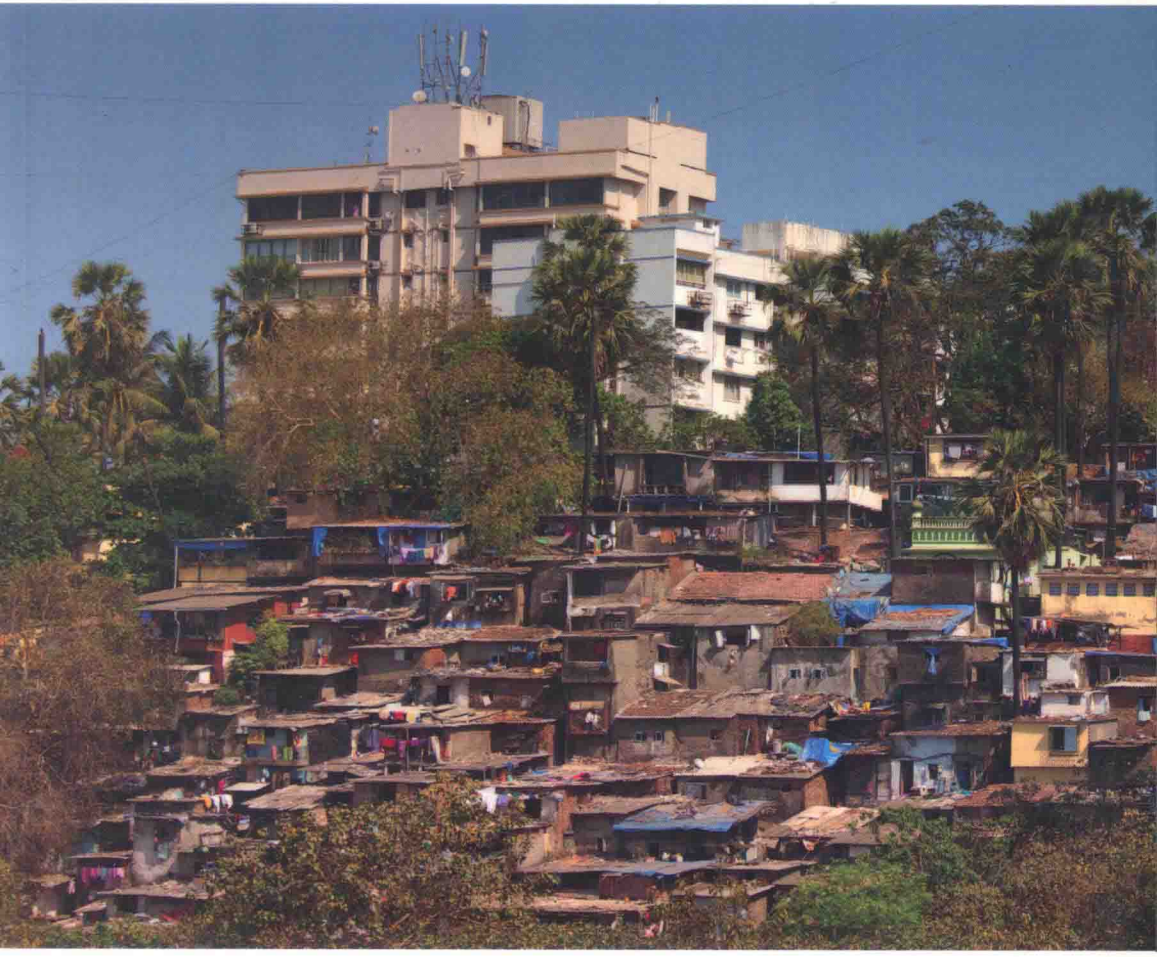
REVIVING
CRITICAL PLANNING THEORY

Dealing with pressure, neo-liberalism, and responsibility in communicative planning

TORE SAGER



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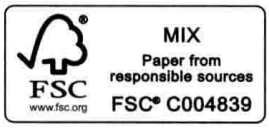

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Reviving Critical Planning Theory

Discussing some of the most vexing criticisms of communicative planning theory (CPT), this book goes on to suggest how theorists and planners can respond to it. CPT has become mainstream but is still criticized for emphasis on consensus building, underdeveloped techniques for dealing with stakeholder coercion, and facilitation of neo-liberal urban policies.

