Introduction

This roundtable, organised with Planning Theory & Practice, will consider the planning research agenda and the extent to which the academy is engaging with the major economic, social and environmental challenges we face. Planning Theory & Practice seeks to examine the links between research and practice, and asks critical questions about the future of professional planning. This discussion note provides some thoughts on the planning research agenda and its links with policy and practice, referencing a number of articles in Planning Theory & Practice, and using as an illustration an under-researched area – the economic value of planning.

Summary

Planning research is not providing practitioners and policymakers with sufficient evidence that helps them to improve outcomes from planning in practice. A prominent example of this is the relationship between planning and economic growth and development (what the RTPI has termed the ‘value of planning’). This gap between research and policy/practice stems in part from which topics academics choose to focus on and how they approach these topics (for example, whether work is sufficiently empirical), not just the commonly-cited barriers to research having more ‘impact’ on practice and policy (such as the accessibility and timeliness of academic research).

A crucial challenge for academic researchers is then to focus on those issues that are of direct relevance to potential research users in ways which provide practical, actionable evidence, alongside efforts to improve the accessibility of this evidence. Such a focus need not necessarily mean a loss of ‘critical distance’, but even if it did, this could be more than compensated for by more informed and informative research (in both theoretical and practical terms), and hopefully greater impact. This has not been sufficiently addressed in academic debate, despite being critical to the future of the academy as well as planning practice and the communities which planners seek to serve.

Why planning research matters

The RTPI is committed to the promotion of the art and science of spatial planning for the benefit of the public. This includes a critical role for research. As stated in a 2010 study conducted for the RTPI:

“Sustainable development depends on society’s capacity to plan for our urban and rural futures. The planning profession is a crucial part of that capacity, enabling the integration of analysis, design, negotiation and management into the process of making, and remaking, the places where we live, work and play. The planning academy in turn shapes the profession through its research and teaching activity. The relationship between practice in place-making and the academic discipline of planning will therefore underpin the future quality and functioning of our built environments.”

1 Geraint Ellis, Brendan Murtagh and Lisa Copeland (2010), The Future of the Planning Academy, RTPI/Queen’s University, Belfast.
Moreover, the challenges facing our societies are becoming ever more critical in their scale and scope. As we noted in the outline for the Planning Theory & Practice-RTPI AESOP roundtable in 2013:

“Societies near and far currently face enormously difficult and complex challenges in the face of the global economic crisis, social change and increasing climatic variability. Moreover, individuals, communities and cities must grapple with such challenges in an environment of fiscal austerity resulting in severe resource constraint, and where public confidence in the capacity of policy-makers and politicians ‘to do right thing’ has seldom been lower. The challenge therefore is not just with understanding the nature of the social, economic, political and environmental problems confronting communities but also with the capacity to generate appropriate forms of action and innovative policy interventions.”

These various challenges for planning and development are well-known – from sustainable development (including climate change, demographic change, and urban and rural health challenges), to economic growth and development (particularly ensuring more equitable growth and development, reducing spatial inequalities, and coping with economic and technological change). These challenges have been recently considered in the RTPI’s Planning Horizons series of papers, among many other publications.²

Further, as Planning Theory & Practice’s editor, Heather Campbell, has argued:

“[T]he intellectual capabilities honed as scholars directly feed into the ways students are educated and therefore have significant societal implications. Beyond the over-simplified debates about degree programmes and “employability” skills, for life and for work, students need to know not just how to analyse issues, but how to synthesise and apply knowledge. If academics do not themselves value such qualities and capabilities, they are not going to be well placed to cultivate them in future generations.”³

At the same time, in many countries (especially the UK and US), planning has been under attack from a range of neoliberal critics and commentators. This makes it all the more important that we can use research to defend and improve – as well as critique – planning practice and policy. In turn, this relies on a strong relationship between academia, planners and policymakers.

The purposes of planning research

What might be the purposes of planning research? I’d suggest these include to:

- Conceptualise, observe and systematically record events and processes to do with planning;
- Analyse such observations in order to describe accurately their conditions, contexts and implications;
- Publish accounts of all that is known about the particular topic under consideration, drawing on existing theory from one the disciplines which contribute to the field, from planning theory itself but also geography, politics, sociology, and so on;
- Relate findings to political, economic and social aspects of society;
- Further the improvement of social and living conditions.

