



Book Review - Planning in ten words or less: A Lacanian entanglement with spatial planning

Michael Gunder and Jean Hillier

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Many contemporary planning texts are an assemblage of writings by non-planners. However, this book is solely written by two highly regarded planning theorists. Auckland University's Michael Gunder has a reputation for bringing forth the psychoanalysis of French philosopher Jacques Lacan who allows new insights into how ideology shapes reality, in this case, the analysis of spatial planning. His co-author, Jean Hillier, has a strong interest in exploring the frontiers of planning theories which are praxis-based.

The chapter contents are drawn largely from the authors' previously published works. In this comprehensive text, the reader will experience a cross-disciplinary analysis of the finer nuances of commonly used planning words, or 'signifiers', closely associated with contemporary urban spatial planning. As can be gathered from the book's subtitle, the authors interweave the insights of Lacan (and indeed, many other theorists familiar within planning circles) with each signifier, their analysis at times drawing upon Lacan's famous *Four Discourses* as well as the Lacanian concept of 'master signifiers'. Lacan's discourses (broadly: governing/educating/desiring/analysing) represent a linguistic basis which support and produce social effects that create resonance within practical planning.

Chapter 1 begins with the word 'planning' itself. In turn, the authors examine nine additional buzzwords or 'contestable' words: *certainty, good, risk, Smart Growth, globalisation, multiculturalism, sustainability, responsibility* and *rationality*. Browse just about any modern planning document and it won't take long to find one or two of these contestable words, which the authors label 'empty signifiers'

Each chapter outlays a theoretical and philosophical foundation for its chosen signifier, often in tandem with metaphorical societal (Lacanian) constructions which

then leads into the signifier's relationship to spatial planning. Another characteristic of the book is the frequent use of whimsical headings. Take for example *The Concept of Lack: Thanks Mum!* in Chapter 2. This uses the analogy of the suckling infant who seeks the 'illusion' of constant maternal nurturing, only to be in competition with a sibling or mother's other demands. The theoretical aspects are not always an easy read, but bear with them as towards the end of each chapter the authors cleverly evolve their narrative, entangling the philosophical aspects into more practical aspects of spatial planning and related terminology.

Contestable words see-saw in and out of favour in planning praxis, in large part dependent on the political context, the ideologies, and the 'academic' background of leaders and decision-makers of the day. The words are contestable in the sense that they have concise meanings in their own right. But they can also mean everything - or nothing - depending on the audience. Take *sustainability*, perhaps the most utilised - and abused - 'empty signifier' in the literature, practice, politics and business; a word that can mean 'all things to all people'. For example, future roads, part of a 'smart' network, may be built of reused 'sustainable' materials to support increased volumes of 'sustainable' transport (electric vehicles replacing fossil-fuelled vehicles), which may lead to ...'cleaner congestion'!? Is that a desirable, or derisible, outcome?

The authors return often to the notion of *jouissance* (desire, a word central to Lacanian theory), the signifiers being utilised by technocrats and the ruling elite to support the imperative for society to enjoy, consume, accumulate and create wealth, to create the sense or impression of happiness, of desires being fulfilled while simultaneously achieving the stakeholders' specific outcomes.

The authors are not *per se* against spatial planning. They suggest that practitioners tend to predetermine the issues based on their spatial planning signifiers of choice. They contend spatial planning needs a 'reality check', that planning practice is about challenging the appropriateness of pre-determined and often universally defined goals; desirous but unreachable goals that conveniently mesh with the prevailing growth and consumption paradigm.

They suggest the challenge for the modern spatial planning is allowing signifiers to tie too closely with the economic agenda, allowing solutions to define problems, with innovation being lost in the process. Interestingly, the authors define spatial planning precisely, according to British town planning terminology, to be the 'co-ordination, making and mediation of space' (p. 4).

If you are a familiar with topics such as social constructionism, then this book has much to offer scholarly scrutiny. There are also frequent references to Slavoj Žižek's and related 'post-structuralist' perspectives. And while these are important to the authors to build the context for each chapter, the text can at times be a little daunting for the uninitiated reader. However, most chapters contain a wealth of material that can also be delved into by a planning practitioner.

Spatial planning as an approach to town planning has become popular internationally over the last decade. New Zealand cites such as Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin have in one form or another employed a spatial template to articulate political and community aspirations. In practice, it is perhaps too early in this country to say whether or not spatial planning is delivering the outcomes its sets out to achieve. Urban planners trust that their 'solutions' will not perversely open the door to even more wicked problems.

This book is a useful addition to the planning literature. It is also a must-read for post-graduate planning students. If one is able to 'disentangle' Lacan and process the 'plain English', there is more than enough food-for-thought content for practitioners to mine and explore further.

*Reviewed by Mike O'Connell, Senior Policy Analyst,
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