

Introduction: crisis and renewal of contemporary urban planning

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Since 2008, cities in the Western world have been under stress due to pressures that have been labelled as the 'crisis' and its 'consequences'. Despite the fact that several years have passed, international planning debates have not fully highlighted what we have learned from this challenging phase. How and to what extent have these stresses and changes affected planning activities and knowledge? How are current reforms of national and local planning systems influenced by the crisis beyond its discursive appearance? How can we cultivate critical approaches and how can we pragmatically translate critical knowledge into practice during and after a time of crisis? This article outlines the broad questions that were addressed, under different perspectives, by the authors in the theme issue. The article serves as an introduction by, first, briefly reviewing relevant positions in the planning and urban studies debates and explaining the relationships between urban planning and the crisis; second, by presenting the papers in the issue and highlighting planners' roles, responsibilities and relevance in the crisis and in subsequent phases; and third, by calling for closer attention to the current signals of crisis in planning theory and practice, as well as by considering new responses derived from research.

KEYWORDS: Economic crisis; planning theory; planning system; urban policy; urban planning

In most parts of the Western world, since 2008, cities have been under stress due to a set of pressures that have been labelled as the (economic, financial, global etc.) 'crisis' and its 'consequences': decrease of public finance and traditional service provision, real estate market's slowdown, economic stagnation, recession and so on. Some countries and cities started to recover quickly and to go back to business as usual. Others did not, especially in Southern Europe. Despite the fact that, at the time of writing, the initial financial crisis occurred more than seven years ago, international planning debates have not fully highlighted yet what we have learned from this challenging phase and its consequences. For example, it is not clear if and how current reforms of national and local planning systems are influenced by the crisis beyond its discursive appearance, nor how and to what extent these stresses and changes have affected planning activities and knowledge.

Under unfavourable economic conditions and due to lower political stability, some changes in the national and local planning systems did indeed occur. In most critical

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contexts and phases, when both public and private resources become scarce, policy-makers tend to lower the standards for regulation, to strip-off planning powers and authorities, to try to de-politicize and streamline choices and projects, to promote new strategies (e.g. smart city), in order to keep the available urban investments flowing and maintain political consensus among relevant stakeholders. This can be seen as a means of survival for planning (or at least some weak form thereof), but at the same time as a way of impairing the critical contribution that planning practice is expected to give to societal development. How to cultivate critical approaches and how to pragmatically translate critical knowledge into practice in a time of crisis? How to see and understand emergent ways of planning under the pressure of so-called neoliberal policy rhetoric?

Critical times exacerbate planning problems and make them more visible, I believe we must take the chance to critically learn from them. This theme issue faces some aspects of such a huge set of issues concerning planning both as a field of knowledge and action, by critically discussing the current signals of crisis in planning theory and practice, as well as by considering new responses derived from research.

Crises? What crises?

The last financial crisis can be interpreted in the light of long-term reflections over the economic and institutional implications of other crises in social-democratic and late capitalist systems (Dahrendorf, 1984; Habermas, 1976). Both in terms of the internal dialectic of political systems and in public arenas at large, the crisis has often been used as a discursive device for policy change. In fact, Bauman and Bordoni (2014) noted that the current crisis has deeper roots and, in certain national and regional contexts, longer term manifestations than a temporary (though recurrent) economic slowdown or a mere policy discourse leveraging it. This critical phase indeed implied the further erosion of the role of the State on many policy fronts, starting with the welfare system. Similarly, a crisis and austerity rhetoric delegitimized given technical and planning knowledge and eventually favoured the restructuring of urban policies and planning systems. In this sense, the crisis that started in the late 2000s and the subsequent period of recession can be considered as critical historic junctures to be observed with particular care.

According to Harvey (2010, 2012b), the global economic crisis showed how central the urban and built environment is for the circulation and accumulation of capital. Part of the financial surplus implied in the rise of the bubble was related to urban growth and welcomed by cities intending to position themselves, spark urban regeneration and real estate appreciation in very different arrangements (sprawl, gentrification etc.), which are typical matters of planning practice (Burkhalter & Castells, 2009). The journal *Critical Planning* promoted a debate regarding the relationships between the crisis and urban restructuring (Sourelis & Youn, 2009). Urban scholars, planners and geographers confirmed that the roles and definitions of the city, its rescaling and features, are under stress in this phase of restructuring of the economic and institutional system and of its ways of accumulating and distributing wealth. Indeed, all this is particularly visible in the urban realm (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2009). Upon such premises the recent 'right to the city' movement gained momentum and tried to draw further attention to current potentials for change in urban life (among others: Harvey, 2012a; Marcuse, 2009; Uitermark, Nicholls, & Loopmans, 2012).

