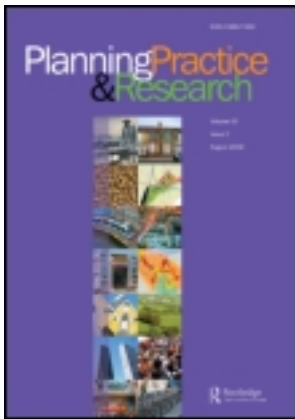


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ARTICLE

Planning Systems as Institutional Technologies: a Proposed Conceptualization and the Implications for Comparison

UMBERTO JANIN RIVOLIN

Abstract

Spatial planning systems have become the subject of much comparative research in recent years. This has resulted in very general classifications, while a definition of the subject of comparison remains vague. Any attempt at comparative evaluation has proved therefore to be difficult and controversial, impeding further theoretical and institutional progress. Against this backdrop, the present contribution is aimed as an effort towards conceptualization. The notion of ‘institutional technology’ is adopted in order to understand planning systems as specific social constructs, thus encompassing also the shaping of respective planning cultures. Implications for analysis and comparison are discussed.

Introduction

Urban, regional, and spatial planning is a capacious field of theories and practices, mostly developed in the last century, overall aiming to improve the quality and environmental conditions of places for human well-being (Healey & Hillier, 2008). Spatial planning activities and processes occur within frameworks of legally established objectives, tools, and procedures which, in modern states, are usually derived from fundamental constitutional rights. So, institutional ‘planning systems’ (Healey & Williams, 1993; Berry & McGreal, 1995; Newman & Thornley, 1996; Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 1997; Larsson, 2006; Janin Rivolin, 2008a; Nadin & Stead, 2008a,b, 2009) allow and rule, in various ways in all countries and regions of the world, involving multiple and complex processes of vertical (between policy levels) and horizontal (between policy sectors and between public and private subjects) interactions addressing the spatial organization of social life. At any point in time and space, however, ‘the final output of such a process is the act of physical development (or, in some cases, the decision not to develop, but to leave the land as it is)’ (Hall, 2002, p. 3).

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Spatial planning systems are not static objects, however. On the contrary, new needs of spatial reorganization driven by global change and the reshaping of institutional frameworks, such as those occurring through European integration, are determining various attempts of planning systems renewal almost everywhere (European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), 2007; Cullingworth & Caves, 2009). Even a worldwide re-scaling process of relationships between territory, public authority and individual rights appears to be in course (Swyngedouw, 2000; Sassen, 2006). This parallels an increasing attention to comparative research that, nonetheless, has so far resulted in very descriptive analyses, offering nothing more than rather colorless classifications of planning systems ‘families’ or, at best, ‘ideal types’ (Nadin & Stead, 2008a,b, 2009). Methodological difficulties of such comparative studies are certainly present (Pierre, 2005; Nadin & Stead, 2008b), which may explain recent recourse to more nuanced and ‘borderless’ reference notions, such as that of ‘planning cultures’ (Sanyal, 2005; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009; Ernste *et al.*, this issue). Whatever the reference is, the lack of clear definition of the subject of comparison seems however to be the ultimate obstacle to more fruitful observations and evaluations. Moreover, since spatial development and planning outcomes are commonly (i.e. outside the narrow circle of insiders) understood as the overall product of respective institutional contexts (CEC, 1997; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2001; World Bank, 2009), the persisting underestimation of spatial planning as a scientific or epistemic field (if compared to others) might also be a consequence of a missing conceptual definition of planning systems.

Against this backdrop, and based on previous research (Janin Rivolin, 2008a,b,c; Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2010), the present contribution proposes a tentative conceptualization of what planning systems are ‘in nature’. A planning system is here identified as ‘institutional technology’ and explained, as such, in its overall functioning and capacity to be renewed over time. Particularly, this concept explains the insurgence of planning practices and cultures within wider processes of ‘institutionalization’, triggered by a social convention concerning the public assigning of use rights in land. Highlighting the latter as the basic rationale of spatial planning activities may allow, in other words, to overcome a persisting (and misleading) conceptual separation between ‘planning systems’, as the configuration of formal and informal institutions (laws and rules) which guide spatial planning practice, and ‘planning cultures’, as referred to the concrete practices and mechanisms which determine the ways of planning (Blotevogel & Reimer, Getimis, this issue). The proposed arguments are overall addressed, on the one hand, to provide comparative research on spatial planning systems and cultures with a shared conceptual framework for more profitable classifications and evaluations. They support, on the other hand, the need to reconsider the institutional dimension of spatial planning (Verma, 2007; Moroni, 2010).

The second section after this introduction reviews comparative studies on planning systems, focusing on how this subject was progressively understood and on remaining conceptual gaps. The third discusses the analytical notion of ‘institutional technology’ for deeper understanding of the nature of planning systems. The fourth section proposes accordingly an analytical framework suitable to highlight the relevant dimensions and relationships which can explain the

operation and evolution of planning systems. The fifth presents an attempt to guide the practical application of the framework. The sixth discusses the emerging implications for comparison and evaluation of planning systems. A seventh conclusive section points out some more general consequences of what is previously argued.

In Search of a Reliable Notion of Planning System

Apart from earlier essays in the field of economic and regional planning (Bunbury, 1938; Hoffman, 1972), comparative research on spatial planning systems began rather recently, especially in the European context of Community integration (Davies *et al.*, 1989; Healey & Williams, 1993; Newman & Thornley, 1996; Balchin *et al.*, 1999). Identifying the nature and operation of planning mainly as a product of governmental and legal provisions, possibly influenced by professional traditions, these studies generally address the classification of planning systems according to broad ‘families’ of law and government structure (Table 1).

This usual comparative approach posed various limitations, namely the abstraction of the true variety that the countries and regions exhibit, and a tendency to overemphasize the effect of variation in legal styles and administrative structures. In other words, it was soon pretty ‘clear that behind the formal façade different kinds of applications may exist in practice’ (Larsson, 2006, p. 1). There was evidence, on the other hand, that government and legal frameworks are ‘important for the operation of planning, but planning systems can operate in similar ways under very different formal government and legal arrangements’ (Nadin & Stead, 2008b, p. 15). Other analyses began therefore to survey further contextual variables, like property markets’ behaviors as observable in representative cities (Berry & McGreal, 1995).

The *EU Compendium of Spatial Planning Systems and Policies* (CEC, 1997), which is the first comparative study in this field to be commissioned by a supra-national policy institution, adopted a more complex and sophisticated approach in order to position European (EU15) planning systems. Here the legal family context was used to help distinguish planning systems together with six other relevant variables (recalled in the penultimate section). This led to the identification of four ‘ideal types’ of planning system traditions existing in Europe – namely ‘regional economic’, ‘comprehensive integrated’, ‘land use management’, and ‘urbanism’ (CEC, 1997, pp. 36–37) – representing as much approximate reference frameworks to guide the understanding of (European) planning systems.