² See: www.rtpi.org.uk/planninghorizons
Theory necessarily plays an important role in these purposes. In the most recent edition of *Planning Theory & Practice*, John Forester suggested that theory and practice are co-dependent, and that the central intentions of the journal are to confront theory with problems of practice, and improve practice by illuminating and framing through insights from theory. But contributions in *Planning Theory & Practice* have also regularly lamented the distance between theory and practice. For example, Heather Campbell has suggested that:

“[W]hat is “discovered” in traditional articles can be quite limited. Few papers demonstrate much capacity for synthesis and I continue to be surprised by how few authors say much about the practical or wider theoretical implications of their investigations. Alongside this, the imperative of promotion processes, which in effect weigh publications, sees the slicing of research studies ever more thinly. This undoubtedly is to the detriment of scholarship.”

Campbell (and many others) have called for a ‘scholarship of engagement’, but empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that this engagement is not being realised – at least not from the perspective of practitioners, policymakers and other research users such as professional institutes. For example, an RTPI-sponsored study published in 2010 suggested that practitioners have a rather poor view of research produced by the academy, and academic journals were ranked as the least important source of advice and information for practitioners’ professional roles (compared to other sources such as CPD materials and events, trade publications, advice and guidance from government and other public agencies). Further, according to this survey, only 15 per cent of practitioners thought that planning academics have a ‘healthy and productive relationship’ with practitioners, and a majority believed that academics were becoming more distant from practice. The study recognised that planning academics are engaged in a wide range of research activity, much of which has a direct relevance to practice, and that academics acknowledge the need to relate their research directly to policy outcomes. Yet overall, it also suggested that researchers see the key role of research as being to provide a ‘critical and independent’ voice on planning issues, rather than impacting on practice.

The barriers and challenges to building stronger links between the academic research community and practitioners/policymakers are well-known, and are not the focus here. Practitioners lack the time and familiarity with research sources to find relevant material, there are significant issues in the accessibility of research (in terms of the digestibility of language/terminology, but also in being able to actually read pay-walled material), and so on. But accessibility is also a matter of the subjects of academic research. Much research seems to be disconnected from what practitioners and policymakers, rightly or wrongly, are required to focus on (such as growth, jobs and housing), and the practical operation of planning systems in helping or hindering their delivery. This can be illustrated through a programme of work that the RTPI has developed called the ‘value of planning’.

**Why has academic research neglected the value of planning?**

The value of planning is an example of a central issue with which planning research has, in large part, failed to engage, and so to establish its relevance to practitioners/policymakers. It follows then that the value of planning is one that could be used to strengthen this relationship, without (I would suggest) weakening the ‘critical distance’ that research should also have to practice/policy.

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4 Forester, J. (2015), ‘What kind of research might help us to become better planners?’, *Planning Theory & Practice*, vol. 16 (2).


6 Geraint Ellis, Brendan Murtagh and Lisa Copeland (2010), The Future of the Planning Academy, RTPI/Queen’s University, Belfast.
By the ‘value of planning’, the RTPI means the relationship between planning and development to create economic value, particularly how planning adds value to development. However, there is comparatively little useful academic research which helps us to establish the value of planning and provides recommendations for policy and practice in order to realise this value more widely, and which appreciates and is informed by the real conditions of practice (policy, politics, leadership, resources and so on).\(^7\)

Why is this? As has been noted in a number of *Planning Theory & Practice* editorials, ‘planning’ has increasingly become synonymous with – at the same time as being criticised as an impediment to – a narrow conception of ‘growth’ which equates the generation of economic value with being ‘pro-development interests’ and against equitable and sustainable growth. In a 2011 editorial, Libby Porter lamented the “neoliberal addiction” in which planning seems to be ensnared (“[The neoliberalisation of planning has been so successful that it is now entirely unchallenged in the world of practice”)), and made a passionate plea for planning that acknowledges its intrinsically political nature and overtly addresses the antagonistic implications this brings to it:

