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COLLABORATIVE PLANNING IN AN  
UNCOLLABORATIVE WORLD

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**Abstract** The purpose of this article is to expose the concept of collaborative planning to the reality of planning, thereby assessing its efficacy for informing and explaining what planners ‘really’ do and can do. In this systematic appraisal, we begin by disaggregating collaborative planning into four elements that can enlighten such conceptual frameworks: ontology, epistemology, ideology and methodology. These four lenses help delimit and clarify the object of our examination and provide transparent criteria that guide our examination of collaborative planning’s strengths and weaknesses. The second part of this article comprises an empirical investigation of planning processes in Northern Ireland, ranging from region-wide to local and from statutory to visionary. Planning efforts in this province make suitable test cases because special care has been invested in participatory deliberation processes to compensate for the democratic deficits in its mainstream political system. Such efforts have sought to ensure a maximally inclusive planning process. And indeed, the consultation process leading to the *Regional Development Strategy*, for example, has earned plaudits from leading exponents of collaborative planning. The final analysis provides a systematic gauge of collaborative planning in light of our empirical evidence, deploying the four conceptual dimensions introduced in the first part. This exposes a range of problems not only with the concept itself but also regarding its affinity with the uncollaborative world within which it has to operate. The former shed light on those aspects where collaborative planning as a conceptual tool for practitioners needs

to be renovated, while the latter highlight inconsistencies in a political framework that struggles to accommodate both global competitiveness and local democratic collaboration.

**Keywords** collaborative planning, epistemology, ideology, Northern Ireland, ontology, realistic assessment

Collaborative planning as an inclusive dialogic approach to shaping social space appears to accord with certain features of contemporary society. These include: the postmodernist perspectives on the reduced certitudes and predictabilities of a complex world; the putative shift to new modes of governance that acknowledges the need to involve multiple stakeholders; the cross-fertilizations among these stakeholders, supportive of a creative milieu for the changing economy; and the increasing hegemony of neoliberalism that some see less in terms of de-regulating and privatizing the public realm, but rather as dismantling old divisions between state and market to accommodate new synergistic partnerships. However, despite these factors appearing to favour a new platform for more collaborative decision-making, tensions are apparent in the supporting arguments, at both particular and universal levels. To take a particular example, the UK's 'modernizing planning' agenda speaks of the virtue of participative practice. But it also extols the purpose of greater decisiveness and speed in plan-making, without explaining how the equity and effectiveness of the former can be made compatible with the economy and efficiency implied in the latter. At a more universal level, there is an apparent paradox in the promotion of collaborative practice rooted in values of cohesion, solidarity and inclusivity in a world that can be seen as ever more individualist, socially fragmented, competitive, or in other words, uncollaborative.

The central purpose of this article is to explore the efficacy of communicative/collaborative planning, which some see as 'an important direction for planning theory with significant potential for practice that will continue to dominate academic debate' (Tewdr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2002: 216). Here, it should be acknowledged that it is debatable whether it is a theory in the strict Popperian sense of explanation that permits falsifiable prediction or more like a normative framework designed to describe and guide practice. Without arbitrating on this distinction, we examine the term under four key dimensions that can clarify and delimit the ambitions and inconsistencies involved: ontology, epistemology, ideology, and methodology. These 'lenses' are selected because they offer insight into the assumptions about reality, knowledge, values and practice that are central to the claims of collaborative planning, and help to develop transparent criteria to assess its efficacy for describing the actual and potential role of planners.

Because we argue that one of the flaws in this planning concept lies in the paucity of robust empirical evidence summoned to support its contentions, we then present a case study of nine types of planning and regeneration

intervention stretching over a decade from the mid-1990s, and operating at varied spatial scales within Northern Ireland. Given the region's divided society, it may be thought that this is an inappropriate arena to test collaboration. However, hard cases can illuminate the challenges and contradictions involved in a proposition, without laying claim to being typical. Expressed differently, it can be said that, if collaborative planning works in a difficult environment like Northern Ireland, then its application in more favourable circumstances is all the more feasible. Another justification for selecting this arena derives from a paradox of its very division. Government has invested much effort into securing the legitimacy derivative from extensive consultation processes and feels obligated by the region's distinctive equality legislation to facilitate the participation of all sections of society. So, while Northern Ireland offers a 'wicked' test case, it demonstrates also a substantial investment in collaborative planning practice, and, as indicated later, it has been the recipient of praise for its planning practice by advocates of collaborative planning.

The case study is based on participant observation at the centre of these nine examples of planning and regeneration, via the role of one of these authors as facilitator for all these engagements; related intensive discussion with policy-makers and decision-takers in government; and 50 semi-structured interviews with strategically placed personnel across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors about their appraisal of collaborative practice and impact.

### *The contested meaning of collaborative planning*

The idea of collaborative planning has gained widespread acceptance among planning scholars and practitioners. Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger certify that communicative/collaborative planning has enjoyed an 'enthusiastic reception' (2002: 207); Innes and Booher observe that 'collaborative planning is moving forward and spreading as a method' (2003: 24); and Innes even chose the expression 'emerging paradigm' (1995) to describe the role of collaborative planning for planning theory. It is not possible to identify a particular author who has coined this term. Rather, it seems to have evolved out of previous debates around the desirability, timeliness and effectiveness of various planning dispositions in the late 20th century, in particular out of 'the neo-liberal, anti-planning morass of the 1980s' (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2002: 214). It is feasible, however, to name those authors who helped to refine and popularize the concept. Among them in the American context are scholars such as Innes, Booher, Forester, Friedman, Hoch, Fischer, and in Europe, Albrechts, Swyngedouw, Hajer, Davoudi, Moulaert and, maybe most prominently, Healey.

Collaborative planning is not a monolithic block of axioms set in stone. While some portray it as a planning theory genus that encompasses a heterogeneous and dynamic mix of particular planning theory species, others seem to treat it as a particular species within the larger genus of communicative planning theories. Among the latter are Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (2002) who juxtapose it as the Healeyan incarnation of communicative planning next to argumentative planning (Fischer and Forester), deliberative

planning (Forester) and variations influenced by neo-pragmatism (Harper and Stein), critical theory (Forester), Foucauldian perspectives (Flyvbjerg), and planning practice (Hoch). For the purpose of this article, it is insignificant whichever taxonomy and hierarchy one subscribes to and whether collaborative planning is considered a theory (Healey, 1997, would deny this), a 'strong programme' à la Barnes and Bloore<sup>1</sup> (1982), a 'world view' (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2002) or merely a "'form" of planning' (Harris, 2002: 23). Regardless of these discussions, there seems to be a sufficient amount of shared understanding about the skeleton of collaborative planning or, for that matter, of communicative planning, and if challenged, we would specify that the focus of our argument derives from the definition developed by Healey (1997).

### Ontology

Collaborative planners do not understand space and time as merely 'objective, external containers within which human life is played out' (Graham and Healey, 1999: 626). Therefore, they do not follow the Christallerian notion of abstract ideal distributions in a Euclidean space. Collaborative planning is based on a relational understanding of space (e.g. Graham and Healey, 1999) where one mile in direction X can be of a totally different quality and a radically different experiential length, than one mile in direction Y. In other words, spatial realities cannot be reduced to geometries without losing the rich and crucial complexities of real life. Similar thoughts guide collaborative planners' understanding of time as something more complex than a linear sequence of seconds. To cycle 10 minutes along a polluted highway is really different from cycling 10 minutes in a park. The maxim that everything depends on the context is an overarching part of the ontology upon which collaborative planning rests. Accordingly, the object of any planning endeavour must not be treated as a blank slate but as a unique component of an incredibly complex larger system.