Apart from final outcomes and possible misunderstandings (as occurred in: ESPON, 2007; see: Nadin & Stead, 2008b, p. 14), the *EU Compendium* had the merit of posing the need for a wider notion of planning system, coming from a different view of its institutional substance. Institutions, which planning systems are certainly part of, are after all social constructs by which communities of individuals organize, with the spontaneity that historical conditions allow, their life in common, through structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing their behavior (Giddens, 1984; North, 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Kasper & Streit, 1998). Therefore, planning systems should be rather understood as ‘embedded in their historical context, the socio-economic, political and cultural

TABLE 1. Planning system typologies (Nadin & Stead, 2008a, 2009)

	Common law	Germanic	Napoleonic codes	
Davies <i>et al.</i> (1989)*	England		DK, DE, FR NL	
Newman and Thornley (1996)	British	Germanic	Napoleonic	East European
	IE, UK	AT, DE	BE, FR, IT, LU, NL, PT, KS	
CEC (1997)**	Land use regulation		Regional economic	Urbanism
	IE, UK (and BE)		FR, PT (and DE)	GR, IT, ES (and PT)
	AT, DK, FI, DE, NL, SE			
Farinós Dasi (2007)***	Land use regulation		Regional economic	Urbanism
	BE, IE, LU, UK (and PT, ES), CY, CZ, MT		FR, DE, PT (and IE, SE, UK), HU, LV, LT, SK	GR, IT, ES, CY, MT

*Davies *et al.* (1989) do not give a specific name to the two groups but contrast England and other systems based on their legal frameworks.

**The EU Compendium identifies 'ideal types' of planning traditions. Each country may exhibit combinations of ideal types in different degrees. The ideal types are dominant in the countries indicated here.

***The ESPON project took the EU Compendium traditions as a starting point and examined how countries, including the transition states of central and eastern Europe, were moving between them.

patterns that have given rise to particular forms of government and law' (Nadin & Stead, 2008a, p. 35). Interestingly, this perspective tends to overlap with the concept of 'planning culture', which looks 'embedded in the interdependencies of social, economic and political values, norms, rules and laws' (Hohn & Neuer, 2006, p. 293), and which has been subjected, as such, to more ambitious attempts of comparison (Sanyal, 2005; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009). In this view, both concepts of planning system and planning culture may help explain possible variations over time, as non-linear adjustments to external and internal pressures for change, as well as the result of this in terms of convergence or divergence (Healey & Williams, 1993) and of even wider phenomena, such as supposed 'Europeanization' of spatial planning (Davies, 1994; Giannakourou, 1998, this issue; Dabinett & Richardson, 2005; Dühr *et al.*, 2007, 2010; Maier, this issue).

Critical progress notwithstanding, however, the concept of planning culture proves to be too elusive for systematic comparisons (Getimis, this issue) and the notion of planning system still remains 'a generic term to describe the ensemble of territorial governance arrangements that seek to shape patterns of spatial development in particular places' (Nadin & Stead, 2008a, p. 35). Admittedly, planners are generally aware of dealing with 'systems which are mainly directed towards arranging the physical space in a suitable way and co-ordinating different activities within it' (Larsson, 2006, p. 1), but a reliable idea of 'the nature of systems in the full sense of the word' is missing (Nadin & Stead, 2008b, p. 8). Therefore, as the *EU Compendium* drafting experience has demonstrated, 'criteria that evaluate the effectiveness of a system are particularly controversial' (Nadin & Stead, 2008b, p. 8); furthermore, 'the precise nature of convergence, or for that matter, divergence, is difficult to measure and assess' (Nadin & Stead, 2008b, p. 3).

Ultimately, as it was possible to identify a few 'ideal types' of European planning systems, serving 'as measures against which reality can be compared' (Nadin & Stead, 2009, p. 290), a further effort in sharing a general notion of planning system would be necessary in order to achieve further progress in understanding, comparison and evaluation. In other words, without disregarding that 'planning takes place within a particular national framework' (Newman & Thornley, 1996, p. 27), we would 'need to guard against taking a stance from one country and ideally need a generic or universal conceptual framework or terminology to explain the characteristics of systems' (Nadin & Stead, 2008b, p. 3).

Planning System as Institutional Technology for Territorial Governance and the Crucial Purpose of Land Use Rights Assignment

A relevant remark, which may be generic and universal enough to pursue the aforementioned intent, is that 'Spatial planning is to a great deal concerned with 'land' in a broad sense' (Larsson, 2006, p. 2). With respect to the use of land, 'the design of a system for planning, implementation and control is much dependent on the general attitude in the society to public involvement and steering' (Larsson, 2006, p. 5). In other words, 'planning can be seen as a technology for collective action aimed at improving the physical environment' within societal organizations (Sager, 2009, p. 17), being therefore, at the same time, 'a set of practices itself subject to processes of institutionalization' (Gualini, 2001a, p. 51). It seems

ultimately plausible to represent a planning system as an ‘institutional technology of government’, operating ‘as a hinge between the government system [...] and the spatial production and consumption system’ (Mazza, 2003, p. 54, present author’s translation).¹

The concept of ‘institutional technology’ and the image of a hinge are of particular help in considering that, as the concept of ‘dual planning theory’ highlights, government aims and governance outcomes are often led to differ ‘in ‘agonistic’ societies characterised by conflicting interests’ (Sager, 2009, p. 14). It is undeniable indeed that the operation of a planning system is wholly embedded in political conflict featuring societal organizations; more precisely, in the continuous process of ‘expansion and exclusion’ that characterizes the social struggle for land use control, particularly exacerbated in capitalist societies (Plotkin, 1987). Government and governance are therefore coexisting dimensions of the planning process, and cannot be assumed as mutually exclusive or alternative perspectives (Heere, 2004).

In principle, however, institutions and organizations are not interchangeable concepts: while the latter ‘are systematic arrangements of resources for achieving explicit, shared goals’, the former are rather ‘sets of basic rules of conduct, acknowledged by a community’, which can ‘ensure a pattern-coordination among individual actions’ and become ‘a fund of knowledge accrued over the centuries, and available to all’ (Moroni, 2010, p. 277; see also: North, 1990; Kasper & Streit, 1998). Although they are both ‘artificial phenomena’ (different from ‘natural phenomena’), whereas organizations occur ‘by deliberate decision’, institutions occur ‘by convention’ as ‘the unintentional result of the interplay among intentional decisions and actions’ (Moroni, 2010, pp. 282–283; see also: Hayek, 1982). Particularly, as the social rule concerning the rights to *land ownership* is an institution derived from ‘conventions’ acquired along the course of history (Hume, 1740/2000, p. 315), conventions of similar nature have later conferred to public authorities the task of assigning rights to *land use* or, in other words, of deciding ‘whether they are more or less absolute or limited by specific conditions and rules’ (Larsson, 2006, p. 2).