> “[I]n the face of the strengthening grip of neoliberal planning and the inevitable consequences that entails (deeper wealth polarisation, more displacement, higher profiteering through land development, greater environmental impact), planning scholarship is looking the wrong way. It seems to have strikingly little to say to these critical issues and trends, because it is far too focused on institutional design, stakeholder consensus, process-based analyses, or the latest French philosopher to “bring” to planning. ...[A]re we so wrapped up in these questions we are losing critical abilities to think differently, politically, and to present credible alternatives?”\(^8\)

In another editorial, Aidan While also suggested that:

> “[P]lanners and planning have much to contribute to supporting and facilitating sustainable economic recovery. The question is whether this role is best served by regulation that is undiscriminating in its definition of “growth”. It could be argued that more regulation is required not less, and that building better places (rather than just building), addressing social needs and investing in low-carbon infrastructure might provide an economic stimulus capable of combining sustainable job creation with some semblance of social justice and responsible environmental stewardship. ... Being able to distinguish between different forms of economic and non-economic development might be one way of challenging the growth discourse on its own terms.”\(^9\)

From this, the question is which kind of ‘growth’ do we want (planning) to promote, and further, which kinds of growth can planners deliver under which conditions? These issues underlie the RTPI’s value of planning programme of work.\(^10\) But the relative absence of planning research from these debates has meant that other disciplines, notably economics, have done more to shape policymakers’ views – often of course to depict planning as a barrier to growth and development.

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The need to engage with markets

Rather than the relative neglect of the issue of planning and growth on the assumption that ‘growth’ means inequitable and unsustainable development, it would be more productive for more academic research to critique ‘markets’ and to understand how planning (as well as other instruments) in different policy contexts can produce better outcomes. In this vein, in an article last year in *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Heather Campbell, Malcolm Tait and Craig Watkins considered the extent to which planning can make a positive difference in the face of ‘free market’ and deregulatory pressures. Importantly, as Campbell et al. note:

“Economics and more specifically property (or real estate) markets are social constructs... This potential uncertainty leaves open the possibility that investment and development choices can be shaped by wider public policy priorities.”

Campbell et al. conclude that there are possibilities for planners to incorporate longer-term public benefits from development schemes – but only if there is a willingness among planners to ‘ask questions’ within the institutional contexts in which they work and to press developers to produce schemes that generate such benefits (including through for example promoting more competition between developers in local markets). Yet as the authors also note:

“The conceptualization of property markets in one-dimensional terms is perhaps what advocates of neoliberal agendas desire. But for critics and state actors to take such a view is deeply disempowering, as it leaves the parameters for dialogue to be set by market actors. Planning as an activity... may have traditionally placed property economics outside its remit, but without even a basic understanding of the workings of commercial real estate markets, the basis on which to generate alternative propositions is reduced. ...[O]ne of the great practical and intellectual challenges is to understand and articulate more clearly what state regulation is good for.”

The corollary of this is that it would also be valuable for researchers to gather an increasingly comprehensive and compelling evidence base of the negative economic, social and environmental outcomes that result from poor (or an absence of) planning – but this too is largely lacking.

The need to engage with practice

This greater engagement with markets also logically requires a greater engagement with practice by researchers. It is then especially problematic that there remains a significant distance between academia and practice. As John Forester suggested in his recent *Planning Theory & Practice* editorial:

“[W]e in planning academia have been dis-served by the narrower focus of social science research: if we care about improving practice, we have to pay attention to evaluative and normative questions of learning to be better practitioners, better actors in complex political and social contexts, questions that mainstream social science seems all too happy to avoid.”

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12 Forester, J. (2015), ‘What kind of research might help us to become better planners?’, *Planning Theory & Practice*, vol. 16 (2).
Contrast this with education and medical research, both practice-based disciplines, both of which engage directly and cumulatively with questions of which practices and treatments work, under which conditions, for whom. Controversy and debate continue in these fields of course, but they have generated an extensive body of evidence and knowledge on ‘what practitioners should do’.

Instead, in place of more direct engagement with practice, too much planning research suffers from over-theorisation and too great a distance from practice, with laments about the impossibility of planning under ‘neoliberal hegemony’ in place of more hard analysis of what planners can do better and what the results are when they do.