Collaborative planners also share some fundamental assumptions about the nature of human beings and, accordingly, the social world. The latter is, in Healeyan terms, not just 'constituted of autonomous individuals, each pursuing their own preferences' (1997: 55) in an isolated, almost autistic manner. This is a clear departure from the neo-classical model of self-interested utility maximizers who are 'responding to objective price signals in the manner of robots' as Pennington put it (2002: 189). In philosophical parlance, collaborative planning dispenses with Lockean assumptions of the atomistic man in favour of an Aristotelian understanding of humans as political beings. Also, Barber's theory of strong democracy (1984) is firmly based on an ontology that treats human beings as essentially the product of social interaction. Although these philosophers are rarely cited in publications about collaborative planning, their thoughts clearly describe its ontological basis.

Some authors in the field of collaborative planning frequently refer to the notion of 'complex adaptive systems' and it is, again, an element of its ontological foundation. Such systems are 'characterized by fragmentation, uncertainty and complexity' (Innes and Booher, 2003: 10), quite often 'at the edge of chaos'

(Innes and Booher, 1999: 417) but with self-organizing capabilities. Those who share this assumption would obviously disagree with the idea that the 'nature' of the world is essentially that of a neatly structured machine. In their eyes, it is more like an organism (Innes and Booher, 1999). Jacobs (1961) would probably adhere to the latter notion and contribute her understanding of the world – and especially of a city – as a phenomenon of 'organized complexity' which is fundamentally different from the notion of 'simplicity'<sup>2</sup> (the machine model) and of 'disorganized complexity' (chaotic, amorphous entropy). Assuming that this is what collaborative planners adhere to, it can be said to rest on an a-modern ontology (see Moore, 2001), in that it dispenses with modernistic reductionism and universalism, while also disowning post-modern relativism and hyper-individualism.

Two well-established philosophical traditions share most of the above assumptions and constitute the main genealogy of collaborative planning: Giddens's structuration theory and Habermas's theory of communicative action. Healey (1997) uses both explicitly as scaffolding for her construct which makes Harris conclude that collaborative planning is a 'hybrid of various . . . theories' (2002: 24). Giddens's core assumption is that neither agency (human activities) nor structure (the 'given' political, technological, habitual structures) is some kind of *movens immotum*. Both rather shape each other constantly in a recursive loop, meaning that fundamental change is possible through a spiral bootstrap process. The practical manifestation of such a virtuous cycle is a lengthy, 'restless, dialectical process' (Offe, cited in Healey, 2004a: 96) and it requires a 'major leap in reflexive activity . . . to re-think problems and challenges . . . [to] re-shap[e] the frames of reference in which issues are discussed and decisions are taken' (Healey, 1997: 244). This point of self-reflection lies at the heart of Habermas's theory of communicative action which is meant as a tool to question and overcome the gravitational pull of existing powers that are always already embedded in and acting through all types of structures. Reflection and undistorted debate are needed to wake up from our power-blind somnambulism and to reconstruct a world without hegemonies.

### *Epistemology*

The assumption that there is ultimate Truth 'out there' demands a different approach for understanding the world than the assumption that everything is socially constructed. Collaborative planners certainly lean towards the latter end of this spectrum and openly admit that they are trying to flip the epistemology and think differently. But they do not even have to reach into the depth of philosophical debates to challenge traditional epistemologies. They can also marshal quite pragmatic concerns for a new type of meaningful knowledge, especially in a time where 'the diversity of lifestyles seems increasingly to be slipping out of the demographers' ability to categorize and capture in quantitative data' (Healey, 1997: 102).

The ontology that underlies the concept of collaborative planning also determines *what* we should look for in our pursuit of knowledge. We should, for

example, not simply measure space in metres and miles because physical adjacency cannot be used as a proxy for identifying meaningful relationships and impacts of a project or a policy (Graham and Healey, 1999: 642). In addition, we should not only know 'about the immediate patterns driving a planning issue . . . [but also] step back and think more about the underlying strategic patterns that derive from the system in which the more immediate patterns are defined' (Healey, 2004b: 6). In a similar context, Sandercock (1998) reminds us that we need to 'make the invisible visible' and Innes and Booher encourage us to generate 'emancipatory knowledge [which] transcends the blinders created by our conditions and institutions' (1999: 418). Only then will we appreciate how 'power is exercised through taken-for-granted norms and practices' (Coaffee and Healey, 2003: 1982). Typical questions collaborative planners pose therefore include: which are the power relations involved in a particular issue; who are potential winners and losers; what kind of arguments are used to forge coalitions; how does the prevailing situation influence the way we think about an issue? In other words, collaborative planning is all about disassembling the black box of our situated-ness and of the constructedness of whatever situation happens to prevail 'out there'.

Another epistemological issue is the claim that all *types* of knowledge need to be taken into account, implying an acknowledgement of tacit knowledge as a major factor driving human decisions and actions, even if it cannot be articulated, let alone measured. Therefore, collaborative planners emphasize the need to facilitate articulation of such experiential knowledge, stressing that 'there is no privileged, correct "rationality" [and that] all . . . potential forms of reasoning have to be learned about and given respect' (Healey, 1997: 264). As an example, Healey mentions that 'fear, like moral outrage and aesthetic appreciation, cannot be reasoned away in the language of instrumental rationality' (1997: 129). An important corollary of this position is that there are no privileged sites of knowledge production. Thus, collaborative planning seems to side with the idea of 'Mode 2' research (Gibbons et al., 1994) which is supposed to generate 'socially robust knowledge' (Nowotny, 1999) in a 'post-normal' (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993) or 'post-academic' (Ziman, 1994) fashion.

The above considerations amount to a call for the 'co-construction' of knowledge among possibly many social actors. This is, indeed, a bold departure from modernist/positivist epistemology. Knowledge generation thus resembles more a collective learning process, resulting in 'negotiated knowledge' that can arbitrate among diverse claims and priorities. But, here we need to distinguish two dimensions of learning. The first type 'involves working out how to perform a task better within given parameters; the second involves learning about the parameters and thereby changing the conditions under which tasks are performed' (Healey, 1997: 257). The latter type is also discussed under the heading 'second-order learning' (Schot and Rip, 1996) which connotes a process whereby the supply- *and* the demand-side articulate and question their current preferences in search for a new 'fit'. Such a process is possible because preferences are not fixed (Fainstein, 2000); they are malleable because they are contingent upon circumstances, including the preferences of others. The

interactive epistemology of collaborative planning is therefore not concerned with the gauging of fixed interests but with facilitating the negotiation of emergent interests and the manifestation of second-order learning effects.

### *Ideology*

Collaborative planning is also characterized by certain ideological assumptions that reflect its purveyors' idea of how the world *ought* to be. Collaborative planners emphasize the importance of candid and explicit discussions about values in planning processes because the technical and seemingly objective quality criteria of the 'public good' and the 'common interest' have been unmasked as sterile and over-aggregated simplifications of real-world complexities. This, of course, marks a sharp turn away from the traditional, rationalist notion of the value-free planning process.

Most collaborative planners cherish certain values themselves. Their cumulative value base brings collaborative planning close to what Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger call 'a left-leaning substantive explanatory and prescriptive theory' (2002: 215). And indeed, collaborative planning, alongside other concepts like sustainable development and human rights, can be seen as a refuge for leftist ideas, attempting to re-legitimate alternative visions to the prevailing neo-liberalism. It also overlaps widely with notions of a 'third way' that putatively constitutes the philosophical underpinnings of UK's New Labour government (Giddens, 1998, 2000). Yet, a tension exists here between a value-driven approach to collaboration and the New Public Management-style pragmatism that informs aspects of revisionist social democracy. The latter is intent on rethinking the egalitarian project by endorsing market mechanisms for social efficiency, while remaining opposed to market outcomes that generate social injustice (Giddens and Diamond, 2005). While holding firm to distributive values, it is disposed to a 'new realism' about what works amid structural shifts in economy and society, including new partnerships between state and market. This stance is reflected locally by an emphasis on contingent and strategic alliances rather than ideological coalitions, on 'common concerns' rather than shared 'moral orders' (Healey, 1997: 124). In a slightly contradicting move, however, collaborative planners argue for 'open negotiation of moralities, beyond utilitarianism' (Healey, 2004a: 97) and for a collective avowal to values like aesthetics, enjoyment and other spiritual values that enrich human existence.