Therefore, apart from legitimate aims of directing spatial development (an objective for which governments play as political organizations, and for which a ‘system’ for planning would not be necessary), a government system cannot do without a planning system in order to assign individual rights for the functioning of the ‘spatial production and consumption’ (from now on, briefly: ‘land use’) system (Webster & Lai, 2003). As institutional technology operating as a hinge between the public authority and the social usage of space, the planning system allows and rules this continuous process of land use rights assignation and, in so doing, can contribute to the improvement of physical environment to a certain extent.

More in detail, whoever tries to define more specific functions of planning systems (e.g. Healey & Williams, 1993, p. 702; Mazza, 2003, pp. 56–58) cannot avoid ascertaining that these always envisage combinations between *transformative functions* and a *guarantee function*. The former (strategic, design, developmental functions) are addressed towards defining new goals of spatial development or preservation and, therefore, new possible rights and values in land.

The latter (regulative function) is addressed towards defending established rights and values in land. In all planning systems, design activities addressed to transform, at various levels and extents, a spatial organization are therefore variously combined with control activities, aimed at defending the existing public and private rights possibly affected by new spatial developments (Janin Rivolin, 2008a). Under each planning system, as far as featured by more or less complex vertical and horizontal articulations, daily processes of (re-)assignment of rights in land occur according to more or less sophisticated and visible combinations between *planning* and *control* devices. Despite possible appearance, these combinations are neither obvious nor unchangeable.²

On recollection, the concept of institutional technology encompasses the broad idea of ‘usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, crafts, systems or methods of organization’ affecting the ‘species’ ability to control and adapt to their natural environment’, within ‘a structure or mechanism of social order and cooperation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals’.³ A planning system can be seen, in this light, as a specific social construct featuring the establishment and application, in certain institutional contexts in time and space, of certain techniques of social order and cooperation directed towards allowing and ruling the collective action for the use of space. Land lies at the crossroads of these activities and, in this view, it ‘must be seen not as an isolated physical unit but as something integrated into the whole of the society with its rules, institutions and socio-economic characteristics’; in particular, ‘the use of land and the value of land is far more than can be seen by the naked eye. [...] The rights to land, be it ownership or other interests, are vital’ (Larsson, 2006, p. 2).

Conceptual Implications and Analytical Framework

Following the argument presented above, this section is aimed at proposing a general conceptual framework which may contribute to the understanding and analysis of planning systems, intended as institutional technologies for territorial governance. Some abstractions and simplifications in the following explanations are imposed by the primary aim to provide comparative research with commonly acceptable and usable concepts and terminology, allowing ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) of planning systems. Moreover, as pointed out below, the concept of institutional technology is itself driver of arguments pertaining to the domain of ‘evolutionary explanations’. Differently from ‘nomic explanations’ (more common in physics and good for explaining both general and particular cases), these are effective for understanding ‘the principle’, rather than ‘the detail’ (Moroni, 2010, pp. 280–281; see also: Bird, 1998). A test of coherence with practical evidence will be however proposed in a successive section.

Diachronic Prospect

The concept of institutional technology encompasses, as mentioned, both the notions of ‘institution’ and of ‘technology’. They are united to be both recognized in science as evolutionary processes of innovation (Fageberg, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Schubert & von Wangenheim, 2006; Gardner *et al.*, 2007; Sarkar, 2007) or,

in other words, capable to produce ‘qualitative novelties that constitute a new kind or level of reality’ (Moroni, 2010, p. 279). In particular, institutions and (institutional) technologies can be seen as end-products of a creative selection process of trial and error based on ‘(i) first, the *generation* of variety (in particular, a variety of practices and rules); (ii) second, *competition* and reduction of the variety (of rules) via selection; (iii) third, *propagation* and some persistence of the solution (the system of rules) selected’ (Moroni, 2010, p. 279; see also: Rogers, 2003).

It is worth highlighting that, despite the abstraction necessary to explanation, the above assumption rejects any ‘structuralism’ and welcomes totally the centrality of individual choices and behaviors in social organizations, as is particularly stressed by the so-called ‘actor-centered institutionalism’ approach (Werlen, 1992; Scharpf, 1997; Ernste, this issue). It acknowledges indeed that ‘the raw material on which institutional evolution acts is supplied by human trial and error, by intentional agents trying to deal with problems’ (Moroni, 2010, p. 280). In so doing, it refuses completely an idea of institutions as exclusively formal and unanimated structures, basically separated from the confusion of real processes and supposedly aimed at reducing it to order (a mistake affecting the majority of comparative studies on planning systems, as argued previously).

As far as spatial planning systems are specifically concerned, the variety of *practices* (P) generated from the *social experience* of planning and control activities in an institutional context is continuous source of such an evolutionary process (Figure 1). The institutional technology operation is here continuously and variously challenged and stimulated by other public and private design

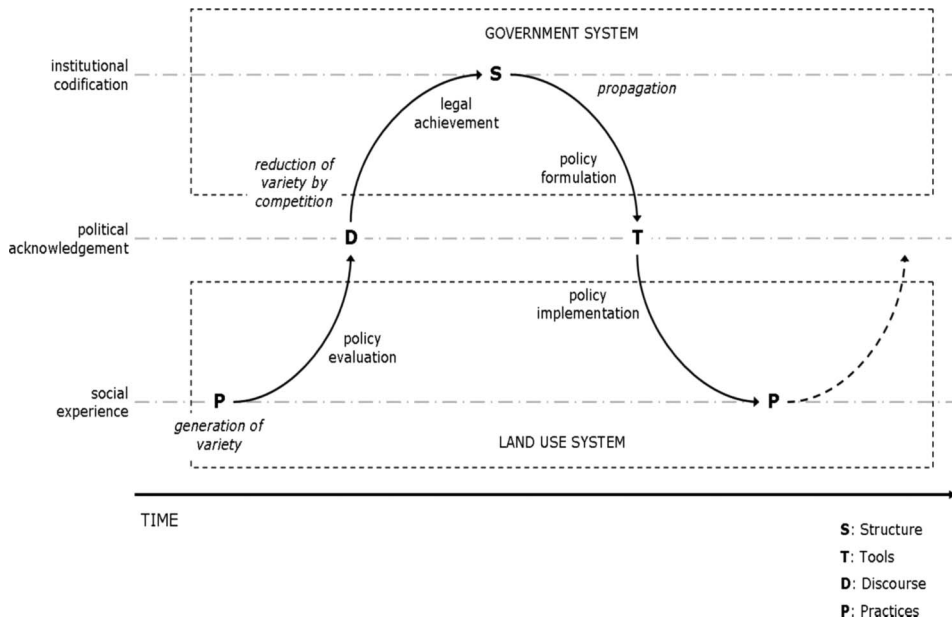


FIGURE 1. Simplified pattern of planning system evolution. *Source:* Author’s own.

