a region’s diversity by assessing the different urban and rural patterns and, on the other hand, overcomes traditional ideas of spatial planning as a mere superposition of sectoral programmes. It must therefore propose comprehensive reflections on coherent geographical areas based on strong and credible criteria.

- The conception of planning as “concertation” both between various levels of government in a region and between public authorities and society. A specific regional framework allows parties to weigh the influence of investment or administrative control by public agencies. At the same time, there are the benefits of legitimacy and transparency, public participation and the political backing of representative agencies.