The future of planning?

Simone Abram

Rather than looking at the designs that planning promises, anthropologist Simone Abram prefers to consider planning as a performance increasingly used to organise our societies in the present. This could help us understand the conditions that often make planning infelicitous or to the contrary, successful.

Planning is becoming increasingly universal. Firstly, planning techniques are being adopted increasingly widely around the world, and secondly, planning regimes are incorporating increasing areas of each state's territory. While planning theorists and geographers have been most interested in questions of spatiality, anthropologists have become alert to the relevance of time and temporalities (Guyer 2007; Bear 2014). After all, planning is a process of ordering (or attempting to) through time, and imagining the changes that could come about in the future. Thinking about planning-in-time opens up new ways of thinking about what this increasingly ubiquitous process is, what it does, and what it does to us.

As soon as we try to define planning more closely, we realise that what is referred to as planning is less than uniform. What we include under the English heading "planning" is not quite the same as the French *urbanisme*, nor does it cover exactly what the German *Raumordnung* or Norwegian *planlegging* might. The difference between American planning and British planning provides ongoing misunderstandings among planning theorists (see Sanyal 2005). However, at a general level, planning entails a broad set of tactics, technologies, and institutions to try to control a collective passage into the future – a set of practices and ideas that have spread across private and public organisations. At the state level, planning is a way of managing the present, of governing and of organising the relationships between the state, citizenry and other entities, whether non-departmental public bodies, not-for-profit agencies or commercial organisations. It is this transition through time, from an experienced reality to a desired future, that excites the interest of anthropologists, and which offers a fresh theoretical stance towards what planning signifies (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013).

What planning does

The anthropological approach sees planning as a performative act, drawing on recent scholarly activity on performativity, and social studies of science (see Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). From this perspective, plans can be seen not as collections of papers or of representations of the world, but as a way of doing the world, of performing modernity and its successors. Recent anthropological work that explores the quotidian practices and rituals that make up politics, policy, democracy and changing forms of government demonstrate the interplay of everyday systems of power and resistance in which people find themselves implicated. Annalise Riles (2006) points out that documents are the paradigmatic artefacts of modern knowledge practices, and we can see that

planning documents perform a certain kind of work, as much about their specific content as about the kind of conceptual orders they lay out.

Key to these orders, being one of its common components, is the inherent optimism and future-orientation of planning. This very nature leads to a characteristic tension produced by planning: one thing we really do know about planning is that the future promised in plans is always slightly out of reach, the ideal outcome always elusive, and the plan retrospectively always flawed. So how can we understand this widespread future-oriented practice that rarely produces the goods it promises?

Planning as a promise

We can understand planning as a kind of compact between now and the future, a promise offered by the state that may be more or less convincing to the subjects and objects of planning, one that can be more or less actualised. The promise of a plan may be institutionalised in different ways – from a mere expectation to an instruction, a policy, a project, a blueprint, an exercise in democracy or a law. It may include some element of moral obligation that ties the present to the future, and to the past too. Part of what makes the plan a particular kind of promise relates to the emergence of modern planning in the 19th century. While many authors define modernity according to particular institutions (such as the democratic nation state or liberal market economies), Björn Wittrock (2000) argues that these institutions appeared at different times in different countries, and so cannot suffice to mark the appearance of the modern era. Instead, he identifies important conceptual changes that were constituted in the emergence of promissory notes. These notes "point to desiderata that can be formulated about a range of achievements that may be reached by members of a given community" (Wittrock 2000, p. 37) – not vague desires, but specific states of affairs expected to be met. Promissory notes provided common reference points in public debates, founded on "radically new presuppositions about human agency, historical consciousness and the role of reason in forging new societal institutions"; in other words, a reformulation of the relationship between society, civil society and the body politic, and the emergence of key concepts of society. If we see plans as a form of promissory document, we can see how they gained a role in regulating the contradictions of 19th-century development, and in formulating "the social" as a problem. Planning is also materialised through a series of notes of different kinds, including guidance notes, forward plans and planning guidance. And plans require a particular social context to be produced, and institutional structures for them to be contested or enforced.

What makes the promise of planning particularly interesting is that it involves actors who are corporate bodies – the corporation[1] is the central principle of governments and commercial enterprises, a transcendent and metaphorised body that has made modernity (Robertson 2006a, 2006b). Plans are published as the product of a council-corporation, and, by performing the act of promising in a plan, its producer indexes itself as a performative person, the corporate body ("the council"). At the same time, they reference an audience for the plan, categorised as a public, a business community, the development industry, and so on. In the process of presentation, the complex relations between planners, designers, levels of state and local administration, public and private are elided.

Promising is a particular form of performance. A promise has effects and brings about obligations on the part of the promisor. For example, when council planners (the promisors) present their visions for a material improvement of the built environment to a public of residents and citizens (the promisees), they create an expectation (or at least an illusion) that this promise will be fulfilled.

Thus, the promise of planning is much more than "just" speech; it should produce relations that endure between promisor, promisee and the thing or action promised. Merely saying "I promise" is

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[1]   A corporation is authorised by law to act as one individual, separate from the action of its members, who need continually to convince us that they are effective, that they have control over their futures and ours, and that they exist.

not sufficient to create a convincing effect. According to Austin (1962), a promise must offer something that the promisor would not be doing anyway; it must be offered with intent to fulfil the promise, offered freely and sincerely, and the promisor must have the ability to fulfil the promise, and so on. If such conditions are unfulfilled, the promise has not so much failed as been abused. A promise becomes "infelicitous" when a procedure is erroneous or misinvoked.

The infelicity of planning

In South Africa, planning and its techniques of zoning, segregated development and housing policy were a key state tool for implementing apartheid policy, and the problem of how to reform planning has been a central question of the post-apartheid era. Deborah James (2013) explains that the planners who staff the government planning offices often move between working for government and working for the NGOs that seek to secure access to land for the poorest. Who is promisor and who is promisee becomes complicated, destabilising the impression of a coherent state. Working out what planning should be – for example, whether land reform should be tenure reform – is an ongoing problem.

The complexity of planning offers many opportunities for such infelicity. Beyond the conditions considered in philosophies of promising, there are infelicities that arise from the obduracy of procedures, tools and the materiality of what is to be reformed and transformed. Some places may positively refuse to be transformed by a plan. The plan can thus be understood to take the place of the performative utterance of the promise with important material implications. This promise must be performed according to the correct procedures, produced at the right time, approved by the appropriate committees, announced using adequate mechanisms, available to the proper kind of scrutiny, and it should ideally produce concrete and measurable effects. If it does not fulfil such procedural niceties, it lays itself open to challenge. If its content is not adequate or its ambitions are weak – for example, if it only offers to do what would happen anyway – then it might be criticised as "just talk" (Vike 2013). If the context in which a plan is issued is considered incorrect or infelicitous, the actions arising from a plan can be challenged either through due process (e.g. judicial review) or on the ground (direct action). Finally, if the promises it contains are not fulfilled, it will be considered invalid or might be adapted, in retrospect, to reflect the changing circumstances, or be deemed altogether illegitimate (but when do we ever formally evaluate a forward plan made twenty years ago?).

Our point in highlighting the elusiveness of promises is that the relationship between the spatio-temporal orders laid out in plans and the realities they engender is always fragile and multivalent. The gaps between ideal, ideology and practice fill themselves with things unplanned, unexpected, inexplicable or overlooked. Instead of lamenting them, we can chart how people deal with these gaps and mismatches and start to understand what they mean. Using the idea of planning as an elusive promise is a means to undertake this task.

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