Book Review:

Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies
- Patsy Healey, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997

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Patsy Healey were the first voices questioning the merit of detaching planning theory from substantive theories about the operation of urban and regional systems. Although in recent years a few others have noted the desirability of joining together the knowledge of spatial systems with generic planning theory, until Healey's recent book, no other scholar has actually taken on this mammoth task. It is not easy to weave together in the late 1990s several key fields of knowledge that have meantime developed extensively—and separately.

Collaborative Planning is a single-handed enterprise of presenting an all-comprising theory of urban and regional ('spatial' in continental English) planning that seeks to weave together into a single, strong fabric, the most recent and comprehensive knowledge about how spatial systems (what Healey calls 'places') work, together with a thorough presentation of how public sector planning ('government') operates in practice. But Healey's goal in undertaking this ambitious work is not only to summarise and integrate several otherwise almost estranged fields of knowledge. Her motivation is to present a normative view of how planning institutions, processes and decision can be reshaped and improved in order to be able to deal with today's 'fragmented societies'. Within the fabric-weaving analogy, I have imagined the substantive theories of urban and regional systems as the horizontal strands of thread, and the theories of planning and governance as the vertical ones. Although Healey divides the book into three rather than two parts, the book's structure is true to this analogy.

The first part, titled 'Towards an institutionalist account and communicative theory of planning', is in fact an overview of the book's argument, presenting an exquisite weaving together of the two types of threads that the author goes on to elaborate in depth in the two subsequent parts. Part I presents a useful, in-depth, yet critical survey of the various traditions and views of planning never brought together as Healey has done. She begins with the most integrated survey I have yet encountered of the various traditions of planning thought—not only those to be found in generic 'planning theory', which Healey calls 'policy analysis and planning', but also in economic planning and physical-development planning (a special chapter is devoted to the latter). The author shows how each one of these three planning traditions has evolved in a way that leads to, or calls for, the development of the 'institutionalist analysis and communicative approaches'.

Part I continues with a chapter providing a refreshing new view of the modern and post-modern approaches to planning that integrates works by philosophers and political sociologists, with special attention to the contributions of Giddens and Habermas—two thinkers who have influenced Healey most.

Based on these contributions, Healey proposes the 'institutionalist approach' for today's fragmented societies, which argues that

a way through the dilemmas of collaborating across cultural differences is... to build shared systems of meaning and ways of acting. Local environmental planning thus becomes a project in the formation and transmission of cultural layers. (p. 64)

In Part II Healey weaves the 'horizontal' strands of theory about urban and regional systems. She presents not one, but three different disciplinary perspectives—sociology, economics, and ecology. Such analysis cannot be found in any textbook in these fields because it seeks to synthesize current knowledge about trends in urban and regional systems with the implications each hold for planning theory. The survey begins with what the author refreshingly calls 'everyday life'—the sociological and demographic perspectives. The diversity of lifestyle in a telecommuting and mobile society, alongside the high degree of awareness among interest groups about the need to participate in decisions, has reduced planners' ability to categorize and quantify social trends. Instead, the institutional approach, which focuses on the social dynamics of households collaborating with each other in many overlapping circles, is gaining momentum.

I have found the second chapter on economics especially illuminating. Noting cynically that 'patterns of land value are not an even surface, sloping outwards from a central peak' as some regional economists have argued (p. 158), Healey sheds fresh light on 'the relational webs which interlink landowners, developers, investors, purchasers, lessees and renters in the development process' (p. 149). The third chapter, 'Living in the natural world', is an excellent survey of current theories about the meaning of the environment and their important influence on planning thought in recent years.
The gist of the messages of the three chapters about theories ‘in planning’ is that spatial planning has developed the most effective way of bringing to bear in a one discourse, knowledge about the economic, environmental and social dimensions, and is therefore the field most suited to providing guidance to governance decisions about these issues. In today’s fragmented societies, planning holds the potential of gaining even more importance in coming years.

The third part of this book is its raison d’être. Here, Healey develops her view of the new form of governance—collaborative planning—as the desirable alternative to current styles of planning and the wider domain of governance.

Healey’s view of collaborative planning is of a discourse held among a multitude of ‘cultural’ or ‘political’ communities. This planning conversation starts from divergent points and aims at achieving a temporal, flexible understanding about the coexistence of all those different voices at one place. Collaborative planning draws on communicative planning theory which emphasises the connection of knowledge to action, of mutual learning and therefore of the importance of communication in the planning process. This is the normative framework for the collaborative conception of planning. Healey merges this conception of planning with ‘new institutionalism’—a social theory that focuses on inter-personal relations and argues that social institutions, as a formalisation of these relations, shape our action and at the same time are shaped by them. The contemporary arena for handling public affairs is an arena of plurality, fragmentation and diversity. The challenge of public governance activities, and planning among them, is to create a public realm for the inclusionary discourse of political, cultural communities.

Healey does not present a blueprint to collaborative planning—the reader would have been exceedingly surprised had she done so. Instead, in her important concluding chapter, she provides a set of parameters and criteria for the systematic institutional design of collaborative planning. These include five attributes (I would have called them ‘mandates’): recognise the range and variety of stakeholders; acknowledge that much governance work occurs outside the formal agencies; open up opportunities for informal initiatives; foster inclusion of all diverse groups; and be continually open and accountable. In addition, Healey suggests four parameters which political communities should be encouraged to adopt: rights and duties, resources, competencies, and criteria for ‘redeeming challenges’. The latter are of special interest in that they present a fresh challenge to planning ethics.

Collaborative Planning is not a book based on several simple, linearly argued premises. One cannot easily skim this book, but must rather delve into it in depth. If I may return to our analogy, one can say that by tightly weaving the horizontal yarn of theories of urban systems along with the vertical yarn of theories of planning as governance, the author has created a highly durable fabric in the form of the normative theory of collaborative planning. This is the great strength of this book. But this tight weaving has also created the one weakness. In seeking to make sure that the two directions of yarn are woven tightly, the author at times repeats similar arguments in several different contexts. But that does not diminish from the usefulness of each and every chapter.

Healey’s book is a major, carefully argued contribution, which should raise the discourse among planning theorists to a new level—a level reserved for a book that succeeds in the ambitious task of weaving together, into one fabric, theories of planning and theories in planning.