technologies, pertaining to the land use system (and thus obviously motivated by disparate kinds of needs, interests and aims). Relevant episodes occur especially at the local scale (Blotevogel & Reimer, this issue), as various public and private subjects are concerned by the match between existing and possible new rights and values in land in each single place, which 'is always a site of negotiated meaning' (Hillier, 2005, p. 272). Individual cultures, continuously pressed by various intra- and extra-contextual factors (Gullestrup, 2006), are led to interact locally in an indefinable number of very specific 'institutional milieus' (DiGaetano & Strom, 2003). While various types of path-dependency can influence practices (Hohn & Neuer, 2006), their generative potential is ensured by the unpredictable sets of joint rationalities, which is produced for and within the operation of interactive intentional actions (March & Olsen, 1979; Schön, 1983; Oakeshott, 1991).

Consequently, successful experiences in particularly affected places and 'best practices' can raise to selective processes of policy transfer (Stead, this issue). Further selection occurs through a competitive and iterative *discourse* (D) concerning the overall assessment of territorial governance outcomes within the institutional context. Here 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wegner, 1991), 'epistemic communities' (Haas, 1992), 'advocacy coalitions' (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and 'policy networks' (Rhodes, 1997) are active within 'knowledge arenas', determining the prevalence of certain ideas, concepts and arguments in the frame of spatial planning (Adams *et al.*, 2010). A sensitive reduction of the variety (of rules) may occur when 'hegemonic concepts' (Servillo, 2010; Servillo & Van den Broeck, this issue) are shared or accepted through *political acknowledgement* in the concerned institutional context, till possible agreement on substantial and/or procedural changes in the planning system *structure* (S). The latter constitutes the overall set of constitutional and legal provisions allowing and ruling the operation of the planning system. These regulate the legitimate share of the government system intervention on the land use system, and confer legitimacy to certain combinations of planning and control activities, attributed to the planning system in order to assign individual rights for land use.

Institutional codification is necessary to achieve the propagation and some persistence of the solution (the system of rules) selected or, in other words, to let the selected changes be commonly adopted in the concerned institutional context, producing widespread application and new network effects (Rogers, 2003). A sort of 'descending phase' in the cycle continues from here, as systematic application of established *tools* (T) becomes indeed the (new) operational framework for practices. Spatial planning tools are generally recognized as 'plans', although these may be of very different nature, ranging from regulative zoning maps to strategic programs, visions or guidelines (Faludi, 2000). They include, however, further means for territorial governance which are not technically identifiable as plans, such as control devices, monitoring and evaluation procedures and various forms of economic incentive, allowing altogether a wide range of opportunities for practices. Moreover, new problems of spatial organization at global or local level (due to natural, socioeconomic or cultural changes) may emerge over time, inducing the exploration of new solutions from spatial planning, and determining a possible breakthrough for the initiation of a new cycle.

Synchronic Prospect

The above description supports that a planning system is led, like any technology, to renovate its capacities in face of change (Janin Rivolin, 2008a, pp. 178–180): in this case, briefly, the command options of the government system in a system for the use of land that is meanwhile ruled by laws of individual profit, equally pressed by search for innovation (Plotkin, 1987; Harvey, 1989). Paraphrasing Schumpeter (1949), a planning system looks continuously called upon to provide collective action with a ‘creative response’, because any ‘adaptive response’ is driven to leave the physical environment transformation the permanent hostage of prevailing individual interests. In fact, various problems and difficulties met within the planning system operation can challenge and stimulate, albeit in different ways, the government system and the land use system (meanwhile subjected to respective evolution processes and own reactions to external factors). So, a multiplicity of internal and external drivers of change, which are not always convergent (but very often divergent), may enter at various levels in order to modify, in less or more radical ways, the adopted institutional technology, although ‘in practice the process to adopt changes is rather slow and restrained by high transactions costs’ (Fürst, 2009, p. 31; see also: Alexander, 1992).

Be that as it may, the evolutionary nature of institutions and (institutional) technologies is reason of their capacity to ‘embody the knowledge/wisdom of several generations, they are therefore a repository of sorts (or better, a ‘distillate’) of successful experimentation; they crystallize a quantity of knowledge which would be inaccessible to an individual mind’ (Moroni, 2010, p. 279; see also: Hayek, 1982). While taking into account this final warning, a synchronic representation (i.e. that hides the temporal function) of the evolutionary pattern of a planning system (as supposed above) can be the way to comprehend, albeit in a simplified manner, those analytical dimensions and mutual relationships, which are relevant to describe the ‘distillate’ of its substance at a certain moment (Figure 2). Particularly, not only the system’s *structure* and *tools* (usually appreciated by comparative studies) and dimensions of *discourse* and *practices* (as addressed by studies on planning cultures) are important; but especially the dynamic interplay occurring between them and with the government system and the land use system, without forgetting the possible influence of external factors respectively channeled (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2010). So, the ‘evolutionary mainstream’ (as described previously in a diachronic pattern) can be coherently complemented by further intra- and extra-contextual relations in the synchronic representation.

Analytical dimensions and relationships, including those which may be channeled from outside, are systematically tabulated with more specific descriptions in Figure 3. Despite a necessarily high degree of complexity, this shows particularly that the *structure* of a planning system has a direct influence on tools and on practices, as the general framework of rules and routines, as well as on the discourse in form of feedback relation. On its turn, it can be influenced by a supra-contextual structure (e.g. EU legislation) and modified through institutional codification decided by the government system, as a result of effective hegemonic discourse. *Tools* for spatial planning have a direct influence on practices in the phase of policy implementation, and a feedback influence on the discourse.

