

Is Planning a Technical or Political Activity? Discuss in Relation to the History of Planning Theory and Practice

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Abstract: In the field of urban and regional planning, planning plays different roles in different times, it has become a controversial topic that planning is a technical activity or political activity. The objective of this study is to discuss a detailed understanding of the related theories and show the changing process of the position planning as a political activity, rather than a simply technical activity with the development of urban planning, and the results showed the relationship between technical activity and political activity in urban and regional planning.

Keywords: Political activity; Technical activity; Urban and regional planning; Physical planning; Advocacy planning; Rationalism planning; Collaborative planning

1. Introduction

Throughout this paper, the political activity will mean the participation of multi-stakeholder groups and the corresponding planning decisions, and the political process includes the negotiation and compromise among different interest groups. While the technical activity will be used to refer to achieve the goal of urban planning by using specific methods, such as scientific analysis, spatial planning skill and mathematical model (Bridge and Watson, 2012). Planning is a technical activity or political activity has been a controversial topic for a long time in the field of urban and regional planning. And many scholars have put forward some related theories to express their views on this issue. For example, the theories which were proposed by the early utopian planners positioned planning more as a technical exercise. On the contrary, the theory of advocacy planning, which thought planning is a political activity to a larger extent (Davidoff, 1965). This paper think that planning plays different roles at different times, and it is a political activity or a technical activity, which is influenced by the historical backgrounds at that time.

The aim of this essay is to discuss a detailed understanding of the related theories and show the changing process of the position planning as a political activity, rather than a simply technical activity with the development of urban planning. The article has been organized in the following way. The first section of this paper will examine that planning was regarded as a technical activity before the mid-20th century through discussing utopian ideas, systems theory and rational theory. The next part will deal with advocacy planning and collaborative planning, which proved planning as a political activity. Finally, it will briefly summarize the relationship between technical activity and political activity in urban planning.

2. Theories which posit planning as a technical activity

2.1. Physical planning

After the Second World War, cities were damaged seriously. Therefore, physical planning was the mainstream of urban planning in that period, and its main performance

was the large-scale construction of dwelling houses (Taylor, 2010). At the same time, due to the environmental pollution and the deterioration of health conditions, the urban planning which based on industrial development and land use had gradually shifted to solving the problems of social and public health (ibid). Also, with the rapid increase of the urban population, high density and traffic congestion had become serious problems for a city. Therefore, some utopian theories which reflected that urban planning was mainly concentrated on technical activity were proposed by planners.

Utopia is a type of thinking that could ignore the limitations of natural conditions to create perfect cities and societies, and three of the outstanding representative figures are Howard, Wright and Le Corbusier. Taking the 'radiant city' which put forward by Le Corbusier as an example, he thought that cities need a clear functional partition, there should be skyscrapers in the center and the broad green space should be between buildings, what is more, roads need to be arranged according to the function classification and set up the stereoscopic cross. The scheme is shown in Figure 1. He believed that the city could not only maintain the high density of the population but also form a quiet and healthy urban environment. Le Corbusier's theory made planning more scientific and embodied the principle of technique.

Like Le Corbusier, Howard and Wright also did not fully realize their utopian ideals, but the theory put forward by them has had

a tremendous impact on the contemporary city in the 20th century .

In general, during the period after the end of the Second World War, European countries were severely damaged, and meeting the most basic needs of people was the main task. Besides, the urban planning lacked a comprehensive and in-depth cognition for the diversity and complexity of the urban phenomena at the time, what is more, it was an elite program that dominated by architects and a description of the ultimate blueprint for the future . Therefore, urban planning was considered a technical activity without any specific political values or judgments, and there was no discussion of the planning objectives at that time.

Soon after, the theory of designing tendency was questioned by some social scientists, they thought the planners with the aesthetic perspective on urban development excessively, and they lacked the concentration on the content of the social level, which made people away from the real social problems .

2.2 Systems theory and rational theory

After the World War II, Keeble (1952) explained the rationalism planning theory comprehensively. The theory held that the planning scheme is the inevitable result of the rational analysis of the current situation of the city. After that, the process of urban planning theory has become more reasonable, and rationalism planning has become the dominant planning idea. Influenced by the rationalism planning, systems theory and rational theory emerged during the period from the mid to late 1960s.

3. Planning is regarded as a political activity

The post-war mainstream theory has always regarded the essence of urban planning as a technical activity. However, the urban planning practice of the radical modernism in the early stages and utopian integrated approach, which caused widespread public protests and the discussion on the value of urban planning. The assessment of urban planning was not a simple technical issue, rather than the problem of how to distribute the benefits and costs of planning among different interest groups (Keller and Packel, 2013). Planner began to realize that urban planning is closer to the politics in substance, rather than technique or science. Therefore, it is more appropriate to treat urban planning as a political activity that guided by the realization of specific values.

3.1 Advocacy planning

Because a wide range of social conflicts and cultural reflections broke out in western countries in the 1960s. Different social groups have different interest demands after social transformation. In addition, Davidoff made a self-criticism about ‘technical principle’, he believed that planners should be involved in the political process and undertake the client’s initiative responsibility to pay special attention to the interests of vulnerable groups, which are ignored by society (Davidoff, 1965). Thus, advocacy planning emerged in urban planning. Advocacy planning is a political process that the planner defends for their team, social stratum or individual . It is essentially a process of separate the power, and this theory recognized that different social interest groups have the rights of participation in urban planning.

The core spirit of advocacy planning is to strive for more power and higher status for citizens in a pluralistic political structure, thus improving a democratic political system. And it emphasized the equality and justice are the common targets of human social and political development (ibid). Consequently, as a city planner, they should not only undertake the task of urban construction but also take the initiative to reconstruct values, considering the issues from the viewpoint of the social underclass and coordinating the relationship between planning and political life.

3.2 Collaborative planning

In the late 20th century, under capitalist democracy, planning did not satisfy the requirements of democracy. Some powerful interest groups still use their power to profit from urban development, planning and design. The competition began among different social groups which with different social values, priorities and needs to benefit from planning. Hence, planning had become a political process of competition among different values. At this point, planners began to find ways to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders as much as possible. From then on, communication and negotiation became more and more significant. In order to have a better coordination process, the traditional conflict management planning was replaced by collaborative planning (ibid).

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the purpose of the current study was to explore planning is a technical activity or a political activity by talking about a series of related theories. On the one hand, this assignment has explained the origins, the developing processes and the effects of utopian ideas, systems theory and rational theory in the field of urban planning, and how these theories posited planning as a technical activity. On the other hand, the paper has highlighted that planners realized it is more accurate to regard planning as a political activity since the 1960s, advocacy planning and collaborative planning has been discussed in this section to prove planning is a political activity, rather than simply technical activity.

In the process of evolution and development of the planning theory, planning was regarded as a technical activity before the 1960s. In that period, planners put urban planning at the engineering level, which fundamentally negated the connection between urban planning and politics. In the field of urban and regional planning, there are indeed many engineering and technical problems that need to be studied, but they are only partial means to achieve the major goals of urban planning. With the development of the society, due to the intervention of public power, planning is not only technical work and spatial planning method but also consider more factors of people. As a result, planning was treated as a political activity gradually.

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