1. The challenge to make a difference

Louis Albrechts

If planners ignore those in power, they assure their own powerlessness. Alternatively, if planners understand how relations of power shape the planning process, they can improve the quality of their analysis and empower citizen and community action. (Forester, 1989: 27)

1.1. IN SEARCH FOR THE POLITICAL¹

My first degree was in political and social sciences. This study became an eye-opener and introduced me to the intriguing world of ‘the political’. Ever since I have retained a fascination for (political) decision-making. When I switched to planning and got involved in major planning projects (Albrechts, 1999), I developed a good understanding of how decision-making in these projects worked out. My own experience in practice was confirmed by ample examples of well-documented cases of ‘plan-making’ and formal decision-making in the planning literature (Altshuler, 1965; Benveniste, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Meyerson and Banfield, 1955) and by substantive literature on implementation (Gualini, 2001; Majone and Wildavsky, 1979; Mastop and Faludi, 1997; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1974; Wildavsky, 1979). However, I also noticed that hardly any examples of cases analyzed from the perspective of the political class were available. Understandably political decision-making often seems like a black box to planners.

Research by Flyvbjerg (1998) makes it clear that critical analysis of cases is needed to discover the ‘whys and wherefores’ of how elected representatives or preferential actors change the plan and why and how executive officers depart from the formally approved plan.

A few years after a major planning process I was heavily involved in came to an end I started a small research project that focused on understanding the power dynamics of the wider political context in this particular process (Albrechts, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; see also Huxley, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Forester, 1989; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Yiftachel, 1998). What I really wanted to understand was how regional government

ministers and planners interacted, and to some extent which players were dominant in the case at hand (Structure Plan Flanders). Preliminary talks with a few political actors made it clear who the main actors were in the political decision-making process: the ministers of planning and transport, the minister for the environment, the president of the Flemish parliament, the prime minister and their six main political advisers. All of these political key actors were approached for an interview. None of them refused to participate.

Most interviewees clearly had reflected on the questions beforehand. This was important to revive the memory of a process that took place from 1992 to 1997. I asked questions about the timing of the start of the process, the interviewees' image and their expectation of the plan, their view on the consequences of the main concepts, the easy/difficult issues in the plan for their sector, their constituency; the role of pressure groups; the way they convinced other ministers, members of parliament, their own political party. Did they get (political) profit/harm from the process; how did they perceive the role of the parliament, the press; how was the decision-making process organized in their own cabinet² and between the different cabinets, in what way were the party members and others persuaded of some lines of thought? To get a true picture, sayings were crosschecked with other ministers, political advisers and the diary I myself kept during the planning process. The fact that the interviews were conducted five years after the approval of the plan, that all ministers had left office and I was not actively involved any longer in major governmental projects allowed a more detached attitude from both sides. Trust and mutual respect built during my immediate involvement in the project (1992–1997) created a willingness to respond in a very open way in the interviews. I found some similarities and differences in approach with other authors dealing with case studies. Flyvbjerg (1998) looks at the Aalborg case from the outside as a critical observer while Krumholz (1982) and Kitchen (1997) provide first-hand experience as planning practitioners and take an action point of view. However, to my knowledge, the Flemish case is the only one where government ministers have been interviewed about their role in a specific planning process. The interviews with the ministers and their political advisers in office during the Structure Plan Flanders project revealed that politically sensitive problems were discussed in closed arenas with the political advisers of all ministers of the Flemish government. The political advisers constructed the consensus for the decisions to be taken by the Council of Ministers. Key issues were how to incorporate the sector logic of other ministers, the planning stances of other tiers of government and the political preferences of coalition partners (see also Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). The consensus reached was hardly ever changed by the Council of

Ministers. I did a similar research project while on sabbatical in Western Australia (Albrechts, 2003b).

These research projects made me understand that political decision-making has its own logic; it relies on arenas with specific actors. Could this logic be influenced by the specific expertise of a minister/executive politician? Does the intellectual background, the practical experience, the epistemological basis, a past of direct engagement of a minister, mayor or vice-mayor have an impact on her/his functioning? I started to wonder whether and how, in one way or the other, an executive politician with a background in planning could benefit from this background.

1.2. SHIFT TOWARDS EXPERIENCES WITH (EX) POLITICIANS WITH A BACKGROUND IN PLANNING

In the academic year 2016–2017 I was invited as visiting professor at the Politecnico di Bari by Angela Barbanente and Valeria Monno. Angela Barbanente, a professor of planning with a past as an activist, has been member of the executive body of the Apulia Regional Council for 10 years. She had political responsibility for urban and regional planning, landscape and housing policies from 2005 to 2010, and for cultural heritage and protected areas from 2010 to 2015. She was appointed vice-president in March 2013. Her profile provided a unique opportunity to reflect on her experience in political practice and to find out how useful her background as planner has been for her work as politician and what it means for her teaching/research/practice when she returned to academia. As I knew other academics in my network who became active as executive politicians, I decided to enlarge the scope of the project.