Collaborative planning's inherent impulse for grassroots democracy that gives 'voice to the voiceless' (Sarkissian, 2005) draws more attention to gender issues, ethnic diversity and the needs of disabled citizens. But, this is not identical with the Davidoffian version of Paolo Freire's advocacy approach (Davidoff, 1965) which tries to mobilize sufficient discursive counter-power to the prevailing powers. Indeed, collaborative planning tries to dispense with power plays altogether by removing the distortions that Foucault and Lukes detected as embodied in almost every aspect of discourses, in formal routines, informal practices and physical structures. Flyvbjerg, in a more realistic move,

acknowledges that collaborative planning's intention 'is not to dissolve relations of power in a utopia of transparent communication but to play games with a minimum of domination' (Flyvberg, 1996: 391).

But, where does this position collaborative planning with respect to egalitarian values and the role of markets in a globalizing world? While its support for meaningful democracy is congruent with a general endorsement of equity, it is not tantamount to a call for equality. It champions diversity as a social asset, as long as cultural distinctiveness does not promote exclusivist ethnic entrenchment. Nor is it blind to market forces. On the contrary, its ideological arsenal is well stocked with ammunition to keep neo-liberal or Hayekian criticism (e.g. Pennington, 2002) at bay. Although it is – like all planning – interventionist, it intends that local planning processes can 'combine the environmental, social and political awareness of planners with the market sense and commercial sharpness of land managers' (Rowley, 2006: 1). Yet, with its typical focus on the immediate and local, collaborative planning often understates the pervasive influence of globalization. Also, it tends to shelter its inclusive claims under the leaky assumption that planners are conceptually and legally well equipped to address an increasingly transnational political economy and to protect common good from overriding corporate power. Interestingly, collaborative planning is sometimes even understood and marketed as an accomplice of globalization because it is 'seen as fitting in with the *Zeitgeist* of global economic restructuring and local responses – a method for . . . helping communities to compete for foreign direct investment' (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2002: 207).

Sustainable development is also highly valued by collaborative planners, even though they subscribe to different definitions. For Innes and Booher (2003) sustainability is a systemic intelligence, flexibility and robustness that stems from the ability to adapt to new circumstances. While this is an almost value-free understanding of the term, many other authors see sustainability more substantively. Healey, for example, often combines it with ecological concerns to the expression 'environmental sustainability' (1998: 2). She even exposes her underlying ideological position when she reminds us of 'some absolute priorities, such as a duty of environmental stewardship or of natural justice' (Healey, 1997: 63). Moreover, she disavows the ready mutuality between economic growth and a sustainable environment, despite the hopes of the modernity project.

### *Methodology*

The above considerations accrue to a demand for a new methodology, which in turn demands new methods, that is, new approaches, techniques and tools for policy-makers and planners. In essence, these amount to what Friedmann calls 'interactive, non-rationalist modes of governance' (cited in Healey, 1997: 292). Healey dampens any expectation for cookbook-style advice on how to achieve such new modes of governance. She warns that 'there are no standard answers to the specification of the systemic institutional design of governance systems

for inclusionary participatory democratic practice' (1997: 294). The best she can offer is a set of quality criteria which revolves around issues of 'rights and duties ... resources ... policy principles [and the] distribution of competencies' (p. 292).

The ontology of a complexly interrelated world demands rejection of the institutionally hard-wired incentive to split problems along administratively defined hyphenation cracks into convenient components that can be assigned separately to isolated sectoral departments. In the UK, Blair's New Labour government pledged to change this, and in 1999 launched the *Modernizing Government* white paper (Prime Minister and the Minister for the Cabinet Office, 1999) which defined 'joined-up government' as a top priority. This agenda coincided with a shift to spatial planning, a more value-driven and proactive model, designed to create sustainable places through integrative strategies and inclusive processes (Albrechts, 2004).

A direct practical implication of collaborative planning's epistemological foundation is the call to harness the heterogeneity of knowledge or, in Forester's words, to broaden the knowledge base for planning (1999). For this to happen, everyone with a perceived stake needs to be identified and all 'stakeholders must be equally informed, listened to, and respected' (Innes and Booher, 1999: 418). Since collaborative planning demands decisions to emerge from inclusive and open dialogue among equal partners rather than from top-down expertise, majority rule, arbitrage or the haggling around predetermined positions, this ideal cannot be achieved by virtue of political rulings in centralized legislative cauldrons which can, by their very nature, never do justice to 'the relational dynamics of specific instances' (Graham and Healey, 1999: 642). Thus, collaborative planning demands a shift from representational to discursive and participatory forms of governance where deliberation takes place through a lot of 'face-to-face interaction in real time' (Friedmann, 1993: 482). Only under such conditions can policy be designed, not *for* citizens, but *by* citizens in their role as policy 'users'. In other words, the demand- and supply-side of policies and planning decisions ought to 'co-evolve' (Brand, 2005a).

The practice of collaborative planning is also characterized by a reconception of conflicts as 'creative tensions'. Reaping the potentials of this friction energy requires that we bring 'different standpoints and arguments onto the agenda ... clarify what is at stake, and lead to a better understanding of the nature of a conflict' (Elander, 2003: 16). Quite often, Elander maintains, 'contradictions may be less antagonistic than they first seem' (p. 16), a view directly linked to the constructivist notion of interests as, at least partial, functions of contingent and dynamic circumstances. It also prompts the optimism shared by collaborative planners about the achievability of consensus, which is more than the mere arithmetic compromise that emerges if all involved stakeholders concede a little bit. Rather, it is a result at a higher level of complexity, competence, stability and performance than the original elements that were involved (Innes and Booher, 1999). Therefore, the practice of collaborative planning requires more than just thorough mediation; it requires arenas for non-adversarial discourse where value systems can be articulated, where shared

strategic conviction can grow, where conflicts are re-framed in a less antagonistic manner and where the discourse shifts from the competitive bargaining of fixed interests to a mode of negotiative problem definition and consensus-building.

Thus, the role of planners changes. They are not any more the benevolent patrons, the wise and technocratic leaders endowed with the mandate to 'get stuff done' (Moore, 2007) à la Robert Moses. While traditionally, planners were often seen as the regulatory, managerial and controlling middle part of the linear legislation–execution–jurisdiction triad, they are now called upon to act as facilitator, intermediary, as 'knowledge mediator and broker' (Healey, 1997: 309), as a 'counsellor' (Wissink, 1995) and a 'critical friend' (Forester, 1996). This is also different from the advocacy remit that Davidoff (1965) and others used to assign to planners. The collaborative planner is not simply a loyal ally of the voiceless and disenfranchised, but someone who creates the platforms where an interactive and non-hostile discourse among equals can take place. The latter criterion requires painstaking attention to control the many cracks through which the effect of power inequalities can infiltrate. This ranges from the invitation procedure to a public consultation to the room layout during a neighbourhood meeting. During such meetings, a planner has the unique opportunity to elicit the articulation of social dilemmas which often amount to first-mover disadvantages and are thus an obstacle to collaboration (Brand, 2005b).

### *Cracks within collaborative planning*

To summarize this section, the argument is that collaborative planning represents a set of ontological, epistemological, ideological and methodological ideas, and the logical relationship *among* these four building blocks is relatively consistent. However, there are certain logical cracks *within* them, especially in the ideology component. Examples here include its embrace of standard leftist ideas (e.g. inclusion of the disenfranchised) versus its concessions to the neo-liberal imperative of competitiveness, for instance in its references to how collaborative planning can help regions to become 'fit' for the global market. With respect to the dimension of methodology, some issues are simply not addressed. For example, how can we enter the virtuous bootstrap loop without even an initial amount of trust? Expressed differently, how do we get to that 'big bang' moment that creates the foundation of trust? It also seems that some positions of collaborative planning can only be postulated when blinding out certain aspects of reality, a problem of selective ontology that leads to wish-driven claims.