With these severe criticisms being raised against CPT, the need has arisen to systematically think through what responsibilities planning theorists might have for the end-uses of their theoretical work. This book extends the consideration into the responsibility for promoting inclusive dialogue, and, finally, theorists' responsibilities as educators. Much attention is given to the notion of responsibility because of its importance to the ethics of planners as well as planning theorists. Offering inventive proposals for amending the shortcomings of this widely adhered planning method, this book reflects on what communicative planning theorists and practitioners can and should do differently.

Looking at issues of power, politics and ethics in relation to planning, this book is important reading for critics and advocates of CPT, with lessons for both theorists and practising planners.

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Preface

This book aims at the revival of critical planning theory. Communicative planning theory (CPT) was presented in early articles by John Forester as a critical theory inspired by pragmatism and Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. The critical side of CPT was also accentuated in books from the early 1990s, such as Forester's *Critical Theory, Public Policy, and Planning Practice* (Forester 1993a) and Sager's *Communicative Planning Theory* (Sager 1994). CPT has since been criticized in such a way that – in so far as the arguments are valid and the planning theory is not modified – CPT will lose credibility as a critical theory. However, the present book shows that CPT can be reformed and enriched so as to take the sting out of the criticism and restore CPT as a plausible critical theory.

The book deals with some of the most vexing criticisms of communicative planning theory (CPT) and suggests how theorists and planners can respond to it. The suggestions are of different kinds, describing how to examine whether the criticism has merit, how to revise CPT to make it less vulnerable to the objections, and how to reflect on what to take responsibility for.

At the heart of the criticism is the alleged problem that CPT has no convincing strategy for countering repressive power in the planning process, and that – partly for that reason – CPT recommends a mode of planning that tends to facilitate a neo-liberal development of society. Questions of responsibility are sure to arise in the wake of such charges, so the last part of the book deals with the moral obligations of planning theorists.

The book addresses these core problems of mainstream planning theory (CPT), and therefore brings up central issues that are part of numerous planning courses. It is not a textbook that reiterates what has already been presented in the planning literature, however. Not only planners, but also graduate students, PhD candidates, and academics in the fields of planning, public administration, and policy-oriented urban geography will find new ideas of how to approach problems of communicative planning.

Planners will find a discussion of ways to legitimize communicative planning which have not received much attention previously. Practitioners will also benefit from the comprehensive account of models for withstanding non-deliberative stakeholder pressure by forging alliances between planners and activists who are external to the planning process. Furthermore, socially concerned professionals will appreciate the proposed strategy for examining

whether an urban planning effort benefits neo-liberal social change or reflects the values of CPT. The new approaches are not heterodox whims leading the discussion of mainstream planning theory out on a sidetrack, but based on ideas from neighbouring disciplines that are potentially important to the future development of CPT.

Situating the book in current discourse on planning theory

It seems to be quite common that the literature on a new theory develops along a certain pattern, at least in the early phases of the theory's attention cycle. Initially, it is imperative for the originator of the theory and the small band of early followers that other academics open their eyes and minds to the new ideas. Early presentations of a theory typically give optimistic accounts of its potential and practical usefulness. Research evolves in a dialectic between creative invention, critique, defence, and modifications, however, and early tributes are bound to be scrutinized both theoretically and empirically. In the next stage, ameliorated and more nuanced versions of the theory are usually defended. Different branches of the theory are often distinguished, as it is realized that real world contingencies call for a range of specialized theoretical and practical tools. Painted with broad strokes, this gives a picture of where CPT stands around the year 2010. Three decades have passed since John Forester's (1980) first important articles on critical communicative planning theory.