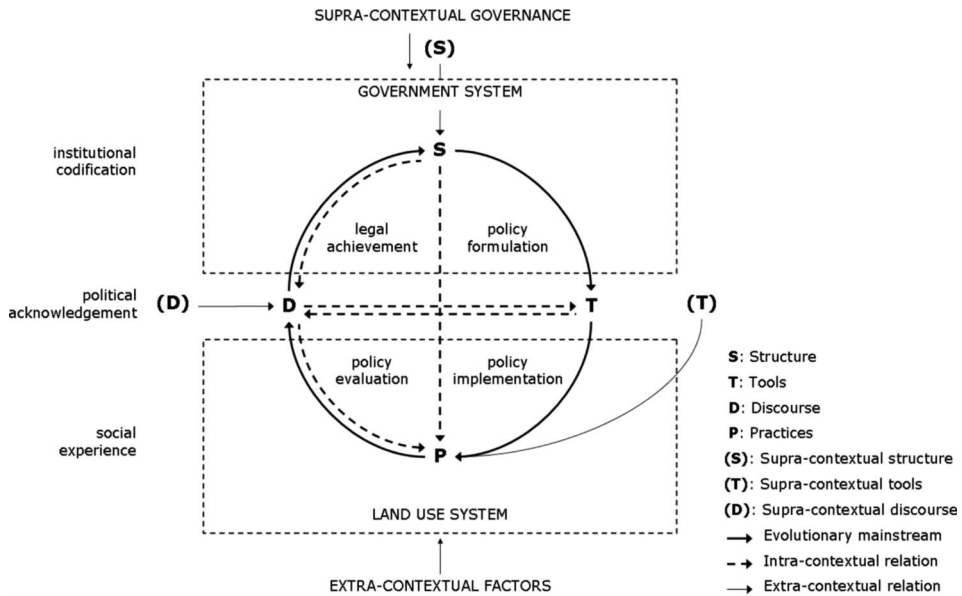
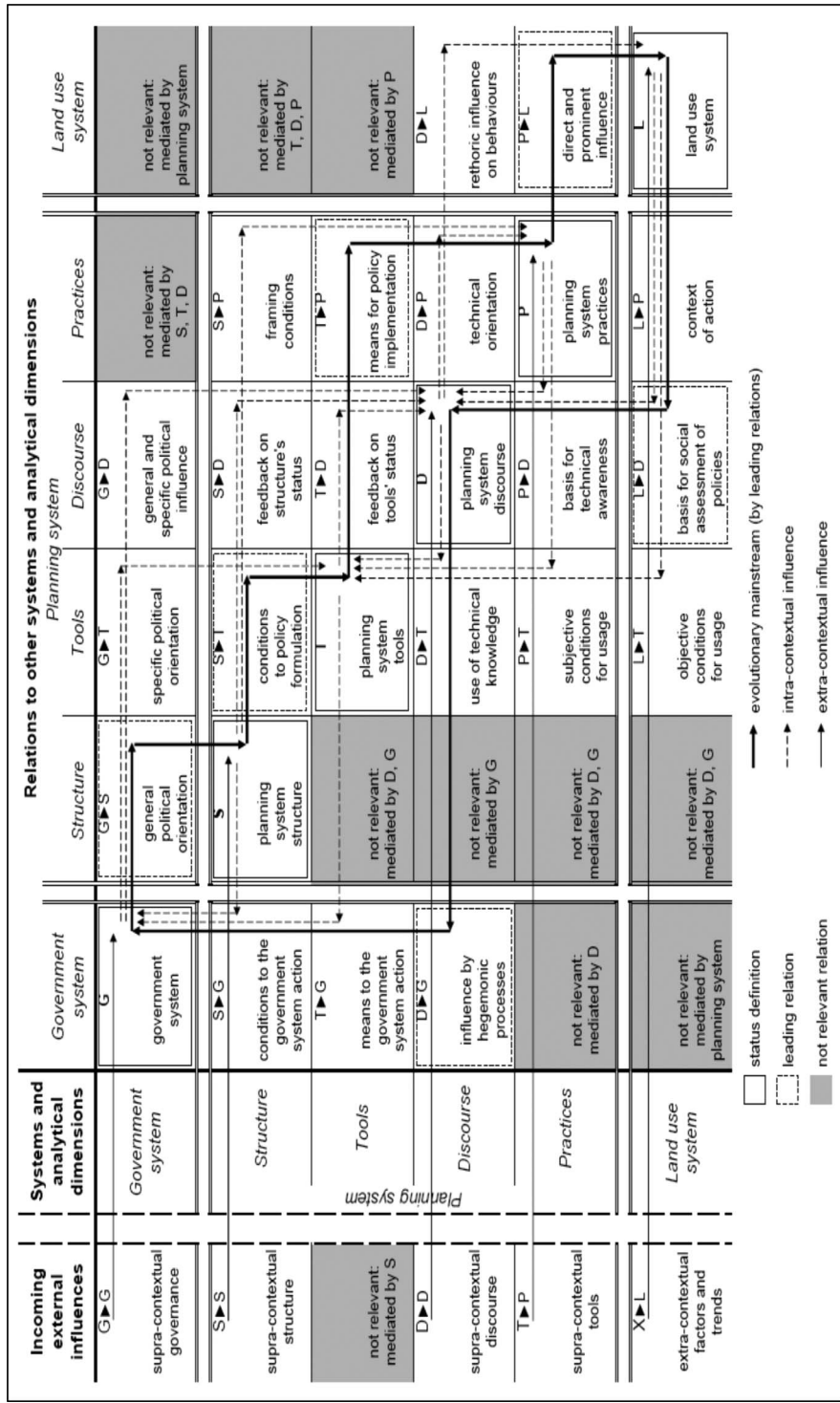


FIGURE 2. Simplified model of planning system operation. *Source:* Author's own.

They are conditioned by the structural dimension of the planning system and by ideas, concepts and approaches channeled through the ongoing competitive discourse. The *discourse* concerning spatial planning has a recurring influence on tools, especially as far as the establishment of policy aims is concerned. It may have also an influence in changing the structure, via the government system, as well as on practices, in the form of feedback relations. It can be influenced by a supra-contextual discourse (e.g. channeled through transnational cooperation) and is generally oriented by more or less aware evaluation of practices against the background of information derived from the planning system structure. Finally, spatial planning *practices* are influenced overall by the structural aspects featuring a planning system; by specific tools established for the implementation of policies (including those coming from outside the context, e.g. EU spatial planning tools); by the discourse conveying certain focal themes; and, last but not least, by aims and behaviors coming from the land use system. Their final outputs are concrete acts of physical development or preservation affecting the land use system (meanwhile influenced by intra- and extra-contextual factors), and becoming basis for policy evaluation within the discourse about spatial planning and territorial governance.

An Inception Test by Factual Evidence

The reliability of previous arguments and usefulness of proposed schemes should be verified through factual evidence. The high complexity of issues at stake would of course require a very articulated comparison among various existing situations (i.e. a brand new comparative study inspired by the institutional technology



→ evolutionary mainstream (by leading relations)

- - -> intra-contextual influence

→ extra-contextual influence

FIGURE 3. Relevant dimensions and relationships in planning system operation. *Source:* Author's own.

concept). However, a simplified reading of features concerning one acknowledged 'planning system' in the light of previous discussion may have at least the value of an inception test. Taking the Italian national context as example (more familiar to the author), it seems indeed possible to build a description of current planning system as the 'distillate' of various concatenated cycles of institutionalization, as above illustrated.