Several urban scholars envisioned the crisis and recession as part of a longer term neo-liberal shift. According to Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010), neoliberalism is not an all-encompassing socioeconomic and ideological structure. It cannot be referred to as the sole force behind institutional homogenization, but rather a spatially variegated pattern that different forms of capitalism follow according to their local and historic conditions. It is also now evident that cities in the same country or region can be touched by the implications of the economic crisis and subsequent slowdown in quite different manners (Keil, 2010; Martin, 2011; Meegan, Kennett, Jones, & Croft, 2014). Also, an innovative and lively debate regarding austerity policies emerged (Peck, 2015).

Despite this richness, mainstream planning scholars and theorists do not always seem interested in providing new explanations, evaluations and critical alternatives for planning activities in the recent years of neoliberalism and crisis. Among the exceptions, one can see a long-term account by Sager (2011). Quite early in the crisis, Burkhalter and Castells (2009) argued that the urban dimension is central in explaining the origin and spread of the crisis. They explained that the urban and suburban models, property ownership orientations and lifestyles have not been radically questioned in practice by policy-makers and urban planners. In their view, the shortcomings and failures of twentieth-century planning practice are more visible in times of crisis and they took the opportunity to suggest new approaches, potential urban interventions and changes. Similar positions appeared in Europe (among others see: Bourdin, 2014).

Kunzmann (2010) suggested that further research, debate and visioning were to come in order to better understand the spatial implications of the crisis in European cities and regions. As in the abovementioned paper by Burkhalter and Castells (2009), Kunzmann brilliantly explored future options to substantially rethink mainstream spatial policies in Europe. Five scenarios offered stimulating and at the same time problematic visions for development (involving issues of regional polarization, public spending, unintended spatial effects etc.). He concentrated on spatial planning and policy, posing an open question regarding the consequences of the crisis on them. In this essay, though, one can find little doubt about the future roles and responsibilities of planners, which he evidently expects to vary little in future scenarios.

Specific professional profiles in the planning field have been critically analysed. For example, Knox and Schweitzer (2010) discussed the role urban design played in the rise of the bubble. Reassuring downtown and suburban designs allowed real estate and finance interests to take advantage of the availability of credit in booming times. Urban designers more often than not seconded capital circulation and accumulation, refraining from considering underlying and structural problems of urban growth. According to Knox and Schweitzer, the new roles that urban design is expected to play in the post-crisis period can be improved. Designers and planners can learn from the shortcomings that have clearly appeared in the phase of crisis and engage more intensively in the social construction of places and in social justice.

In sum, one may simply argue that there is a bidirectional relationship between planning and the crisis. On the one hand, urban planning contributed to the conditions for the mortgage and financial bubble to occur by seconding the real estate market and allowing great surpluses in different manners. On the other, the crises and their subsequent stages showed the weaknesses of planning systems in different countries and put pressure on their reform or reorientation. Regardless of the consensus on this simple bidirectional

argument, numerous debates suggested that observing the city and urban planning in systemic crisis can help us to understand the origins and consequences of the crisis, and this can provide the opportunity for reflective learning and alternative responses to current and future problems. A few years after the radical and revolutionary changes foreseen by some have not appeared. Nonetheless learning and envisioning a change can be further promoted in the field of planning, not just in terms of better uses of urban-generated or urban-related capital surpluses, but of pragmatic reconsideration of its roles, responsibilities and relevance in the public domain.

Institutional and planning system reforms

The examples of the ongoing changes in planning systems and cuts in institutional structures and public spending in Europe can help focus on the implications of the crisis beyond discursive strategies, both in countries where the crisis and its consequences were lighter (e.g. France or Germany) and where they were heavier (e.g. Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain and the Netherlands).

In France the process of reform simply seemed to speed up under the presidency of Francois Hollande, especially with reference to the decentralization of planning powers with regard to metropolitan institutions. According to Enright (2014), the cuts and stresses in public financing led to streamlining infrastructure and large-scale development projects in Paris, which are expected to promote further opportunities for urban growth. The likely social and economic inequalities deriving from such a neoliberal approach are clearly exposed.

Recent reforms in the UK planning system were partially motivated by new political orientations and restructuring strategies (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2011, 2013). One can critically see how the former mainstream spatial planning could not perform according to its premises and live up to its excessive expectations and positive rhetoric. The rapid dismissal of spatial planning that started in 2010 and the emphasis over local control and simpler development processes dramatically limited the regional scope, the timeframe and relevance of planning practice in England (Gallent, Hamiduddin, & Madeddu, 2013). However, the opponents to the reform rarely considered the critical shortcomings of the former spatial planning approach, probably because they felt they would discredit planning at large by doing so.