The term 'communicative planning' as used throughout this book encompasses processes that are also called dialogical, deliberative, or collaborative. The terms are largely overlapping, although collaborative planning is sometimes consensus-seeking to such a high degree that little room is left for an approach that is critical of strongly biased power relations. In other words, communicative planning is not necessarily critical, and critical planning theory does not always emphasize deliberation or debate. The non-critical approaches to planning are more vulnerable to the charge of unintentionally facilitating neo-liberalism than the critical approaches that are always attentive to inclusion and representation in ways that immediately challenge neo-liberal theory and practice. In this book, 'collaborative planner' and 'critical pragmatist' denote planners that put, respectively, less and more emphasis on communicative planning as a critical and reformist endeavour. I sometimes use 'communicative planner' as a generic term, even if it is an odd phrase since all planners communicate.

Diverging approaches can be discerned from books on CPT that have been published since 2005. Harper and Stein (2006) prefer a theoretical and philosophical approach, aiming to situate CPT in relation to the modernism debate. They try to construct a robust platform for CPT by supplementing

Habermasian thinking with ideas from John Rawls, Donald Davidson, and Richard Rorty. Innes and Booher's (2010) introductory text on collaborative rationality draws on the authors' own experience as facilitators and mediators in a number of consensus building processes. The practical skills they acquired inform their theoretical sections on how to conduct communicative planning. Forester (2009a) takes on an even more empirical approach. He studies real confrontations, difficult mediation, and practical consensus building and brings valuable knowledge back to planning theory. Forester's book is a rich narrative analysis built on 'profiles of practitioners' created through case-focused interviews.

Major recent contributions to the literature on CPT successfully link mainstream planning theory to topical themes such as post-modernism, complexity, and 'organization of hope' in conflict situations (the books mentioned above), as well as to institutionalism (Verma 2007), networks (Albrechts and Mandelbaum 2005), and pragmatism. Books and survey articles on CPT (Healey 2009, 2011) have given more attention to these concepts than to other central themes, forming and being formed by current economic-political trends, such as sustainability, globalization, or web-based arenas of interchange. Notably, the nine-volume series *Classics in Planning* (published by Edward Elgar 2006–2008) contains no articles on planning and neo-liberalism. The same is true for the three-volume set on *Critical Essays in Planning Theory* (2008) edited by Jean Hillier and Patsy Healey.

The present book takes a step in the direction of politics by exploring the relationship between CPT and neo-liberalism (including its offspring, new public management). This focal part of the book situates CPT and its planning practice in relation to the most powerful economic-political ideology since the collapse of communism. This will hopefully meet a demand, as Lovering (2009:5) observes that very few planning textbooks have the word neo-liberalism even in their index. Allmendinger (2009) and Low (1991) are exceptions, but they do not comment on planning-related neo-liberal policies or on the relationship between neo-liberalism and CPT. The possibility that CPT might have the unintended consequence of facilitating neo-liberal policies makes the study of other key themes of the book – dealing with power and taking responsibility – particularly apposite.

The political side of planning is also brought out clearly in the analysis of the activist communicative planner role. Explication of that role fills two chapters and is not primarily about technical expertise or communication, but about strategies for coalition and participation. At the centre of the activist planner's strategy is the establishment of an informal coalition with an interest group or a social movement external to the official process. The political aim of the activist planners is to generate outside pressure that can help them to move the planning outcome towards fairness by inducing stakeholders to seek solutions in a deliberative manner.

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The first material for this book was collected during a three months stay at Murdoch University in Western Australia in 2002. I am grateful to Dora Marinova, then chair of the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy, for providing facilities and an inspiring working environment. Thanks also to Jean Hillier, then at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, for stimulating chats on planning theory, and to both Jean and her planner husband Theo for bringing me along on excursions into the countryside. The lively debate in the Australian media at the time, about restructuring and commercializing the universities, triggered my interest in neo-liberalism.

Much later in the writing process, I had research stays in New Zealand and South Africa, two other countries that have experienced their fair share of neo-liberalization. During my three months in Auckland in 2007, I concentrated on responsibility issues. This is one of Michael Gunder's interests, and he read and commented on early versions of the texts for Part III of this book. I am grateful to him for that, and for making the arrangements for my fruitful sabbatical at his place of work, the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Auckland.