Embedded within an administrative and legal structure belonging to the 'Napoleonic family' (Newman & Thornley, 1996), with strongly hierarchical power relationships between the state and municipalities, a 'modern' planning culture has emerged in Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the result of a cultural 'dispute' between various professional figures, in which architects have finally prevailed also thanks to the favor of the Fascist regime (Zuconi, 1989; Vettoreto, 2009). This may help explain the origins of the Italian 'urbanism' tradition, which is still today seen as characterized by 'a strong architectural flavour and concern with urban design, townscape and building control', and by regulations 'undertaken through rigid zoning and codes' (CEC, 1997, p. 37). Apart from previous experiences of partial and specific legislation, an Italian planning system was indeed codified in 1942 by the national 'urbanism' Law No. 1150 (*Legge urbanistica nazionale*), which is still in force despite various successive amendments (CEC, 2000). This established, amongst other things, that the planning system operation must be pivoted on a local plan for prescriptive zoning of future developments (*Piano regolatore generale*).

Various problems of development control arose in fact during the post-war reconstruction period, in which building activity recorded an unprecedented boom in Italy, without achieving the primary declared aim of improving housing conditions. In an evolving cultural context in the 1950–1960s, with inputs received also from economics and social sciences, 'reformist planning practices (and their culture), in such a period, constituted the hegemonic discourse on planning' (Vettoreto, 2009, p. 193). Within a highly agonistic social context, this led to a partial reform of the planning system by 1967 Law No. 765 (so called *Legge ponte* or 'bridge law', alluding to its provisional character). Coherently with the consolidated prescriptive approach, this introduced more precise zoning typologies, quantitative indicators and minimum standards for public services and infrastructures provision. Similarly, problems regarding public budget shortage and plans implementation in the 1970s led to 1977 Law No. 10, which established that development permissions must be onerous and that local plans must be provided with a 'multi-annual implementation programme' (*Piano pluriennale di attuazione*).

In the same years, a further change concerning the planning system's structure was the extension of some legislative powers (including planning) to regions, as late application of 1948 Italian Constitution. So, progressive regionalization (Putnam, 1993) accentuated the differentiation of regional planning systems under a common national framework: since then, 'ordinary' planning practices and their working cultures vary significantly, in a way, among regions (the institutional setting of spatial planning) and among communities of practice' (Vettoreto, 2009, p. 190). Apart from few best exceptions, however, the widespread prescriptive

approach has induced ordinary planning practices to become bureaucratic, as ‘a formal obligation, where social interactions have been reduced to formal ones defined by laws and regulations and/or [...] affected by patronage negotiations’ (Vettoretto, 2009, p. 196).⁴ In such cultural conditions, land use planning has often become a powerful instrument for political and electoral consensus building, contributing to the realization of massive low-density urban regions and sprawl in the long run (Clementi *et al.*, 1996).

Such was the scenario which, since the 1980s, has stimulated new reflections concerning both the effectiveness of ordinary planning practices and the appropriateness of professional ideologies. Some early experiences of European spatial planning, such as the pioneer initiatives of Integrated Mediterranean Programmes and of Urban Pilot Projects, as well as the starting of cohesion policy cycles after 1988 reform, have encouraged this renovating process in various ways (Gualini, 2001b; Janin Rivolin, 2003; Janin Rivolin & Faludi, 2005). Consequently, the introduction of urban ‘integrated intervention programme’ (*Programma integrato d’intervento*) as of 1992 Law No. 179 has been the specific legal provision allowing the launch of various ministerial programs, based on the Urban Community Initiative model, during the 1990s. In the emerging context of EU multi-level territorial governance, new opportunities for multi-actor and cross-sector activities have been allowed in Italy by new tools of inter-institutional partnership, such as the ‘programme agreement’ (*Accordo di programma*) as of Law no. 142/1990, and the ‘conference of services’ (*Conferenza dei servizi*) as of Law no. 241/1990. An advanced contractual model for public/private partnership has then been introduced by the ‘framework programme agreement’ (*Accordo di programma quadro*) as of Law no. 662/1996.

Regional reforms occurring since the late 1990s (while the claim for a national reform of the planning system is again a recurring *leitmotiv*) have introduced significant novelties in respective spatial planning tools: such as the distinction between ‘structural-indicative’ and ‘operative-regulative’ plans, the establishment of collaborative planning processes, and procedures for the transfer of development rights (so called ‘*perequazione*’ or ‘equalization’). The recent ‘fashion’ of strategic spatial planning, experienced by various cities and local communities spontaneously in the last decade (i.e. despite the absence of specific legislation) is further witness of the experimental ‘innovation’ process in course (Palermo, 2006). This cohabits, however, with ordinary practices that are ‘still uncertain because of the persistence of traditional administrative and professional cultures’ and of path dependence; therefore, ‘a sort of hybridisation of mere old regulative styles and new perspectives’ characterizes the present picture of the Italian planning system (Figure 4), in which ‘a traditional culture of planning, as essentially a command and control activity, is still vital and influential’ (Vettoretto, 2009, pp. 201–202).

Implications for Comparison and Evaluation of Planning Systems

The proposed conceptualization of spatial planning system as institutional technology reaches general findings that seem to meet current critiques on traditional comparative studies, namely:

