SPRAWLESCAPES

A comparative study of landscape discourses of urban sprawl in Sweden and Germany

This summary report gives an overview of the main objectives, results, and conclusions of the research project SPRAWLESCAPES, a two-year project run by Vera Vicenzotti and Mattias Qviström. The project, which ended in November 2016, was financed in the EU's People Programme (Marie Curie Actions); it was hosted at the Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning and Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

The challenge

Urban sprawl, that is unplanned incremental urban development at low density, is considered to be an escalating problem in Europe. The European Environment Agency states in a report from 2006 that "[s]prawl threatens the very culture of Europe, as it creates environmental, social and economic impacts for both the cities and countryside of Europe." (European Environment Agency 2006: 5) Consequently, there are calls to curb urban sprawl on a European level.

However, research into how to tackle urban sprawl has focused almost exclusively on measuring and quantifying sprawl. Such exclusively quantitative approaches are problematic as they 'naturalise' urban sprawl. That means they falsely assume that sprawl is a universal concept and manifests itself in the same way all over the world, or at least all over Europe. This has fostered an unreasonably homogenised methodology considering the diversity of European landscapes. Moreover, it has nurtured an oversimplified polarization in the discourse between 'sprawl' and 'densification'. This fails to capture the rich variety of settlement structures in Europe. These shortcomings have practical implications for planning as the underlying, often ideologically biased, assumptions preclude certain sustainable planning solutions from the outset.

The project's objectives

In both Swedish and German planning research debate, the concept of 'landscape' has emerged as a way to facilitate a more nuanced and culturally situated conceptualization of urban sprawl. In the SPRAWLESCAPES project, we have thus engaged with these landscape discourses of urban sprawl, asking: *What landscape-related concepts are drawn upon, built up and disseminated in Swedish and German planning discourse on urban sprawl and how do they contribute to a more nuanced, culturally situated understanding of urban sprawl?*

To answer this question, the project aimed comparing Swedish and German discourses of urban sprawl, and to contribute to developing a methodological framework that would allow a critical qualitative comparison.

Main results

We have compared landscape discourses of urban sprawl in Germany and Sweden by chronicling the import of the German concept *Zwischenstadt* into Swedish planning research discourse. *Zwischenstadt* means literally 'in-between city'. It is a neologism that has been coined towards the end of the 1990s by German urban designer Thomas Sieverts (1997/2003) to allow an unbiased look at the suburbanised reality of the landscape where we live now. It has been introduced and used by Swedish research planners, too, in attempts to come to terms with the peri-urban landscapes and as an alternative to the hegemonic planning discourse on urban sprawl.

The project reviewed existing comparative studies and criticized quantitative mapping approaches. We argue that studies that try to map urban sprawl on a European level are problematic because they systematically fail to acknowledge the historically varied and culturally situated character of European urban development. Furthermore, they are implicitly based on modernist ideas of progress, which makes them disregard qualitative differences, i.e. differences in culture and history. This makes it also impossible to trace and open up for different futures.

We contributed thus to developing a methodological framework that allows a critical discussion of mobile or "travelling" ideas in transnational planning discourses on urban sprawl. We have engaged with literature on policy mobility, i.e. movements of policies in trans-national planning discourses and their implications, translation and, last but not least, on travelling theories and concepts (e.g. McFarlane 2010; Said 1983; Wood 2016). It turned out to be essential, especially in transnational planning discourses, to be aware of the paths along which concepts travel, as it were, and of the different contexts at a concept's place of conception

and its current or final destination, and of the changes the concepts undergo *en route*.

The methodological framework developed in the project has made us see that travelling concepts tend to lose their critical content *en route*. This could be clearly seen in the case studied in the project: The term *Zwischenstadt* is invoked as a default counter-narrative to the hegemonic discourse on dense city centres in Swedish planning research discourse. However, since engagement with the term and its original context is, in most instances, rather superficial, the concept's original critical impetus is largely lost. The project proposes thus two ways to recover the critical content of travelling planning concepts: firstly, to translate the concept's context, i.e. to take into account the differences in the historico-geographical circumstances of the concept's point of origin and its new destination. Secondly, if the concept travels between language realms, deliberations around the literal translation can help to revive its critical content.

The wider theoretical and geographical implications of the project, i.e. the application of the methodological framework and the results of the case study, have been explored in international conferences and in developing new international research networks.

Conclusions and socio-economic impact

In European planning practice and research, it has long been common practice to learn from how things are done and conceived abroad. The methodological framework developed in this research project is thus of crucial importance, because it enables planners and researchers alike to critically reflect on the import and use of concepts coined elsewhere. The project's results are thus highly relevant for planning practitioners and researchers, both on the national and the European level.

In addressing methodological challenges of (mutual) learning, the project has contributed to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention (ELC), which highlights "mutual assistance and exchange of information" concerning landscape matters (Council of Europe 2000: Ch. III, Art. 8).

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Project duration:

2 years, between November 2013 and November 2016, with one year parental leave of the research fellow.