Vanessa Watson kindly received me as a visiting professor to the University of Cape Town in 2008. Despite her busy days as acting head of the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics, she often came by my office for invigorating talks about planning theory in developing countries or the intriguing politics of her country. Vanessa and the people she introduced me to, especially Pieter Jolly, research associate with the Department of Archaeology, provided me with a very pleasant three months in Cape Town.

The help of peers in reading and commenting on research publications is invaluable, and thanks are due to those who have contributed to the various chapters in this way at different stages of completion. They are Nils Aarsæther, Ernest Alexander, John Forester, Michael Gunder, Jean Hillier, Judith Innes, Tore Langmyhr, Torill Nyseth, Matti Siemiatycki, John Sturzaker, and Rachel Weber. Patsy Healey read the whole manuscript thoroughly and came up with excellent advice for improvements. Furthermore, I appreciate the broad-mindedness and indulgence of my working place, the Department of Civil and Transport Engineering at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), and my colleagues' acceptance of the fact that I spend time on research that is only indirectly linked to transport planning. Careful checks of

the language are indispensable, and I acknowledge the efforts of Nancy Lea Eik-Nes at NTNU in Trondheim, who has improved the English of the entire book.

Earlier versions of about half of the chapters have been published as journal articles or book chapters, and I value the constructive assistance of editors and anonymous referees. Chapter 1 uses material from the paper 'Collective action: balancing public and particularistic interests' which was written for the *Oxford Handbook of Urban Planning* edited by Rachel Weber and Randall Crane and scheduled to be published by Oxford University Press in 2012. The paper was significantly changed for inclusion in the present book and now focuses more on legitimation and less on the public interest. In 2006, Chapter 2 was published with the same title 'The logic of critical communicative planning: transaction cost alteration', in *Planning Theory* volume 5, issue 3, pages 223–54. This article won the AESOP Prize Paper Competition as the best article in European planning journals in 2006. Chapter 5 is an abridged and recast version of a comprehensive literature study with around 770 references, which was published as 'Neo-liberal urban planning policies: a literature survey 1990–2010' in *Progress in Planning* in 2011 (volume 76, issue 4, pages 147–99). Two different versions of Chapter 6 have already been published. The first appeared in *European Planning Studies* in 2009 (volume 17, issue 1, pages 65–84) with the title 'Planners' role: torn between dialogical ideals and neo-liberal realities'. A more theoretical version with the title 'Role conflict: planners torn between dialogical ideals and neo-liberal realities' appeared in 2010 in the book *Ashgate Research Companion to Planning Theory: Conceptual Challenges for Spatial Planning*, edited by Jean Hillier and Patsy Healey and published by Ashgate. The paper was revised once again for the present volume, and the classification of values is now given more attention. Earlier versions of Chapters 8, 9, and part of Chapter 10 were published together in 2009 as one long article in *Progress in Planning* (volume 72, issue 1, pages 1–51). The title was 'Responsibilities of theorists: the case of communicative planning theory'. The material for Chapter 8 has undergone thorough re-editing, and most of Chapter 10 is written anew. All previously published texts are reproduced here with the permission of the publishers.

Figure 7.1, showing the area Svartlamon, is used with the permission of the copyright holder, freelance journalist Bjørn Lønnum Andreassen. The seven other photographs are under the copyright of the author.

Introduction: Critiques and Evolutions of Communicative Planning Theory

For theorists and practitioners alike, it is necessary to know how the planning processes they work on can be justified. They should also know how to counter severe criticism of their favoured mode of planning or at least know how to determine the validity of grave objections. This book aims to convey such knowledge with relevance to communicative planning theory (CPT). In addition, much attention is given to the notion of responsibility, which is important in the ethics of planners as well as theorists. The book discusses the responsibilities of planning theorists, for example, regarding the consequences of practical applications of their theories.

The book has strong bearings on how to plan within a critical, communicative conceptual framework, although it is a contribution to planning theory. The discussion of combined activism and deliberation as a means to improve the empowering capacity of communicative planning in adverse conditions, and the increased emphasis on substantive values in order to prevent planners from unwittingly serving neo-liberal agendas, are both intended to have practical implications. Readers will hopefully find that CPT can be meaningfully reformed and pragmatically ameliorated in response to challenging criticism, and that there are interesting and helpful ways to reflect on the moral responsibility that planning theorists encounter – obligations which they might perceive as especially thought-provoking when faced with harsh disapproval.