A more fundamental critique challenges the core propositions of collaborative planning that are underpinned by the concept of deliberative democracy. The latter espouses forms of collective decision-making that are inclusive, reflexive and consensus-oriented in ways that enhance access to, and legitimacy of, a more transparent and accountable form of governance. In this view, rational discourse among equals allows all participants to open debate and interrogate others in a process facilitated impartially and based on universal

principles such as justice and democracy (Calhoun, 1991). Many aspects of this proceduralist approach are laudable: its recognition of multiple and diverse stakeholders operating in an increasingly complex, pluralist and unpredictable world; its holistic perspective on development; its implicit value of subsidiarity; and its ambition of an informed and engaged citizenry in respectful interaction for dispute resolution. In essence, it seeks to replace the argument of the greater force with the force of the better argument.

But, this deliberative and communicative polity faces a basic ontological problem. As expressed by Mouffe (1999), the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all on matters of common concern is a conceptual impossibility. Related to this is the flawed approach to power and inequality implicit in the assumptions about a public sphere for rational discourse leading to democratic consensus. Power differentials, a reality well recognized by many adherents of collaborative planning, cannot be dissolved through logical argumentation. Beyond the problem of power, there is a need to acknowledge the role of the emotional and the personal, expressed in the narrative that allows 'the whole person to be present in negotiations and deliberations' (Sandercock, 2000: 26). Moreover, the goal of consensus may itself be over-ambitious (Hillier, 2003). Rather, antagonism and conflict are intrinsic to human relations, and this 'us' and 'them' are particularly manifest in the diversities of contemporary society (Amin, 2002). Thus, it may be less illusionary to pursue a 'democratic art of governance, namely civil servants' and planners' ability to work productively with and within strife' (Ploger, 2004: 72).

In rebuttal, Innes (2004) has insisted that advocates of consensus-building like her have not assumed that it delivers comprehensive harmony. Indeed, often it leads to 'second order effects such as spin-off partnerships . . . new ideas for use in other situations, . . . new institutional forms of planning and action' (pp. 8, 9). For her, issues such as differential power are not overwhelming. Rather, in an increasingly fragmented world, the powerful can be induced to participate, given the beneficial security and legitimacy of widespread support, and the added value of new forms of network power and synergy that attend collaborative practice. But an alternative perspective emphasizes that, in the face of the inherent combativeness in society, consensus can often be purchased at the price of containment. They insist that it remains feasible to change from a politics of antagonism, where the opponent is perceived as an enemy to be crushed, to a politics of agonism, where the opponent is perceived as an adversary to be contested with, within a mutual acknowledgement of the right to differ. Thus, Mouffe (2000: 15) notes that:

an important difference with the model of "deliberative democracy", is that for "agonistic pluralism", the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.

In similar vein, Gunder (2003) advances the concept of 'passionate planning'. In this perspective, the disharmonies of rival ideas are an immutable feature of an unrepressed pluralist polity. Particular struggles will yield hegemonic

outcomes reflective of the power relations, and will be invariably exclusive of some social interest. In short, the agreeability implicit in 'collaborative' decision-making demands a level of tractability unrealistic in a discordant world.

As noted by Honig (1993) and others who have set the contours of a contemporary agonistic politics, the requisite is for discourse that affirms persuasion and argumentation within a dialogic process that acknowledges the perpetuity of dissent and contest. In this reality, agreement can often be provisional and ragged rather than neatly consensual and terminal; certain divisions remain intractable despite repeated effort at resolution; the multiple meanings and interpretative rivalries of a very differentiated world offer fragile reference points for building a shared context of norms, values and perceptions (Mantysalo, 2002); divergent propositions have to compete to be compelling; and the dialogic process is itself transformative in the relations among participants, creating a 'sensing together' rather than the conventional consensus, whereby antagonism can be domesticated into agonism (Hillier, 2002: 289). Within this ontology, agonism recognizes that knowledge is always partial, and sometimes partisan, and that the search for enhanced knowledge is endless rather than exhaustive. Since, unlike deliberative democracy, agonism does not regard consensus as a regulative frame (Schaap, 2006), it anticipates more the protracted entanglements around disputed knowledge and multiple intelligence. As indicated by Deveaux (2000), these particularities are inherent in disputes around identity and difference that generate diverse conceptions of 'the good', and as Murtagh (2004) recounts, are especially pronounced when the challenge of creating place in contested territory confronts acute emotional attachments to ethnic space.

By contrast, Habermasian intersubjective communication, while disavowing many of the universalities associated with totalizing metanarratives, is designed for rational mutual understanding, and remains rooted in normative assumptions about the virtues and viabilities of consensus. However, in the ontology of agonism, such consensus-building can be a contrivance for evasion or evisceration when addressing contentious issues. Thus, it has been suggested that in the *realpolitik*, planners are expected to pursue

a consensus strategy [because it] is a way of avoiding turning questions of interests, representation, justice or power into political questions and community controversies . . . Consensus steering can thus be seen as a way of ignoring antagonism or suppressing strife, because this form of governance prevents public disputes from unfolding and becoming important in planning politics. (Ploger, 2004: 78–9)

In an attempt to transcend the differences between agonists and deliberative democrats, Dryzek (2003) first acknowledges the difficulties of operating trustful and reasonable discourse in the robust context of contradictory assertions of identity, where one identity can be validated mainly by the suppression of another. But, while he accepts that agonistic exchange across diverse identities can appear to permit more candid collision about difference, he suggests that it contains its own limitations. For instance, if contested identities are accentuated in such forthright engagements, there is a risk that difference can be amplified

or congealed, whereby persistent confrontation likely produces indeterminacy. On the other hand, he insists that deliberative discourse does not have to be dispassionate or trapped in a rationalistic ontology. Moreover, not all exchange among protagonists in a divided society needs to be contestable, and a more nuanced and differentiated epistemology about such social relations can help identify scope for shared futures. Nevertheless, Dryzek does question consociational arrangements for dealing with division, since these are often rooted in agreement among ethnic leaderships for macro-coalitions among the blocs, within a framework for segmental autonomy, mutual vetoes, and proportionality. Such 'analgesic' settlements can gag dissent and freeze the sectarian cleavages. As an alternative, planners and other social interventionists need to facilitate a discursive democracy, operating in an autonomous public domain and given to myriad discourses that offer alternatives and induce critical reflection, are non-coercive, and are capable of relating particular experiences and epistemologies with more universal principles and issues.

To test these arguments further, attention is now turned to the empirical evidence of the case study.

### *Exploring the practice: collaborative planning in Northern Ireland*

As indicated earlier, the planning arena of Northern Ireland is chosen as a hard case to test key propositions of the collaborative approach. Given its deeply disputatious nature and related contested space, it offers a stark challenge to a form of planning rooted in reciprocal principles and cooperative practice. In societies fractured by ethno-nationalist dispute, urban space becomes a crucible for the wider conflict about identity and nationality. Territory becomes used as both ethnic protector and exclusionary space (Lustick, 1993), while concepts of common belonging and citizenship become problematic in a polity of dominance and resistance that accentuates tribal rivalry (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). While effective planning in the contemporary city-region is putatively based on connectivity and networked social capital, these visceral and separatist affinities make inclusive collaborations across such sectarian partitions highly problematic.