A brief insight into the Italian planning system can provide further arguments and, later, the Dutch case will be considered thoroughly (by Buitelaar & Bregman, 2016). As several other Southern European countries, Italy has been heavily hit by the recent financial crisis and its policy implications (e.g. EU Stability Pact and the Fiscal Compact of the early 2010s). In particular, the critical problems in managing the huge and long-term public debt led to a drastic change in the government in 2011. The former European Commissioner for Competition, Mario Monti, was suddenly appointed Prime Minister at the expense of Silvio Berlusconi and started a new season of institutional reforms and public budget cuts. These cuts and reforms heavily invested the public sector and the field of urban planning as well. The urban policy realm was targeted as a 'natural' place for jump-starting economic growth (e.g. selling public real estate assets, fostering new smart-city initiatives, retrofitting the old building stock etc.), while the urban agenda

and other local development policies had little place in the debate and public programming (Gabellini, 2014; Rossi, 2015).

The crisis explicitly provided the chance for accomplishing a long-pending institutional reform in Italy. The spending review act (Law 135/2012) established 10 Metropolitan City Authorities (Milan, Rome, Naples, Turin, Venice, Florence, Genoa, Bari, Bologna and Reggio Calabria, which dramatically differed in size and regional features) to substitute the former Provincial governments. Today the Metropolitan City representatives are not elected by voters but by the representatives in power in the municipalities pertaining to each metropolitan territory. This new institution was designed for carrying out infrastructural and spatial planning, integrated public service provisions, development policy and other tasks. The remodelling of the metropolitan tier of planning and the change of its political and technical roles are for the moment more visible in terms of the planning process and formal contents (the main document changed from a structure plan to a limited-range strategic plan). Perhaps for this reason, the Italian debate is mainly concerned with urgent solutions for these new metropolitan planning exercises, rather than critically considering planning's shrinking public role. Clearly, the functioning of this new planning authority was shaped according to a plain rationale of cutting public spending and it seems problematic for the authority's weakened, short-term and post-political features.

Once again, one may consider these reforms as just one further chapter in homogenizing neoliberal ideology, as one piece of longer term strategies for capital accumulation and circulation, and see the crisis just as a phase of a broader structural shift (Brenner et al., 2010). However, during and after the late-2000s crisis, significant shocks in several national systems have been game-changers in matters of urban and regional governance. The call for not missing the chance to learn from this important phase of change in urban, regional and development policies and of reshuffling in public discourses should be taken seriously (Oosterlynck & González, 2013).

Roles, responsibilities and relevance in times of crisis and beyond

This theme issue provides empirical analysis and discussion regarding planners' roles and responsibilities in the generation and management of the crisis and regarding the relevance of planning research in subsequent phases.

The first paper by Matti and Elliot Siemiatycki presents a documented analysis of the limited attention paid by established planning journals to the issue and it explores the paths that planning scholars could follow. In order to have a critical understanding of the current phase and to make a positive difference, it seems crucial for scholars to go beyond academic walls and to engage with public policy and with different sorts of planning and civic practices in a timely, reflective and pragmatic manner.

The second contribution by Tore Sager discusses the roles of activist planners in the light of neoliberal economic-political ideology and urban policies. Activist planning is related to other well-known approaches (radical planning, equity planning and advocacy planning) and seen as a positive promoter of further interaction and deliberation between partisan interests. Critical-alternative initiatives have an important role to play even in well-functioning democratic systems. The articulated roles and set of examples in this paper suggest new ways of understanding and eventually of re-positioning planning expertise and practice in current times.

More than 40 years ago, Habermas (1976) suggested that a crisis is evident when the state is not able to keep sufficient control of the economic system to function and the legitimation crisis exposes the weaknesses of such control functions. Under non-critical conditions, some perceived planning problems, such as longer times and more costly procedures, are typically tolerated by stakeholders. These problems and their solutions are interesting grounds for learning when the critical conditions make them more visible and controversial. The third paper, by Edwin Buitelaar and Arjan Bregman, discusses the difficulties met by the Dutch planning system and its recent reform. The integrated institutional system for driving urban development in the Netherlands is internationally known; nonetheless the slowdown in the real estate market has revealed its weaknesses and alarmed politicians and policy-makers. The cuts in public spending as well as new political orientations pushed the system towards a less-detailed land-use control and a more open-ended approach to planning. It is not clear if this approach will lead to reflective manners of consolidation and eventually ways for stronger institutionalization.