Initial information is provided in three places. The preface stated the purpose of the book, identified its likely readership, and explained how the main themes of the book relate to the ongoing discourse on planning theory. Chapter 1 starts by acquainting readers with the essentials of CPT. This introduction tells what the book is about, why it is topical and important, and why planners as well as theorists will benefit from reading it. I also offer a brief account of the debates about CPT.

Reviving critical planning theory: dealing with pressure, neo-liberalism, and responsibility in communicative planning

From the outset, CPT was meant to provide a critical foundation for planning, as it was in some respects an adaptation of the critical theory of communicative action developed by Jürgen Habermas (Eriksen and Weigård 2003). The title of the book reflects my conviction that even contemporary planning theory should have a critical side to it that questions the political and economic processes of which urban planning is an integral part.

The overall argument

This book is about CPT, and especially the branch insisting that planning theory should take a critical view of society. This critical strand of CPT is here called critical pragmatism. From its critical perspective, problems of exclusion, inequity, discrimination, and private interests overshadowing the interests of the broader citizenry call for close probing. The basic assumption providing the motivation for the book is that CPT has been criticized in ways that can erode its credibility as a critical planning theory.

Two points of severe criticism have been raised against CPT. The first objection has been bothering planning theorists since the inception of communicative planning: The CPT mode of planning depends on the intellectual force of arguments; it has not devised an effective strategy for dealing with stakeholders who rely on their social position to dominate the planning process and ensure an outcome of their own liking. This objection is often followed up with the rhetorical question of what right planners have to drag ordinary people, protest groups, neighbourhood associations, etc., into co-opting and exhausting participation processes if there is no operational strategy for preventing (for example) real estate groups or strong commercial developers from getting the upper hand in the local negotiations.

A different but equally salient problem is how to keep CPT as a critical theory of planning, avoiding that it is intentionally – or especially unintentionally – used to justify policies that support the predominant economic-political ideology of the time. This problem was not often aired before the turn of the century, after many sections of society had been colonized by the neo-liberal ideology that hails entrepreneurialism, private business, market logic, economic efficiency, and materialistic lifestyle. Neo-liberalism is not only a programme of resolving problems of society by means of competitive markets, but also the latest institutional form of capitalism. The second point of criticism says that communicative planning and CPT serve neo-liberalism whether this is intended or not. It is a grave accusation, as many regimes with

neo-liberal agendas have limited the tasks, resources, and mandates assigned to public planning, and because a considerable part of the public regards the policies often denoted neo-liberal as a threat to the living conditions of ordinary people.

The arguments put forward by the critics of CPT need to be scrutinized, but this is not my errand in the present book. I am neither out to take issue with the critics nor to write a defence of CPT. My approach is to take the core critical arguments seriously, even if the consequences of CPT outlined by the critics are very different from what communicative planning theorists intended. The aim is to investigate what can be done to revive CPT as a critical theory of planning, even in the eyes of those who consider the arguments of the critics to have theoretical appeal or empirical merit.

The purpose of the book, then, is to make CPT less vulnerable and more robust in the face of accusations that this planning theory serves other interests than intended. A convincing argument is needed, as critical pragmatism cannot claim to be a critical planning theory if it mainly serves the prevailing economic-political interests and sidetracks the opposition into exhausting processes that offer little substantive reward.

I start the strengthening of CPT by offering new arguments legitimizing this planning theory. Thereafter, I respond to the no-strategy-against-power critique by shaping an activist role compatible with CPT. The idea is that the planner builds an alliance with activist organizations external to the planning process and encourages them to put pressure on stakeholders that act too self-serving at the expense of broader interests. The serving neo-liberalism critique is addressed by identifying substantive criteria for good plans that are closely associated with the procedural values that CPT is promoting. When the outcomes of communicative planning satisfy these criteria, it will be unreasonable to describe the plans as serving neo-liberalism.