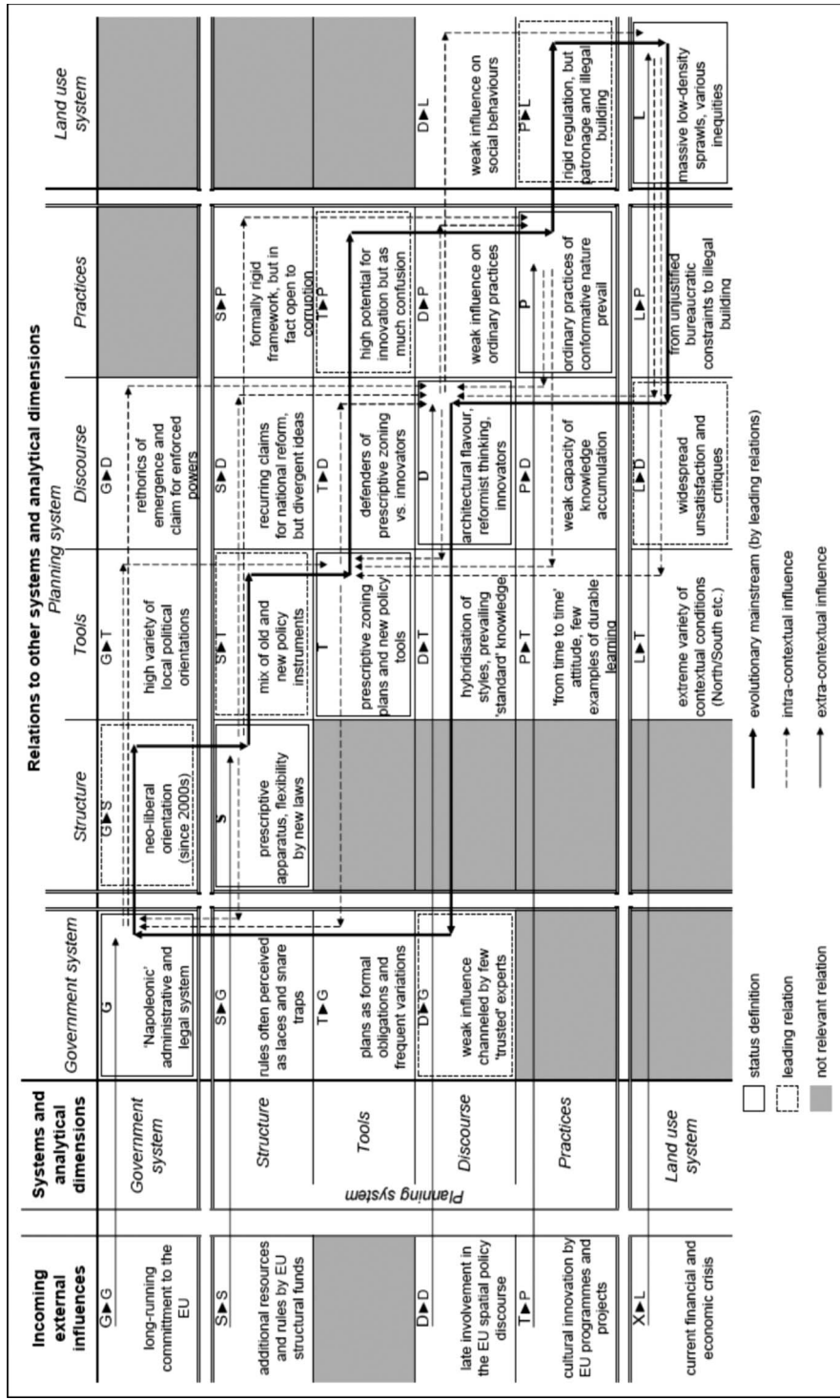


FIGURE 4. Current representation of the Italian spatial planning system as an institutional technology. Source: Author's own.

- (a) the need for a more integrative analytical approach, which takes the establishment and evolution of respective social models into due account (Nadin & Stead, 2008a,b, 2009) and, thus, can encompass also the variation of planning cultures (Blotevogel & Reimer, Ernste, Getimis, this issue);
- (b) the warning that planning system operation is a fluid, multi-scalar and iterative process between multiple institutions and actors and, therefore, the significance of historical background and the need of a diachronic reconstruction of dynamics (Getimis, Servillo & Van den Broeck, this issue);
- (c) the primary importance of the micro-scale of practices as for a genuine understanding of planning system's actuality and effectiveness, implying also a revision of the meaning and usage of 'best practices' (Blotevogel & Reimer, Stead, this issue);
- (d) the awareness that the study of wider phenomena, such as possible 'Europeanization', can benefit from more appropriate and consistent conceptualization of the concerned planning systems (Giannakourou, Meier, this issue).

More practically, the analytical framework coherently derived may have the value of a rough conceptual instrument (to be further tested and improved) for comparing equally 'thick descriptions' of planning systems. The exercise of simplified application to the Italian planning system, as of previous section, may encourage this perspective.

An additional consideration concerns the opportunity to improve comparative studies on spatial planning systems by means of evaluative criteria, supplementing usual descriptive classifications (see initial sections). Evaluation is of course neither a new nor obsolete necessity for spatial planning (Alexander & Faludi, 1989; Faludi, 1989; Mastop & Faludi, 1997; Alexander, 2006). The point here is that evaluating planning systems is something different (albeit not completely detached) from evaluating plans (Janin Rivolin, 2008a, pp. 169–171). Various types of plans can represent possibly one dimension (namely, tools) concurring to distinguish a planning system. So, findings coming from the ongoing discussion about evaluation of/in spatial planning can be only partially useful to the purpose of evaluating systems. On the other hand, the capacity to evaluate the performance of planning systems could improve the awareness of planners and decision-makers, counteracting usual risks of 'cultural arrogance and parochialism' (Sanyal, 2005, p. 24) by the force of argumentative evidence. Furthermore, it could serve supra-national institutions in the understanding of trends and in the orientation of policies and behaviors concerning territorial transformation and governance (e.g. OECD, 2001; World Bank, 2009), with the acknowledgement of spatial planning as a 'mature' field of theories, policies and practices.

It seems not misplaced to verify, therefore, the usability of the analytical framework here proposed in the light of the general evaluation criteria, which the Network on Development Evaluation of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) at the OECD has individuated and cultivated in the last 20 years in order to increase the effectiveness of international development policies by supporting robust, informed and independent evaluation (OECD, 1991, 2010). The 5 OECD

evaluation criteria, which several national governments, the EU and various international development agencies have meanwhile adopted for guiding policy assessment, are namely *relevance*, *efficiency*, *effectiveness*, *impact* and *sustainability*.

In accordance with original definitions, the *relevance* of a planning system should be intended as the extent to which its *structure* is consistent within an institutional context, particularly with requirements posed by the government system towards the functioning of the land use system (starting from the weight which is attributed to spatial planning and control in the institutional/political agendas). Evaluation could benefit here from a reading of proposed table (as from Figure 3) focusing on the status of the structure (S) and on incoming and outgoing relations, as they are portrayed in the respective row and column. As far as the example of Italy is concerned (Figure 4), an assessment about the relevance of planning system shall not neglect, for instance, that the existing prescriptive apparatus is perceived often by the government system as 'laces and snare traps' and that the formally rigid framework is in fact open to corruption.

The *efficiency* of a planning system should be understood as a measure of how economically the established *tools* are capable to convert resources/inputs (funds, expertise, time, etc.) to results. In principle, the availability of more sophisticated means of evaluation might allow to translate this measure into financial costs (per capita) and/or social costs (number of appeals to court etc.) due to the overall operation of the planning system. Similarly to previous criterion, however, a reading of proposed table focusing on row and column that cross the status of tools (T) can allow not too approximate evaluation. As for the Italian planning system, for instance, a frequent recourse to variations of plans (that should be quantified somehow) and evidence of high confusion can contribute to assess the degree of efficiency.

The *effectiveness* of a planning system can be intended as the extent to which some basic objectives (i.e. the improvement of physical environment, plus others declared) are achieved by *practices*, taking into account their relative importance. In this case, evaluation can benefit from the table, focusing around the status of practices (P) and respective incoming and outgoing relations. Prevailing ordinary practices of conformative nature shall be therefore assessed also in the light of patronage and illegal building phenomena, as well as of less widespread exemplary experiences, in the case of Italy.