Yet, strategic planning in Northern Ireland has recently received commendation for its innovative role not only in providing a framework for the spatial coordination of public investment, but also for facilitating a policy discourse about greater social cohesion amid the diversities and enmities of a deeply contested society. For instance, Northern Ireland's regional strategy, known as *Shaping Our Future* (DRDNI, 2001), has been seen to accord with the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESPD) and its priorities for territorial integration, trans-European spatial planning, balanced and sustainable development, and the engagement of multilevel governance. In this regard, Albrechts et al. (2003: 126) comment:

*Shaping Our Future* deserves the praise it has been given outside Northern Ireland. It has provided a strategic focus for infrastructure investment policy. It has given a framework to localities to work out how to position themselves in a positive way in a

new 'shared and devolved' political landscape. It has provided a basis for some degree of transdepartmental integration at government level. It has helped to change the governance culture towards more participatory practices. And it has provided a goal-focused, transparent argument about investment priorities in a highly charged political environment.

However, this affirmative appraisal of one planning initiative as an inclusive participatory process in a fractured societal context is not applicable to the region's typical planning experience. A more comprehensive analysis benefits from consideration of a longer time frame and a wider range of planning initiatives. Thus, as indicated in Table 1, the following assessment is based on nine types of planning and regeneration intervention stretching over a decade from the mid-1990s, and operating at varied spatial scales. The empirical data that follow were generated by participant observation in each of the examples cited, involving intensive public consultations and related policy discussions with senior government officials; two cross-sectoral forums on the experience of partnerships and development in Belfast; and 50 semi-structured interviews with a cross-sectoral sample of strategically placed personnel about the practice of collaborative development. Data interrogation included a content analysis of the consultation reports; an assessment of the correspondence between their findings and the final policy/plan; an appraisal of the initial problems in delivery; and an evaluation of the views of leading stakeholders about their experience of the planning process. Conclusions drawn from these investigations were then examined through the lenses of ontology, epistemology, ideology and methodology.

In general, these planning/development efforts shared three important characteristics:

- 1) they offered the rhetoric of more *integrated development*. For instance, the planning components deliberately stated the imperative of moving 'beyond land use' considerations to a more holistic appreciation of creating place; and the urban programmes, though primarily targeted at the most deprived areas, spoke of the importance of linking their development to that of the wider city. Yet in reality, the main strategic guidelines within the statutory plans did not venture far from the comfort zone of typical land-use planning;
- 2) they did not follow any *progressive linear pattern* in terms of scale or focus. For instance, the city-region planning process was well underway, only to be abandoned in favour of an overall regional planning strategy; and, while the urban policy of the 1990s induced the most needy communities to collectivize into area partnerships in order to attain a better economy of scale and scope, the policy of this decade has involved a retreat to smaller spatial units under the Neighbourhood Renewal agenda; and
- 3) all the initiatives were underpinned by extensive *public consultation*, designed to legitimize the process and to secure 'buy-in' from key stakeholders, as government came to increasingly acknowledge that effective delivery of urban and regional development demanded multi-agency collaboration.

TABLE 1 *Outline of plans and strategies*

<i>Scales of planning &amp; development</i>	<i>Objectives &amp; timing of initiative</i>	<i>General explanation</i>
Regional	The strategic planning framework for Northern Ireland, known as <i>Shaping Our Future</i> (2002), designed to enhance regional identity and collaboration in a territorially integrated policy approach	As the first regional strategy attempted for nearly three decades, it involved substantial consultation and an expectation that it would provide a fresh and cohesive platform for a new political dispensation
Sub-regional	Development strategies for sub-regions such as the South East and North West, directly derivative from the principles and priorities of the regional strategy, and designed to ground that strategy in a series of linked action points through delivery mechanisms that mobilized key stakeholders in a sub-regional partnership network	This was the 'rolling out' of the regional strategy, localizing its concepts in a sub-regional geography, sufficient to offer an economy of scale and scope, and to encourage the development of local networks capable of delivery and management of the regional development agenda
City-region	The <i>Belfast City-Region</i> strategy preceded <i>Shaping Our Future</i> and was designed to provide an integrated development framework for an area within a 30-mile radius of Belfast	This spanned much of the predominantly Protestant/Unionist eastern part of Northern Ireland and was thus vulnerable to the charge of spatial inequity
Metropolitan	The <i>Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan</i> (BMAP) was the statutory plan for the Greater Belfast conurbation and immediate hinterland, representing 40% of the region's population	Linked to a metropolitan transport strategy, this sought to adopt a spatial planning approach within the regional strategy framework
City vision plans	These included the Belfast and Derry city visions (1995–2001), followed by similar processes in Armagh and Craigavon. They were designed to be imaginative inspirational projections of urban futures	Intended as a new approach to participative concept planning, these city-visioning exercises created pictures of what these places would be like 20 years hence and identified the periodic milestones towards the ultimate vision

TABLE 1 *continued*

<i>Scales of planning &amp; development</i>	<i>Objectives &amp; timing of initiative</i>	<i>General explanation</i>
Urban programmes	In particular, this included the main urban programme for Belfast, <i>Making Belfast Work</i> (1995) and a similar initiative in Derry (1995), in the tradition of spatially targeted compensatory programmes, offering positive discrimination to the most deprived areas	For the first time, these programmes were operated through inter-sectoral area partnerships, which were remitted to take long-term strategic approaches to their area's regeneration
Peace programmes	Two regional peace programmes (1998) totalling nearly €1 billion, designed to cement an emerging peace by promoting social and economic cohesion and conflict resolution	These were intended to link processes of regeneration and reconciliation in the areas most afflicted by both social need and legacies of the political violence
Area partnerships	Long-term regeneration strategies for multi-agency partnerships across five large areas of Belfast (1995–8, with follow-ups since)	Derived from the urban programmes, these have been in operation for 11 years and are now networked with each other across the city in the Belfast Area Partnerships
Local comprehensive developments	An example here is the redevelopment of Belfast's Crumlin Road prison and surrounding area, an historic and highly symbolic feature of the city's long-standing conflict, designated for redevelopment (2001–present)	These specific developments were linked to landmark sites/buildings, often sensitive in terms of their iconic status and/or location at sectarian interfaces

These initiatives differed in their status. At the apex of the planning hierarchy, some (the regional strategy and the metropolitan plan) carried statutory authority, whereas other initiatives like the vision plans were conceptual and aspirational. They also contrasted in the extent of their engagement around the issue of contested space. In addressing issues of rival cultural and territorial identity, policy and planning have oscillated between ambivalence (McEldowney et al., 2001) and an acknowledgement of the spatial impact of the ethno-nationalist discord. For instance, in the mid-1990s, urban policy in Belfast was informed by multi-sectoral dialogic engagements that attended to the debilitations of ethnic space most pronounced in the most deprived city

neighbourhoods (Gaffikin and Sweeney, 1995). This emphasized the need to interweave regeneration into the reconciliation agenda of the peace process, the close association between deprivation and division, and the efficacy of shifting from narrow 'territoriality towards unifying goals, which heal as they help renew' (Making Belfast Work, 1995: 19).

Subsequent similar public consultations for the Belfast city-region plan raised the implications of a divided society, including contentious matters such as the 'peace walls'; the sensitivities behind allocation of land for housing; and accessibility of employment to both sides of the community (Gaffikin et al., 1997). A subsequent regional plan process included engagement with around 500 community and voluntary organizations, during which issues of sectarian division were aired (Gaffikin et al., 2000). The impact of this discourse emerged in the final regional plan, which recognized (DRDNI, 2001: 9):

Internally, Northern Ireland is a deeply divided and polarized society. Evidence suggests that community divisions have deepened in recent years. This has obvious implications for planning, especially when rational planning choice is often constrained by a strong sense of communal 'ownership' of territory.

Accordingly, government laid great stress on building a consensus through a comprehensive public engagement, and felt able to conclude that the final plan was 'an expression of the shared vision, values and principles identified through the extensive consultation process' (p. 5). Yet, there is little evidence of specific directions for planning in contested space other than declarations of broad principles such as the following (p. 9):

Land designation, the location of employment and investment decisions on social, economic and physical infrastructure must respect the sensitivities of the divided and polarized nature of the community, while seeking ultimately to contribute to the healing of community divisions.