Some of the critics strike out at CPT indirectly by attacking the communicative planning theorists for being politically naïve and acting as if spellbound by their own good intentions. I provide a basis for assessing this critique by analyzing the theorists' responsibility for end-uses, and their responsibility for inclusion, which is a core aspiration of CPT. The analysis of responsibility ends in an account of the challenges of critical planning theorists as educators and scholars in an academia that seems to be ever more influenced by neo-liberal ideas. This outline does not clear communicative planning theorists of all suspicion of naïvely misjudging the effects of their own theoretical constructs, but at least clarifies what critical theorists are up against in many contemporary universities.

Critical planning theory

If one or both of the above points of criticism are valid, CPT will have applications and end-uses which promote a narrow set of economistic and market-oriented values, and will most likely give priority to segments of the population that are already well off. This is all very different from the original intentions of communicative planning theorists: to deepen democracy, 'to spread political responsibility, engagement, and action', and to take steps 'toward the renewal of structurally sensitive, practically engaged, ethically and politically critical planning theory and practice' (Forester 1989:162). This is a manifesto to which I subscribe.

Critical theory illuminates the ways in which people accept societies characterized by massive inequities and the systematic exploitation of the many by the few as normal. Critical theory reveals how bureaucratic rationality, hedonic individualist ethics, and the logic of dominant ideology push people into ways of living that perpetuate discrimination along economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender lines (Brookfield 2005). Brenner's characterization of critical urban theory is also valid for critical planning theory:

> Rather than affirming the current condition of cities as the expression of transhistorical laws of social organization, bureaucratic rationality or economic efficiency, critical urban theory emphasizes the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space – that is, its continual (re)construction as a site, medium and outcome of historically specific relations of social power. (Brenner 2009:198)

Critical planning theory should examine the relationships between urban planning and the changing balance of social forces, power relations, socio-spatial inequalities and political-institutional arrangements that shape, and are in turn shaped by, the evolution of neo-liberal urbanization. Critical planning theory must reveal and question the ways in which planning contributes to the lubrication of the processes of taking unfairness for granted. Critical distancing from, and then oppositional re-engagement with, the ways and means of the dominant culture of planning are what critical planning theory is striving for. A critical theory of planning can be deemed effective to the extent that it keeps alive the hope that society can be changed by planned collective action to make it fairer and more compassionate despite the strong structures that favour the interests of the already well off.

The book is an effort to revive critical planning theory in the sense that:

- It aims to reinforce the legitimizing rationale for communicative planning which is based on autonomy (anti-paternalism), the improved quality of decisions made not by a single authority but by many people pondering the same question, and the appreciation of relational goods created in interactions between people working in concert.
- It tries to find new ways that communicative planners can resist pressure from predominant actors.
- It suggests that substantive criteria should be worked out so that it can be checked whether the elements of the plan are in line with the values guiding the process. When the values of CPT are brought out clearly in the plan as well as the process, it is easier to make sure that communicative planning does not run the errand of ideologies at odds with its own core values.

It is the task of planning theorists to respond to critique, sort out conditions in which the unfavourable assessment of CPT may be well-grounded, and consider ways to revise the theory and improve anticipated results of applications. The present book is an attempt to fulfill this felt obligation, and proposals for a revised critical CPT are offered in Chapter 4 on activist communicative planning and in Chapter 7 on the value approach to examining whose interests CPT is serving.

Takeaway for practice

The analysis in the central part of the book is explicitly based on the neo-liberal reality in which an increasing number of planners are working. Neo-liberal ideology is strongly market-oriented and commends transfer of authority from governments to the private sector. Even more than before, public planners must expect opposition from strong market actors who challenge any notion of public interest by pursuing private goals using power strategies that disrupt open and fair deliberation.

For example, the neo-liberal policy of privatizing large airports creates powerful private actors with whom planners in adjacent municipalities have to co-operate in order to produce city plans with a balanced geographical development of housing and employment, and land transport infrastructure with capacity for serving not only the aeronautical functions but also all activities in the airport city that are meant for a wider public than the air travellers. How can the planners marshal support if coordination to the benefit of the entire city seems to count for little with the airport corporation? Can alliances be built with external groups – perhaps activist organizations – to put pressure on the airport owners to act on goals beyond their own