The *impact* of a planning system can be understood as the positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced in the land use system, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended. Focus in the table is here centered on the status of the land use system (L), as well as on the row and column converging in that cell. Massive low-density sprawls and various inequities characterizing the land use system in Italy will have to be considered, for instance, also in the light of apparent disconnection of social behaviors from the technical discourse and of the extreme variety of regional and local situations.

Finally, the *sustainability* of a planning system could be intended as the continuation of benefits from its intervention through *discourse* after its main operation has been completed, including the probability of long-term benefits

and the resilience to risk of the net benefit flows over time. The status of discourse (D) and various relations converging here by row and column are the information that the proposed table can offer to evaluation to this respect. As for the Italian planning system, for instance, more and less traditional characters of present planning culture can thus contribute to assess sustainability together with other factors, such as the role of ‘trusted experts’ with respect to the government system and the apparent weak capacity to accumulate knowledge.

The above verification leaves certainly a wide range of doubts and open questions, which further applied research only could solve. It seems however to support the reliability of the proposed analytical framework as one path traced in search for more consistent and comprehensive methodology for the (comparative) study of spatial planning systems. A last ‘litmust test’ to this respect may come from a comparison with the ‘seven broad and interrelated factors’, adopted by the EU Compendium (see second section) as main variables ‘to identify the essential characteristics of planning systems’ (CEC, 1997, pp. 34–36). As far as the level of consistency and completeness of such important study is concerned, Table 2 indicates, first and foremost, that the EU Compendium’s variables are in fact a mixture of criteria which respond partially to purposes of ‘description’ (nos. 1–5) and partially to purposes of ‘evaluation’ (nos. 6–7). Moreover, in the former case, the adopted variables overemphasize clearly the importance of the structure of planning system (nos. 1–5), dedicating minor attention to tools (no. 2) and practices (no. 4) and apparently no attention to the discursive dimension. In the latter case, one criterion (no. 6, ‘maturity and completeness of the system’) merges together aspects concerning relevance, efficiency and sustainability, and the other (no. 7, ‘distance between expressed objectives and outcomes’) responds adequately to a criterion of effectiveness, while an assessment of impact is omitted.

TABLE 2. Consistency of the EU Compendium’s variables respectively to analytical dimensions and evaluation criteria here proposed (Author’s own)

EU compendium’s variables	Responding to a descriptive purpose: related analytical dimensions	Responding to an evaluative purpose: related criteria
1. Scope of the system	Structure	
2. Extent and type of planning at national and regional levels	Structure, tools	
3. Locus of power	Structure	
4. Relative roles of public and private sectors	Structure, practices	
5. Constitutional provisions and administrative traditions	Structure	
6. Maturity or completeness of the system		Relevance, efficiency, sustainability
7. Distance between expressed objectives and outcomes		Effectiveness

Conclusions

As individual practitioners and scholars, planners are understandably led to see institutional planning systems as the simple formal façade for much more meaningful and creative activities of policy and intellectual design for the improvement of the physical environment and human well-being (Healey & Hillier, 2008). The notion of ‘institutional technology’, addressed in previous sections to explore the nature of planning systems, can reverse somehow this perception. It suggests indeed that spatial planning is practiced, and planning theories and cultures developed, because human organizations have learnt to endow themselves with certain rules and techniques of social order and cooperation for the improvement of the collective physical environment. This millennial social learning process concerns precisely the creation and evolution of spatial planning systems, that are ultimately addressed to allow public governments the assignation of individual rights for the use of land. Planners are in this light nothing but cogs in the wheel, whose contribution to progress depends largely on the awareness about their own role into the whole institutional game.

The analytical framework derived in accordance with these assumptions in order to highlight main dimensions and relationships describing the complex operation of a spatial planning system was proposed and initially tested in previous sections as a contribution for comparative studies. Apart from this purpose, it may however add arguments to current debate regarding (the design of) institutions in/for spatial planning (Bolan, 1991; Alexander, 1995; Healey, 1999, 2006; Gualini, 2001a; Cars *et al.*, 2002; Beauregard, 2005; Moulaert, 2005; Hohn & Neuer, 2006; Verma, 2007; Moroni, 2010). In particular, the proposed framework supports that evolution of planning systems is a permanent necessity in the face of the risk of technologic obsolescence. It acknowledges however that, because of complexity of institutional processes, progress is conditioned constantly by political conflict and economic dynamics against the background of innate social struggle for land use control. This leads to conclude that planners cannot (claim to) determine the overall quality of a planning system in an ‘engineeristic’ manner, chasing after ‘an understanding of whether and how institutions themselves might be planned’ (Bolan, 1991, p. 8; see Moroni, 2010). As the keepers of technical knowledge (Mazza, 2002), planners can rather promote social awareness on ‘the crucial assessment of planning effectiveness’ (Vettoreto, 2009, p. 202), as part of a process of citizenship shaping (Mandelbaum *et al.*, 1996).

In an institutional technology view, planning cultures and systems depend ultimately on the social assessment of the effectiveness of planning. Here perhaps ‘a bridge exists from the technical knowledge that planners embrace to the institutional change that seems necessary for planning to be effective’ (Beauregard, 2005, p. 206). Comparative research on spatial planning systems may play a prominent role in this arena, and present conceptual effort was made with this conviction.

Notes

1. Government system is here intended as encompassing ‘all forms of government, political and economic, formal and informal’, while the spatial production and consumption system ‘is constituted by the complex of

- practices contributing to transforming our physical environment – from detailed building activities to great public works, mining activities, agricultural and forest practices, and environmental protection’ (Mazza, 2003, pp. 54–55, present author’s translation).
2. It has been argued, for instance, that more widespread modality of assigning new land use rights by means of binding zoning prescriptions may counteract an effective control of development projects’ performance (Mazza, 2003; Janin Rivolin, 2008a). On the other hand, some disadvantages and risks of ‘flexible’ and not prescriptive planning with regard to development control have been also pointed out (Faludi, 1987; Tewdwr-Jones, 1999).
 3. Definitions in Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institution>, accessed 4 February 2012).
 4. ‘Patronage and familism are often associated with the establishment of urban coalitions including politicians, developers, landowners, professionals, etc. seeking to maximize urban rent through benevolent land-use planning [. . .]. This is often technically legitimated by overestimated population growth and legally supported by discretionary interpretations of laws, frequent and ad hoc changes in land-use regulation and zoning, along with practices of corruption aimed at supporting the costly local political system, and a widespread tolerance toward massive illegal building activity particularly in Southern Italy’ (Vettoreto, 2009, p. 196).

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