

## SPATIAL PLANNING: A TRANSATLANTIC EXPLORATION



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**In October 2012 a two-day symposium in Dublin organised by the School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy at University College Dublin and the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education at the University of Maryland brought together academics and senior policy-makers from Europe and the United States to examine the process, contents, and implementation of national spatial strategies in Europe and State Development Plans and planning frameworks in the United States (U.S.). Sponsored by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, based in Cambridge Massachusetts, the presentations and discussions focused on the theme of *Planning for States and Nation/States: A TransAtlantic Exploration*.**

The symposium included papers and presentations from leading scholars from the U.S. and Europe and responses from seasoned planning practitioners at the regional, state, and national levels. The symposium offered new information and critiques on planning for those interested in European spatial planning, state planning, regional planning and intergovernmental planning relationships.

Questions considered by the symposium included what is it about spatial planning at the national or state level that makes it so difficult to deliver? Does it in fact make sense to plan at the national scale or should the emphasis be on planning at local scales? While there are no simple answers to

these questions, it is clear that lessons can be learnt through the sharing of experiences – the successes and the failures on both sides of the Atlantic. There is much good practice in spatial planning policy and practice to be drawn upon for both academics and practitioners – irrespective of whether they work at central, regional or local government level or in community development.

Over the two-day symposium, speakers from five states and five nations presented and discussed State development plans and frameworks in the United States and national spatial strategies in Europe – albeit with a health warning given the distinctly different conceptual roots and administrative foundations. The development framework or plan for each was considered under the following headings:

- Context: Geography and general structure of government;
- Structure of land-use governance; roles of local, regional, and national government;
- Factors that shaped the development of the national plan/ framework/ strategy;
- Planning participants, information foundations, and planning process;
- Key elements of the plan/ framework/ strategy;
- Plan implementation tools and processes; and
- Key outcomes and lessons.

Representatives from the United States included delegates from Delaware, New Jersey and Maryland – all with some form of state development plan; and from Oregon and California, states with no explicit state development plan but unique state planning frameworks. There was also an overview of state and federal planning frameworks. Representatives from Europe included individuals from the Netherlands, Denmark and the Republic of Ireland (heretofore referred to as Ireland), all with some form of national plan; and from France and Great Britain, nations with no national plan but unique national planning

frameworks. The work of the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) was also presented.

### **Europe and the United States: Different... But the Same?**

The logic of national planning is extremely compelling and consequently, it is not surprising that there are unquestionable parallels between spatial planning in Europe and land-use and comprehensive planning in the U.S.

**Cooperation:** The theme of horizontal and vertical coordination features strongly in national spatial strategies in Europe and state development plans and frameworks in the U.S. Without integration of policy, spatial planning will fail in its attempts to be strategic and a driver of sustainable development and investment.

**Temporality** is another common issue. The tensions which arise between the short-term political ambitions and longer-term nature of planning are frequent when it comes to strategic issues.

**Citizen engagement** in the planning process and the ways in which planning policy and practice reflect these interventions is a recurring theme – irrespective of location. A democratic deficit through a lack of opportunities to formally engage is an obstacle which can often force citizens to disengage. On the flip side to this, there are systems where it could be argued that citizens are disengaging because of ‘consultation fatigue’. Achieving the right balance is an ongoing learning curve.

**Territoriality:** Common to national planning in both Europe and the U.S. is the emphasis on the territorial specifics of the resulting plan (i.e. the area covered and its socio-economic profile), the key considerations in terms of planning for growth / de-growth, and the resulting impacts of the policies adopted. From a practitioners’ viewpoint, there is a strong case to be made for a common vocabulary – the meaning of which is equally understood by policy-makers, planners and citizens alike.

In the case of Ireland, the Irish Minister for Housing and Planning, Jan O’Sullivan T.D., noted in her opening address to the symposium that the *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS) for Ireland contains within it many positives – but it has not been as successful as expected. Adopted in 2002, the NSS is the strategic spatial plan for Ireland to which all other considered spatial planning documents, whether national, regional or local in focus, must adhere. For example, the NSS is translated into local development plans via Regional Planning Guidelines (RPGs). To date, the NSS has been a key driver in the regeneration of parts of the main cities in the State. However, the failure of Central Government to link the Decentralisation Programme (announced in December 2003 and subsequently cancelled in November 2011) to the NSS greatly weakened its potential; and was the precursor to many of its policies being ignored further down the planning hierarchy. Massive over-zoning and unfinished housing estates are notable examples of the lack of follow through in the implementation of this so-called hierarchy. The strategic planning system did not counterbalance pressure from developers. Instead, encouraged by government policies such as tax incentives for development in disadvantaged rural or coastal communities, a developer-led planning system as opposed to a plan-led system emerged. Planning legislation introduced in 2010 addressed some of these issues; for example, the development of core strategies within City and County Development Plans which demonstrate how plans are consistent with national and regional policy.

On a more positive note, Minister O’Sullivan emphasised her belief that spatial planning has a crucial role to play in the recovery of the Irish economy; and, to this end, a revised NSS will be published which charts an ambitious and sustainable course of strategic planning for the coming decade.

### **The Planners: Taking Back Ownership of Plan-Making**

In some countries, such as the U.K., despite all the rhetoric that spatial plans should be evidence-led, the evidence is often led by policy. This begs the

question: Do planners have the necessary means to both contribute to, and make, effective decisions? And in the context of the current Great Depression which is showing no signs of abating, do planners have the technical capacity – and information-base – to make a plan that will be effective? In terms of the information-base, agencies such as ESPON are especially useful in providing information, studies and spatial analysis through maps that can be used by planners in explaining the direction of suggested plans and policies.

If planners have the relevant influence and capacity to plan and, in turn, can develop effective plans, will people accept it? This raises the need for stronger integration between plan-making and plan-delivery. And key to this is strong leadership – nationally, regionally and locally. Without this, the desired vertical and horizontal integration of policy will be weak.

Planners should not wait for politicians to lead; but instead should carry on with their work and present it with an expectation that there will be a possibility to proceed formally.

Increasingly, risks and uncertainties are part and parcel of the planning system – irrespective of scale. These factors are leading to the use of scenario-based planning that is becoming a core element of urban environment management. Drawing on improved information technologies and datasets, planners and policy-makers can consider different development scenarios based on environmental conditions, and economic and population projections; thus allowing plans to adapt easily to changing circumstances nationally, regionally and / or locally. As such, planners need to be trained in scenario development and modelling of results. Plans and development frameworks that do not consider implementation, feasibility and financial issues are fruitless; and unfortunately there are many examples of the best laid, best considered, best analysed, and best interpreted plans simply falling down because of these issues. Thus, implementation, feasibility and

financial issues should always be taken into account in plan development.

A key message emanating from the symposium is that planners need to think more about the political-culture relationship and the interrelationship between citizen-society-state. The changing nature of community involvement is important both in Europe and in the United States; public expectations have changed and this must be reflected in the process. There is also a need to make stronger linkages between processes and outcomes; with planning systems on both sides of the Atlantic benefitting from outside impacts, collaboration, inputs and views.

The papers presented at the conference, together with presentations and related webcasts are available to download from the websites of the respective organising bodies:  
<http://www.ucd.ie/gpep/events/seminarsworkshopsconferences/natplansymp2012/>  
**and** <http://smartgrowth.umd.edu/ancdublinsymp.html>

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