

Book Review

The Paradoxes of Planning: A Psycho-Analytical Perspective

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The Paradoxes of Planning. A Psycho-Analytical Perspective

Sara Westin

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In “*The Paradoxes of Planning. A Psycho-Analytical Perspective*”, Sara Westin explores the gap between vision and reality in urban planning, a version of a more general philosophical problem, of how something can emerge from its opposite. Westin addresses this issue from a perspectivism philosophical point of view and takes her experience of the attempts made in Sweden to build ‘city-like’ areas as an example. She looks in particular to the case of Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm, seen as an illustration of a much broader case. And she does this exploration offering not only an analysis of the city and urban planning but also an analysis of how we understand these phenomena, in sum of what counts as knowledge.

The book is organized into seven chapters plus the Introduction and Conclusion. Two themes or issues cross the book: urbanity and how we understand it. The approach is interdisciplinary, the references collected come from different disciplines and not only from Human Geography. This and the fact that the author combines empirical and theoretical discussion all along the book, crossing the different chapters, makes this book, a different and stimulating critique to planning.

In chapter 1 (‘Perspectivism’) Sara Westin presents the essence of this philosophical approach, and brings in the work of Nietzsche, Freud, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Olsson and others. For her, and for Perspectivism, what we see depends on where each one stands, all our knowledge of the world is gained from our own particular point of view. How we describe and understand any facet of the world depends on who we are and what we want to do with that description and interpretation. And this is, in her argument, the reason for the gap between her understanding of the urban and the planner’s understanding. In the following chapter (‘The eye of the architect - the body of the flâneur’) Sara Westin quotes a variety of sources, including Jane Jacobs in ‘The Death and Life of Great American Cities’, when she distinguishes between two kinds of people, those on foot and those on car, and uses texts of several authors, namely Virginia Woolf and August Strindberg, as well as her own experiences, as a way of getting into the flâneur perspective. If in this first part of the chapter, Sara Westin talks

about the body of the flâneur, in the second part of the chapter, she speaks of the eyes of the architect, and of how to plan is to engage in rational considerations that will lead ultimately to benefits to the society in the future. Sara Westin discusses different points of view and therefore different ways of seeing and understanding the world and the city, agoraphobia and claustrophobia, or philobats and ocnophils, arguing that what the modernists, as was the case of Le Corbusier or Adolf Loos, among many others, claimed to be the requests of a new era were in fact, in her opinion, their own philobatic / claustrophobic preferences. On the contrary she sees the flâneur as ocnophilic and agoraphobic. While for the flâneur, the crowd is a precondition for movement, for the modernist /functionalist it is an obstacle. This marks a deep difference between the modern architect / planner and the flâneur, since, as she correctly argues, an essential feature of urbanity is being among strangers.

This is followed in chapter 3 ('Planning as a Neurosis') by a discussion of how planning has numerous traits of a neurotic behaviour, in the sense that the acts of planning, whose purpose is to improve life and increase prosperity, as she argues, can cause a greater suffering than those that the actions taken were originally intended to avoid. This leads, to the theme she addresses in chapter 4 ('The impossible profession'). Here Sara Westin starts with Freud's definition of three impossible professions, arguing that planning, being a right hand of politics, and whose aim is to translate ideas into tangible reality, is also an 'impossible' profession. In other words, for Sara Westin planning is seen as an impossible profession since in most cases, if not in all, we can always be sure to achieve unsatisfactory results. At the end of the chapter she introduces space syntax, as proposed by Hanson and Hillier, as a critique of conventional architectural practice, focusing on how the built environment affects movement and the body, an approach and vision close to that of the flâneur, as exposed in previous chapters. It is in the crowd, in the used space, in co-presence that urbanity can be found, an issue Sara Westin explores in more detail in chapter 5 ('Urbanity = ?'), discussing a wide range of contributions, from Lefebvre, William-Olsson, Edward Soja, David Seamon, Bill Hillier, among others.

Sara Westin presents and discusses, in chapter 6 ('The Theory of Space Syntax'), the theory of space syntax, initially proposed by Julienne Hanson and Bill Hillier, and further developed by numerous other contributors. The main advantage of space syntax is the fact that it moved the focus from architectural style and aesthetics to what is between buildings. However, Sara Westin seems to have several objections to space syntax, the main being perhaps the fact that it overlooks that urban life is difficult to apprehend by using a natural scientific approach, as there are too many other variables in the process. The second is perhaps the fact space syntax theorists focus mainly the thing aspect of urbanity and not on the non-thing aspects, urban life, which Sara Westin argues are two dimensions that cannot and should not be separated. In other words, the point for her is to find out what is the influence of urban configuration on social life, although not necessarily in the same way as does space syntax.

After the discussion of space syntax, Sara Westin moves one more step in her intellectual journey around the gap between vision and reality and explores, in chapter 7 ('Logic - Dialectics'), two basic and different forms of reasoning and understanding: logics and dialectics. The differences in perspective explain, at least in part, the gap or discrepancy between the image of reality, the 'plan', and the reality we experience with our body. Dialectics, starts from the whole and sees relations as internal, as interdependent. Conventional logic is based on a philosophy of external relations, disintegration and on a view of reality as possible to exhaust as well as to manipulate. While urbanity is seen as a dialectical phenomenon, modernist planning has been based on positivism and on conventional logic.

In sum, Sara Westin main research problem in the book is a problem of alienation, seen as the result of reasoning about urban development as a finite game. She starts with her experience of what she calls the gap between vision and reality in urban planning and revolves around the discrepancy between planning ideals and the reality that people in general experience. Westin challenges the idea that the city planner is a neutral expert, a claim often made by conventional modernist planners, the distinction between means and ends, and sees planners as ethically responsible subjects. Sara Westin explores, examines and discusses this gap between vision and reality, based on the philosophy of

perspectivism, alternating between two references points, the body of the flâneur and the eye of the architect/planner, which took other forms in the various chapters: philobatic-ocnophilia; Apollo-Dionysus; supergo-id, form-process, logic-dialectics, and so on. If a conclusion should be pointed out, at the end of this inspiring book, it would probably be that a balance between the multiple dualities Sara Westin explores in the book, between planned and unplanned, between Apollonian and the Dionysian, among other dualities, is what people is searching in modern societies, even if they do not know it. All this makes the book a fine piece of scholarship, valuable for students and researchers in the field of urban e-planning, and for planners and urban policy-makers as well.

Carlos Nunes Silva, PhD, Professor Auxiliar at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Portugal. His research interests are mainly focused on urban and metropolitan governance, history and theory of urban planning, urban planning in Africa, urban e-planning, urban planning ethics, local government policies, local e-government, and research methods. His publications include the books "Urban Planning in Lusophone African Countries"; "Emerging Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities in Urban E-Planning"; "Urban Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial and Postcolonial Planning Cultures"; "Fiscal Austerity and Innovation in Local Governance in Europe" (co-edited); "Urban Planning in North Africa"; "Citizen e-Participation in Urban Governance: Crowdsourcing and Collaborative Creativity"; "Online Research Methods in Urban and Planning Studies: Design and Outcomes"; "Handbook of Research on E-Planning: ICT for Urban Development and Monitoring"; "Portugal: Sistema de Govern Local"; "Política Urbana em Lisboa, 1926-1974". He is member of the Steering Committee of the International Geographical Union Commission 'Geography of Governance', and the founding Editor-in-Chief of the 'International Journal of E-Planning Research' (IJEPR).