While this represents an advance on past plans that typically tried to airbrush out the socio-spatial implications of a divided society and owes a great deal to the deliberate engagement around the issue in the consultation meetings and focus groups, the generality reflects the ambiguity of that engagement. In every case, the issue was not raised spontaneously from the various publics. Rather, it had to be prompted by the consultation facilitators. Moreover, the exchange around it was limited and often embarrassed. Indeed, it often quickly descended into a bland politeness and contrived conviviality around divisive issues, which is typical of 'mixed' public audiences in contested societies.

None of this is to underestimate the intricacies involved in unleashing this discourse. Some consultees simply could not see the relevance of the issue of community division to the concerns of a regional planning strategy (Gaffikin et al., 2000). As noted by McEldowney and Sterrett (2001: 43), 'local interest could also be territorial interest', with some participants insisting that even raising such fractious issues risked deepening inter-communal strife. Thus, the critique of the process offered by Neill and Gordon (2001: 37) holds great validity. They note how suggestions made in the consultation about the need for consideration

of the differential impact of sectarian geographies on catchment areas for services and retail were not taken up in the plan: 'It was perhaps considered as giving too great a spotlight to division at a time requiring the rhetoric of healing.'

Thus, in the case of the most significant statutory plan – the regional strategy – four key features emerged. First, most of the key ideas came from outside the discourse. For instance, central concepts such as *gateway*, *hub* and *corridors* were pre-determined by the senior civil servants steering the process. Second, although the logistics of the final plan suggested the need for concentrated investment, the actual proposals flew under the banner of 'balanced development' and suggested dispersed development, designed not to offend any particular geographic constituency. For instance, there was a suggestion for Strategic Employment Locations, around which there would be an attempt to cluster new economic development. Given the small size of the region, some consultees felt that realistic economies of scale dictated that these be reduced to two sizeable zones around the main metropolitan areas of Belfast and Londonderry/Derry. But the final outcome implied multiple locations and, most recently, the difficulties of implementing such a strategy have ensured its effective erasure as a practical framework. Third, although the exercise was billed as an integrated plan and the public discourses did explore the optimal connections among the social, economic, environmental and physical dimensions, the final stage in the plan-making came down overwhelmingly to inter-Council rivalry over the distribution of housing growth targets. Given that the process was designed as a shift to spatial planning that should be concerned with the comprehensive goal of 'building communities' rather than just building housing estates, this was disappointing. Fourth, while the regional strategy was intended as an overarching plan to guide all investment with a spatial outcome, it was the responsibility of just one department, the Department of Regional Development (NI). Despite its efforts to operate an ongoing collaborative exchange with other relevant government departments about the content and application of the strategy, inter-departmental strains among senior civil servants tempered the realization of this objective. For instance, the Department of the Environment (NI), charged with planning at the area level, resisted an interpretation of the plan that would compel it to comply tightly to its central precepts in developing local area plans. Thus, it wanted to change the initial obligation that area plans had to 'be consistent with' the regional plan to one that simply said that they had to 'have regard to it', a quite meaningless expression. The final compromise was that they had to be 'in general conformity with' the regional plan, still a weaker determination than the original. In short, no government department wanted to dilute its autonomy or minimize its 'wriggle room' in the interest of a collectively endorsed planning framework. Accordingly, the final version was weak in terms of hard targets, credible timetable, precise resource implications and clear delivery mechanisms.

In an attempt to offset these limitations, the Department of Regional Development (NI) sponsored a subsequent series of sub-regional strategy discussions to seek to ground the regional plan at more local levels. Interestingly,

at this more action stage, the range of stakeholders engaged was notably reduced. In particular, there was an elevated role for local Councils, government agencies and business lobbies, and a much-reduced presence of the community and voluntary sectors. It appeared that when implementation was on the agenda, the dialogue and decision-making should be exclusive to the 'movers and shakers' with resources and authority to translate ideas into action.

Despite such reservations about inclusivity, a five-year visioning process in Belfast, sponsored by a broad-based cross-community partnership of leading politicians, business and community representatives, sought to paint a new picture of the city 20 years ahead on an empty canvas, an ambitious destination to which all factions could travel together. It succeeded in building a consensual vision plan that projected a 'united city' in which people would go 'beyond the habit of hate' and choose to live cooperatively (Belfast City Vision Partnership Board, 2001: 17):

We will go beyond a leadership of tribal belonging (of tradition, blood, loyalty and even history) to a leadership of common citizenship, which speaks of open debate, pluralism and equal opportunity.

These unifying sentiments did faithfully reflect the overwhelming expression of public engagements that were both intensive and extensive, involving major civic conferences, focus groups, household questionnaires, youth forums and community workshops. But they did not commit any agency to anything definite. While such warm words are preferable to chilled sectarian invective, they do not tie any side to any precise obligation or specific unpalatable change; and a currency that holds little cost also holds little value. For instance, one of the most significant planning issues in Belfast remains difficult to even raise at 'mixed' public audiences. Essentially, the demographic shift in the city has seen a haemorrhaging of the Protestant population, leaving vacant land and housing voids in some of the most sensitive inner-city territories. Yet attempting to accommodate the growing Catholic housing demand in such spaces would be seen as encroachment by many Protestant communities, which feel themselves in retreat. Thus, there are broad commitments in the regional and metropolitan plans to use brownfield land productively to ensure sustainable and compact urban form. But, there has been little serious success in translating this proclamation into practical land-use decisions, based on cross-community consensus.

Indeed, the more local the dialogue around development and land use, the more acute the strain and the more difficult it became to circumvent controversy. For instance, in the comprehensive communication with local politicians and community interests about the renewal of the Crumlin Road prison and its hinterland, it was possible to create a fragile and general agreement about remaking the prison as a shared space for educational purpose, but on condition that the most disputatious prospect of new housing on contiguous sites be 'parked' indefinitely. Given that housing demand in the vicinity was both acute and predominantly Catholic, the local Protestant communities felt

threatened by any prospect of an expansion of their rivals' territory, giving rise to new flashpoint interfaces. The consequent indecision has helped to stall all development in this sensitive location for the last seven years.

It might be thought that a more open and candid dialogue would be evident in the operation of the Peace programmes, designed to promote a twin-track approach to regeneration and reconciliation in those areas that have been particularly afflicted by a combination of deprivation and violent conflict. Yet the public consultations to frame the strategic directions of these programmes have also been beset by the reluctance to confront difficult questions and hard choices. For instance, in the interest of cementing a delicate peace, should we allocate some of these funds in a clientelist form by supporting projects that win approval from the local militias in the most troubled areas? Should consideration be given to a hierarchy of victims, or are combatant and civilian to be treated the same? What lessons have been learned over a three-decade period about the tendency to give grants to 'single identity' work within each of the two main protagonist communities on the premise that this will foster an internal bonding capital that in time can be bridged into a wider social capital? To what extent has this strategy inadvertently privileged ethnic over civic leadership? Many such fundamental questions remain largely off the agenda for open discussion.

This core problem of generating a forthright rational discourse about contentious planning issues was not peculiar to matters relating to sectarian space. Other key arguments were pervasive during this decade of planning and development policy, including the view from rural interests that much of the agenda was too urban-focused, and the competing claims about the densification implied in compact urban development versus the value of dispersed settlement patterns. Even in the case of the regional plan, when these issues were brought before an independent Examination in Public process, intended as a discursive alternative to the adversarial Public Inquiry format, the level of rational debate and mutual exchange was limited. Essentially, at the outset of the process, two models of regional planning seemed feasible. One could be characterized as an *auction model*, whereby local Councils, community agencies and business sought competitive advantage over their counterparts in other districts as if they were bidding for a finite set of resources and investment opportunities. The other approach, which could be labelled the *added value model*, offered the prospect of generating regional additionality and synergy through the collaborative advantage of these different interests working together for a mutually beneficial agenda. The former largely prevailed.