At the Congress of the Association of European Schools of Planning in Lisbon, Portugal (July 2017), I organized a first roundtable on the topic ‘Do they make a difference: (ex)politicians with a background in planning’. I sought out participants who were critical academics and also (have been) actively involved in politics in an executive position. I was pleased to get a positive reaction on my invitation from Alessandro Balducci, Artur da Rosa Pires, Angela Barbanente and Jim Throgmorton. Valeria Monno served as discussant. I invited the four panelists to reflect on how their specific knowledge was beneficial to influence political decisions and how it worked out. The reactions of both the panelist and the audience were such that I felt challenged to continue. The material of this first roundtable was used for another roundtable again at the annual congress of the Association of European Schools of Planning, this time in Gothenburg

(July 2018) as the special plenary session for the 25th anniversary of the journal *European Planning Studies*. This time I selected Alessandro Balducci, Artur da Rosa Pires, Angela Barbanente, Tomas Hudecek and Aksel Hagen as panelist and Daniela De Leo as discussant. The panelists were invited to focus this time more on specific cases where they were able to make a difference.

As the contributions until then had come mainly from Europe I felt challenged to enlarge the scope of the project to incorporate cases worldwide and to aim for an edited book. I used my network to find interesting profiles and initially had a list of some 20 fascinating personalities from all over the world. Looking for a firm commitment, 15 of them responded positively and enthusiastically. One of them unfortunately passed away during the process. Two, after an initially firm commitment, stopped communicating for no reason. After comments on her first draft Maricato invited Tanaka to join her for the final version of her paper. One author had difficulties in coping with the comments of the referees and decided to step out of the project. One minister in office from Oceania informed me early 2019 that she unfortunately was unable to complete her draft in time, owing to work commitments and becoming a new parent.

In order to aim for some coherence in the book I provided a grid of questions for the authors. With the grid I invited/challenged the authors with the following questions:

- Can they go beyond a mere description of your experiences?
- Can they reflect on the intellectual roots, the values that have an impact on how they think about issues, how they interpret, assess and assign significance to problems and strategies?
- How do they draw a link with the institutional context and how open are they to critical voices and innovative practices?
- I asked them to use cases to illustrate the difference they could make.
- What made them choose an active role in politics?
- Do they consider their background (theories, technical expertise) in planning useful/relevant for decisions in their own field? And in other fields?
- What role did they assign to academia?
- Did they use their specific knowledge to influence decisions and did it work out?
- Did they try to change knowledge/power relationships?
- Did their specific knowledge add to their credibility? Did it make them more successful? Did it make them stronger?
- How were they looked at by fellow politicians?

- Did they manage to bring new/different concepts/issues/problems on the political agenda?
- Were they able to focus on structural issues or were they trapped in day-to-day issues (their term in office)?
- Was their way of dealing with citizens different (more open, and beyond usual participation) than those of other politicians?
- Did they focus more on the technical than on the political? What did they consider as structural, crucial constraints to be changed?
- How did they deal with conflicts?
- Did their political experience change the way they did research and the way they taught?
- Did it change their view on the relationship between science and policy-making?
- Do they design research projects in a different way?
- Do they use theory, technical skills in the same way?

The scope of one chapter makes it impossible for the authors to answer all of the questions. Moreover, the (political, cultural, institutional) contexts, the terms in office and the portfolios of responsibilities of the different authors are very different. Therefore, the grid should be viewed more as a suggestion. I also experienced that it is not so easy to steer these (ex)politicians in a fixed direction. They have their own story to tell.

1.3. AIMS OF THE BOOK

Besides the older literature I was familiar with I also explored more recent literature. Patsy Healey, who attended the first roundtable in Lisbon, pointed out to me that there were at least two recent papers in *Planning Theory* exploring issues about planners needing to become politicians. She also had the sense reading *Planning Theory* of a younger generation re-discovering the experiences of earlier ones. One of the recent articles in *Planning Theory* argues that, without power and political authority, planning theorists' advice for planners to be politically astute is of little help (Karki, 2017: 186). The case studies used in this article rely on second-hand material. The second article searches for new insights into the causes of, and potential solutions to, planning's previous inability to significantly mitigate urban social inequity and injustice (Grooms and Boamah, 2018: 213). These articles seem to (re)open the discussion on the inability of planning to tackle structural problems in our countries, regions and cities. They reflect on what planning/planners could/should do to realize their plans. My point remains that, apart from the work of De Leo (2017), who

interviewed 13 Italian tenured urban planning professors who have been active as deputy mayor and/or provincial or regional minister, nothing is available on how executive politicians with a background in planning themselves reflect on the impact they may have on political decision-making and on what this experience means for their teaching/research/practice when they go back either to academia or to professional life. The book aims to fill this gap.