In the fourth paper, Stefano Moroni takes a radical position in questioning over-simplifying explanations of the U.S. mortgage crisis and its effects, as the product of neoliberal hegemonic ideology. He sees the housing bubble as generated by a mix of conditions that are in part (but not solely) a responsibility of public institutions, in terms of growth management and land-use policy, of mortgage and fiscal policy and finally of monetary policy. Moroni criticizes misguided policies at both local and national levels, by drawing on an extensive overview of the U.S. housing bubble. On these grounds, radical institutional reforms and potential paths for planning research and practice are outlined. Moroni's classic liberal positions are not in line with many other accounts which appeared in the U.S.A. nor it is with reference to other countries (among others: Aalbers, 2009; García, 2010; Meegan et al., 2014). As for other radical propositions regarding regulation (Palermo & Ponzini, 2015), Moroni's work is thought-provoking and worthy of reactions in a frank debate about the crisis and renewal of the planning discipline. By observing such matters from extreme angles, one can indeed derive an understanding of the U.S. housing bubble that is quite uncomfortable for mainstream policy-makers and urban planners. The crisis' intertwined relationship with the urban environment and with the management of urban development cannot simply be denied, despite the fact that views regarding possible solutions and approaches to planning reform may be diametrically different from those proposed by Moroni.

The commentary by Klaus Kunzmann considers the four papers and suggests that planning is not currently facing any particular crisis, but it is transforming under the pressures of neoliberal ideology. He maintains, however, that the crisis showed in some countries the dramatic limitation and shrinking public roles of planning in contemporary economic and social systems and this made the need for rethinking planning ever more urgent. In his opinion, this implies once again a strong communicative ability for connecting the academic world to policy-makers, a louder voice regarding pressing and concrete matters and a new set of challenges for the debate in planning profession.

Among other shocking but sobering considerations, Hall (2014) clearly recognized the deep and long-term state of crisis of planning, both in terms of practice (with specific

reference to the UK) and theory (with reference to the grounds of planning education). He called for more and better planning, assuming that the accumulation and transfer of planning knowledge is needed for not having to start building the discipline over again and for avoiding old mistakes. The point is, in my opinion, that learning from critical junctures cannot be taken for granted without a strong critical and realistic stance. In this sense, Flyvbjerg (2013) heavily contested the positions which avoid critiquing planning malpractice and shortcomings. Blaming the greedy bankers, developers and neoliberal policy-makers alone and shying away from critique in general are still widespread in planning circles, probably due to the fear that presenting parts of the planning discipline under a bad light could discredit it all. But this attitude impairs planning's social and political contribution and relevance, dooming it to be a 'zombie institution' to use Flyvbjerg's words. The renewal of planning runs the risk of not inducing any real change or contribution to concrete and pressing urban matters, whether one may say they are related to the crisis, recession and austerity policies or to broader phases of neoliberalism. In order for the widespread denial regarding the crisis in planning's roles, responsibilities and relevance not to become pathological, we should promote a realistic, frank and critical reflection (Palermo, 2014) regarding specific topics such as activism, planning system reform, land-use regulation, public action and deliberation in processes of wealth accumulation and distribution, as well others. This theme issue gathers a small group of critical planning scholars with the aim of pushing further discussions and actions in this direction (while, on the contrary, the mainstream planning theory debate seems stuck in delusionary attempts to transfer abstract theories into practice, as argued in Palermo & Ponzini, 2010).

At the time of writing, I see that, after intermittent and mild interest, major conferences in sight have picked up the topic. The 2016 World Planning Schools Congress will address the theme of 'Global Crisis, Planning and Challenges to Spatial Justice in the North and in the South'. The European Urban Research Association announced the 2016 Conference's rationale 'City lights. Cities and citizens within/beyond/notwithstanding the crisis'; the 2016 Conference of the European Urban and Regional Studies in Greece will target 'Europe, Crisis and Uneven Development'. I hope these and other occasions will continue the discussion, knowing that articles and congresses are not enough to renew the way we understand and practice planning, but at least they can be a start!

The core ideas for this theme issue were discussed in the seminar series 'Crisis and Renewal of Contemporary Urban Planning' which was organized by Stefano Moroni and myself in early 2014, on the occasion of the inaugural year of the Ph.D. Programme in Urban Planning, Design and Policy at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano. I would like to thank Jill Diane Friedman for her linguistic advice. An earlier version of this paper was commented by Manuel Aalbers, Edwin Buitelaar, Stefano Moroni, Ugo Rossi, Tore Sager, Matti Siemiatycki. Usual caveat applies.

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