The practice of planning goes on regardless, as it must. As Jan Vogelij, an independent planning practitioner based in The Netherlands, wrote in Planning Theory & Practice this year:

>“Planning practice develops differently [than academic research]. Practitioners are active actors in the planning processes embedded in different environments. They must react to demands of a fast changing society and develop place-based solutions. Planning practitioners must constantly interpret existing rules in different situations and re-invent planning accordingly. Society demands the preparation of future spatial developments. ...Practitioners are expected to support society in developing its vision on future development.

For Vogelij, the answer is that:

>“To assume a role in innovating the discipline, planning theory should leave its comfortable position and engage actively in future planning. That includes involvement in designing and testing new options, searching for new potentials and chances. ...Planning theorists should ask themselves, “How could we help make it happen when actual circumstances are not favourable? How can our process theories assist local and regional societies to formulate their desired future? Which improvements can we suggest after assessing new concepts?”

Some weaknesses in planning research

The evidential needs of practitioners serve to underline the weaknesses in some planning research, that as seen from this perspective, it can be overly theoretical, qualitative, normative, repetitive, reactive, small-scale and piecemeal. These significantly limit the applicability of much planning research in practice and policy. This also means that planning is left without sufficient defences against its critics. This allows for the de-funding and de-professionalisation of planning, and ultimately has real negative consequences for the communities which planners should be serving.

That some planning research might be highly normative is not to suggest a disengagement from the larger questions of politics and policy. As Luca Bertolini argued in his Planning Theory & Practice editorial, planning is inherently political because of its role in shaping spatial conditions for the everyday life of people. Rather, it is suggest that, tactically, non-academic proponents of planning such as the RTPI struggle to make a stronger case with policymakers for a progressive planning without being able to point to the successful local examples of practice in creating value.

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To quote Vogelij again, this is a function of the different worlds of researchers and practitioners:

“As long as the distance between academic theorists and planning practitioners is so great, and they remain separate worlds, theory will experience difficulties in understanding practice and will qualify outputs of specific processes as coming from a box. The theoretical search for generalized categorizations conflicts with location-determined, possibly peculiar, outcomes of evolutionary planning in practice. That might imply that planning theory does not really accept the place-based character of planning. Theory should be more interested in what is qualified as anecdotal.”

The need to develop a shared research agenda to promote the value of planning

We urgently need an ambitious pragmatism in planning research rather than, as at present in some planning research, what seems like a resigned theoreticism. We need to build a body of research and other evidence to support the case for planning, to test the effectiveness of current policy and practice, and to explore ways in which planning might be more effective, under which conditions.

Specifically with regards to the economic value of planning, we need a substantive, pluralist, wide-ranging but coordinated research programme, one which goes beyond the simplistic economic conclusions of planning’s critics to understand the actual value of planning in the real world. To be most impactful, this should focus on directly helping policy-makers and practitioners maximise the value of planning in practice. This is essential to developing an alternative narrative and evidence base for development that is genuinely sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms.

For its part, the RTPI has commissioned a programme of work in this area to set out what this research agenda might comprise, drawing on a range of methodological approaches and examining planning in different contexts (not just the UK). We are however reliant on the academic research community, supported by major funders of academic research, to provide more evidence, analysis and recommendations on the value of planning. For this, we need to develop a shared research agenda which is more strategic and coordinated (including larger, more inter-connected studies), more empirical/quantitative (including meta studies), more timely and applied, which is both place-based and comparative, and which offers pragmatic solutions to everyday planning issues. For example, Campbell et al. suggest that empirical studies could be conducted which point to the outcomes that could be generated through development schemes if planners adopted a more proactive approach to ‘market shaping’.

The aim of such a research agenda would be to demonstrate in robust terms the critical contribution of planning and planners to economic development, as well as to social justice, inclusion and environmental integrity. For obvious reasons, it is critical that practitioners and policymakers inform and help to shape this agenda. But it must be the academic planning research community that develops and owns this agenda, and in doing so seeks positively to defend and improve both planning practice and policy. Or as Campbell et al. put it:

“*While critical analysis of current practices is undoubtedly important, critique on its own is disputing and arguably also disempowering.*”

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15 See: www.rtpi.org.uk/valueofplanning