Moreover, by giving them a platform I also aim to draw attention on the often-invisible work of these politicians and how, and to what extent, their background in planning/spatial discipline was beneficial. It wants to tell the story of such work, to recognize and value it. By telling their stories they could learn from one another's experience, they could motivate planners to enter the political scene, and they could help to inform planning theorists, students and practitioners how politics actually works. This suits another purpose of this book, namely, to contribute to the need for a first-hand fine-grained analysis of what actually takes place in formal decision-making and implementation, in the transition from plan to formal adoption of the plan and in its actual implementation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

All chapters were double-refereed. My special thanks go to colleagues who were supportive by either pointing out interesting profiles or acting as referees (or both) of the chapters: Alan Mabin, Philip Harrison, Bish Sayal, João Cabral, Flavia Martinelli, Francesco Lo Piccolo, Luigi Mazza, Umberto Janin Rivolin, Bruce Stiftel, Tore Sager, Susan S. Fainstein, Heloisa Costa, Henri Acselrad, Enrico Gualini, Luca Bertolini, Lia Vasconcello, Michael Gunder, Paulo Pinho, Carlos Vainer, Haryo Winarso, Carissa Slotterback, Maria Lucinda Cruz Dos Santos Fonseca, Karel Maier, Maros Finka, Torill Nyseth, Angelique Chettiparambil Rajan, Ali Mandanipour, Carolina Hegler, Petter Naess, Nancy Odendaal and Hou Li.

I am extremely grateful to the authors of the chapters and to all those who have participated in this long-lasting dialogue since the beginning of this project in Lisbon.

NOTES

1. I am in line with the distinction Mouffe (2005: 9) makes between 'the political' and 'politics'. I see the political as *the dimension of antagonism that is constitutive of human*

societies. In this way a clear distinction is made with 'politics' as the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.

2. In the Belgian political tradition ministers rely much more on their political cabinet than on their traditional administration. The inner circle of advisers consists mostly of mature specialists in the field. Some advisers received a political training (i.e. from the study center of a political party); others may have come from administrations or semi-governmental organizations. Politically sensitive problems are discussed in arenas with representatives of all ministers of the government. These arenas involve negotiation in working through all kinds of problems.

REFERENCES

- Albrechts, L. (1999) Planners as catalysts and initiators of change: The new Structure Plan for Flanders. *European Planning Studies* 7(5): 587–603.
- Albrechts, L. (2003a) Reconstructing decision making: Planning versus politics. *Planning Theory* 2(3): 249–268.
- Albrechts, L. (2003b) Planning and power: Towards an emancipatory planning approach. *Environment and Planning C* 21(6): 905–924.
- Albrechts, L. (2006) Shifts in strategic spatial planning? Some evidence from Europe and Australia. *Environment and Planning A* 38(6): 1149–1170.
- Altshuler, A. (1965) *The City Planning Process*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Benveniste, G. (1989) *Mastering the Politics of Planning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- De Leo, D. (ed.) (2017) *L'urbanistica dei prof(ass)essori*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998) *Rationality and Power Democracy in Practice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Forester, J. (1989) *Planning in the Face of Power*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Grooms, W. and Boamah, E.F. (2018) Toward a political urban planning: Learning from growth machine and advocacy planning to 'plannitize' urban politics. *Planning Theory* 17(2): 213–233.
- Gualini, E. (2001) *Planning and the Intelligence of Institutions*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Huxley, M. (2000) The limits of communicative planning. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 19(4): 369–377.
- Karki, T.K. (2017) Should planners join politics? Would that help them make better cities? *Planning Theory* 16(2): 186–202.
- Kitchen, T. (1997) *People, Politics, Policies and Plans*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Krumholz, N. (1982) A retrospective view of equity planning, Cleveland 1969–1979. *Journal of American Planners Association* 48(4): 163–174.
- Majone, G. and Wildavsky, A. (1979) Implementation in evolution. In Pressman, J. and Wildavsky, A. (eds), *Implementation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 177–194.
- Mastop, H. and Faludi, A. (1997) Evaluation of strategic plans: The performance principle. *Environment and Planning B* 24(6): 815–822.
- Meyerson, N.M. and Banfield, E.C. (1955) *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest: The Case of Public Housing at Chicago*. New York: Free Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2005) *On the Political*. London: Routledge.

- Pressman, J. and Wildavsky, A. (eds) (1974) *Implementation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Tewdwr-Jones, M. (2002) *The Planning Polity*. London: Routledge.
- Tewdwr-Jones, M. and Allmendinger, P. (1998) Deconstructing communicative rationality: A critique of Habermasian collaborative planning. *Environment and Planning A* 30: 1175–1189.
- Wildavsky, A. (1979) Implementation in context. In Pressman, J. and Wildavsky, A. (eds), *Implementation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 163–176.
- Yiftachel, O. (1998) Planning and social control: Exploring the dark side. *Journal of Planning Literature* 12(4): 395–406.