### *Appraising the collaborative experience in Northern Ireland*

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Earlier the concept of collaborative planning was disaggregated into the four dimensions of ontology, epistemology, ideology and methodology. The following analysis revisits these four dimensions.

## Ontology

Collaborative planning assumes a mature level of civic literacy among widely informed publics. Our empirical evidence, however, does not provide justification for this assumption. Clearly, the more sophisticated discourses were largely restricted to the small focus groups, comprising those of expertise and experience. Government motivation in sponsoring and resourcing these deliberations was multiple: a genuine desire to learn public views; a need to legitimize policy-making to overcome the democratic deficit in a contested society missing an agreed form of self-government; and a keenly felt objective to do at least the minimum to avoid litigation, given the region's strict legislative framework around equality and discrimination. But the composite of these imperatives did not amount to a clear coherent conviction about the efficacy of collaborative planning.

The reality of the planning world itself distinguishes between *statutory* plans, such as the regional and metropolitan strategies, and the *non-statutory* plans, such as city visions and urban programmes. When it comes to development decisions, the former exercise greater legal authority. Yet, paradoxically, the latter often contain more of the creative and imaginative outcomes of public discourses, whereas the statutory plans lapse into a largely conventional land-use framework. Thus, although the assumption is that more proactive creative public engagements have yielded a new notion of planning, most aspects of those plans that are legally based and resource-linked remain in reality orthodox and cautious. An alternative view is that visionary processes can produce fanciful ideas that are not rooted in any real options for practical delivery.

Another feature of how the reality of Belfast's planning context can be represented is evident in the way the latest government policy for Belfast's regeneration made limited mention of the city's distinguishing divisions, when it merely acknowledged that 'in many neighbourhoods, deprivation is made much worse by religious segregation and community conflict' (DSDNI, 2005: 19). Such remarks reflect the limited development in thinking and perception among some government agencies. Other examples include simplistic interpretations of public space as neutral or shared, misconceiving the differentiated uses and perceptions of space in a divided city. By contrast, the strategy of Belfast's main partnership charged with advancing peace and reconciliation (BLSP, 2004) spoke plainly about the urgency to create one city and to move beyond the usual cautious discourse about the conflict to a more risk-taking and explicit engagement.

## Epistemology

Assessing the weight to accord the varied contributions in public consultations was part of a more general problem of arbitrating the relative significance to be allocated to specific arguments amid the plethora of data generated in such participative processes. In producing the key recommendations from each particular consultation exercise, it was difficult to determine whose 'knowledge' counted most. For example, in instances of dispute between different 'knowledges', it was never clear whether the tacit/experiential knowledge of

local community was to be privileged over the formal knowledge of planning experts, or vice versa. Expressed differently, there was no analytical framework for constructing a coherent synthesis from a diverse production of knowledge.

However, progress on previous public engagement processes was attained, leading to many issues, such as those about sectarian division, being on the planning radar screen for the first time in a serious way. Though certain agencies – such as that responsible for public housing – have for a long time been aware of, and concerned about, sectarianism, this understanding has not been true for the main statutory planning system, which has come to an explicit acknowledgement of the issue more recently. Moreover, despite this new extension of agenda and perspective, there has been no clear linear progression in the direction of greater forthrightness and maturity of analysis about contested space in more recent planning documents.

Despite such limited policy results, the discourses in the various consultations were increasingly facilitated in a form designed to get beyond *wish lists*, with consultees being more compelled to at least appreciate the trade-offs that accompany prioritization and choice. Thus, over the decade under review, it was apparent that the way of thinking and seeing among many regular participants was slowly maturing. Moreover, among such well-versed participants, it was apparent over the decade how the ‘meanings’ once associated with particular interests – for example, the concept of *sustainability* with the environmentalist lobby – became more universally understood. This knowledge-sharing allowed such seasoned participants over time to become much more ‘multi-lingual’ with respect to others’ discourses, improving the sophistication of exchanges.

## **Ideology**

The process was overtly *value-laden*, and this elevation of core values and principles, around concepts such as balanced development, equity planning and sustainability, informed and enriched the debates. As a result, documents such as the *Regional Development Strategy* were prefaced much more by expressions of vision and guiding principles than ever before. Yet there was no apparent link between these and the strategic guidelines that followed. Indeed, from all the engagements, it is difficult to connect suggested ideas from participants to actual changes in policy and planning.

Moreover, this more value-based approach did not guarantee candid dialogue about contentious issues. Rather, the search for consensus and ‘buy-in’ often involved platitudinous affirmations, sometimes referred to as ‘empty signifiers’, very low common denominators to which most stakeholders could acquiesce without the cost of resource commitment and delivery. Thus, the ideological differences that often existed were rarely interrogated properly. Alongside this, in a more market-driven age, there was a deepening sense that in many major development schemes, whatever the wider publics and even government might *propose*, it would be left eventually to the market to *dispose*. Since the neo-liberal ideology underpinning this attitude was mostly implicit, it was seldom openly contested.

## Methodology

Creating dialogic spaces for candid rational deliberation among equal participants for collaborative decisions about priorities and choices proved too formidable an undertaking. Despite significant resources being devoted to public engagement, many proactive methods being deployed, and large audiences being reached among diverse publics, the claims for comprehensive inclusivity were exaggerated. The voice of the inactive poor remained marginal, while many consultation audiences largely comprised community ‘gatekeepers’, government agencies, and the usual competing lobbies for development and conservation. Collaborative planning also recommends ‘joined-up’ governance, a rhetoric that was widely adopted in all the planning processes described above. Despite this, even getting nominal collaboration within government through systematic inter-departmental forums proved to be formidable and fragile. Also, it proved impossible to get many of the most powerful private stakeholders – landowners, developers, house-builders, leading enterprises – around the table for open, multi-sectoral discussion at the formative stage of plan-making. Rather, they used their own direct avenues to government and their legal representation at any formal inquiry procedure to advance their interest. Where a representative section of the public was meaningfully involved in the planning processes, a filtering effect manifested, whereby the various publics would dilute the intensity of their views about contentious issues, expressions that would be further softened in draft plans and strategies, and further blurred at the decision-making stage.

While this may appear conducive to mutual compromise – and thus in compliance with collaborative planning’s methodical toolkit – it turned out that the final results tended to be stated misleadingly in terms that suggested achievement of a high level of consensual purpose. In reality, many discussants merely postponed their hostility behind the superficial mask of rhetorical consensus. It thus seems that the idea of consensus-based planning has successfully trickled into the minds of most planning stakeholders where it reemerged as the craft of cosmetic conflict suspension. Sager’s (2006) idea of preserving or injecting a healthy dose of friction energy through skilled manipulation of transaction costs for some participants in the planning process would seem laudable – if it did not suffer from the overly optimistic notion of the planner as elevated arbiter who objectively analyses and benignly controls the planning play from an Archimedean vantage point (Sager, 2006).

Among the other *systemic* difficulties was the reality that key decisions about fiscal scope, tax, welfare benefits and public investment derive centrally from London, not regional capitals like Belfast. With this also come the social and economic imperatives of the UK government, influenced by its objectives for global competitiveness. Such crucial decisions circumscribe the arena for local regional discourse about development. Symptomatic in this context is the government’s belief ‘that the planning system needs to improve its performance to ensure that it responds to a growing and changing economy and has a positive impact on business productivity and competitiveness’ (House of Commons, 2002). The government commissioned Kate Barker – former Chief Economic

Advisor at the Confederation of British Industry and undeniably a strategic choice – to advise on how to achieve these aims. Her report ‘Review of Land Use Planning’ (Barker, 2006) is thus concerned with speeding up and ‘streamlining’ the planning process and with making it ‘more efficient and responsive to economic concerns’ (Milne, 2006). Although critics argue that the report ‘will have devastating impact on . . . local democracy’ (Friends of the Earth, 2006) and that it leads to ‘further curtailment [of] what remains of local discretion’ (Jenkins, 2006), the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, said ‘the Government welcomes Kate Barker’s report which we will take forward, and agrees with her overall analysis’ (Kelly, 2006). Thus, between the urge for a localist focus by many participants and the increasingly globalist perspective of government, there is a ‘discursive gap’ not fully recognized in the ideals of collaborative planning.

### *Conclusion*

An almost ubiquitous feature of planning discourses in Northern Ireland over the last decade has been the indulgence in generality and ambivalence. Unfortunately, the tendency to the innocuous and inoffensive has led to superficial accords, rooted in what are deemed to be ‘constructive ambiguities’. But, since these semantics are subject to multiple interpretations, they are prone to unravel when confronted by hard development choices and priorities. Many key policy and planning directions that have emerged from the collaborative discourses remain inexact. Is compact settlement privileged over dispersal? Are town centres to be beneficiaries of the precautionary and sequential principle with respect to out-of-town development? Is balanced development a serious objective, with a corollary of greater spatial equity for the West of the region and between rural and urban development? Is there a coherent strategy to deliver productive use of those brownfield sites concentrated in contested space? Are the local regeneration partnerships established in the main cities to adopt long-term strategic renewal to be allowed to pursue this agenda or are they to be sidelined by other disjointed projects and policies? Is shared space to be proactively favoured over ethnic space as a means of de-segregating the deeply sectarian geography? None of this is clear.

The apparent overriding imperative to be unobjectionable to every key constituency permits the ultimate decision-takers to construe these issues expediently rather than strategically. Consequent confusion contributes to a proliferation of plans, a fragmentation of leadership, and a diffusion of resources that make for poor policy coherence and compromised sustainability. Even allowing for the flexibilities demanded by rapidly changing times, the indefinite expression that permeates many aspects of final plans allows key stakeholders to support unitary purpose, without forsaking anything significant of their own silo agenda. A core argument advanced in this article is that collaborative planning’s prioritization of consensus invariably produces this non-committal, since its failure to accommodate a more candid agonistic discourse makes it vulnerable to euphemism, surface agreement and equivocation.

This limitation derives from its Habermasian roots, and his attempt to redeem the Enlightenment project of addressing conflict through universalizing norms, expressed through a proceduralist and testable rationalistic argumentation. This approach extols the cognitive and communicative power of the cooperative search for truth through reflexive and reciprocal debate. Yet its emphasis on commonality and consensus, and its related impulse to defuse conflict, stifles the provocative, and inhibits the expression of distinction and dissent. While agonistic planning is not about forsaking the pursuit of consensus, it sees that objective as ancillary to the primary purpose of at once nurturing the widest possible expression of a very differentiated plurality, and, at the same time, accepting the possibility of irreconcilable disagreement. Thus, the search for concurrence should not suppress the contestatory and combative character of planning politics, in which discord about strategic spatial and resource distribution is often ineradicable. An agonistic approach to collaborative planning offers multiple and inclusive forms of communication, not just those articulated in the formal, dispassionate, disembodied speech favoured by deliberative democrats. It recognizes that, in the subtleties of this unsettled, fluid world, marked by multiple and fractured identities, there is not necessarily a dialogic outcome of singular agreement or a unitary 'common sense'.

Too often in the Northern Ireland planning experience identified in the case study, the absence of straight talking meant obfuscation. But, there were occasions when the application of a more agonistic discourse prevailed. At their best, these transactional exchanges fostered rapport and, within this ambience, participants were afforded the confidence and dexterity to both ventilate their own views, and to navigate around the views of others in ways that acknowledged that query can be preferable to quiescence, and that concession does not have to be seen as surrender, or objection seen as obstructive.

But this is not to blithely dismiss the worth of certain underlying values behind the standard collaborative planning approach: sustainable and equitable development; giving participative depth to conventional representative democracy; the need for social diversity to be reflected in pluralist politics; and the desire that fervently held opposing convictions do not find expression in destructive outcomes such as violent conflict or gridlocked development. Collaborative planning implies a shift from 'competitive interest bargaining' to 'negotiative consensus building'. But, such well-intentioned prescription for governance, rooted in civic solidarity, also makes assumptions difficult to sustain empirically, including: the existence of extensive civic capacity to support the inclusivity of an informed public; the decisive role of rationality in dispute arbitration; and, perhaps most tellingly, the willingness of the powerful to participate in these open discourses when more effective and discreet channels are available. Indeed, the case study highlights the humble power of rationality when confronted with the rationale of power.

Beyond these flaws, collaborative planning focuses on place and time-specific approaches, arguing for attention to immediate and particular instances (the case for immanence). But even in post-modern times (or even in an a-modern interpretation) there are overarching global issues – sustainability; the

inequities behind capitalist hegemony; globalization; fundamentalist Islamic and Christian right movements. They do not necessarily have to be cast into universalizing and totalizing meta-narratives, but they are real patterns with real effects nevertheless. Acknowledging these 'tectonic shifts' is not the same as collapsing into the deceptive certainty of transcendence.

Advocates of collaborative planning are right to remind us that we must not abandon attempts to shape social trends just because they appear inevitable or overwhelming. But, there is a need to distinguish those development problems that may have both a local manifestation and local resolution, from those with a local manifestation, but with essentially an external generation and redress. This confusion about the scope for local action in a globalizing world is reflected in the way New Labour in the UK has adopted certain ideas, compliant with collaborative planning, but operates with opposite impulses. An example here is the incongruence between 'Tony Blair[']s] . . . big-business appeasement [and] Leninist planning' (Jenkins, 2006) or the schizophrenia between New Labour's espousal of decentralization, expressed in terms such as devolution and community planning, and its apparent belief that prevailing global economic pressures demand the directives and efficient decision-making processes that only centralized structures can provide. This is an instance of strabismus at different geographical scales which blinds out the fact that managerialism and participation are always at odds.

Scanning the history of planning models, it is evident that all contain flaws. The rational-comprehensive approach, rooted in classical science, assumes that knowledge is out there and, once discovered through thorough detached investigation, can provide a predictive tool for normative planning in the public interest. Advocacy planning, while disowning this value-free professionalism and assumption about a non-pluralist public, offers an adversarial approach in favour of the most marginalized. But its epistemology is still founded on concepts of expertise, and its conversion of the vernacular of people's opinion into a professional lexicon can both distort and disempower. The more modest incremental planning model forsakes the ambition of grand masterplans, and offers instead an ontology rooted in practical steady improvements in the technical aspects of delivery, based on effective use of time, resources and data, and in the political aspects of legitimacy, based on public debate and consent. None of these standard approaches addresses the challenge of democratic planning in a very differentiated, not to say, divided world. Collaborative planning, and the linked precepts for engagement found in deliberative democracy, at least acknowledge the challenge of pluralism and divergent cultural attachments, within a democratic ideology of self-determination, inclusion and solidarity. In a less collaborative world, in which power seems ever more distant and abstract, and in which the social sphere is being de-politicized and marketized, these approaches affirm the politics of connectivity and propinquity.

But, the agonistic ontology recognizes better not only the social untidiness of the contemporary world, but also the permanent and potentially positive aspects of conflict; that deep social and ethnic frictions do not dissolve simply through entreaties for reconciliation; and yet, how addressing irreducible

difference does not demand either the transient tranquillizer of avoidance, or the high-stakes politics of absolute conquest. In epistemological terms, while collaborative planning recognizes that there are different sites of knowledge production, including the tacit and experiential knowledge of community, agonistic approaches seek to validate the implications of this plurality by endorsing multiple forms of candid expression. Thus, instead of planners being in the business of advocacy and knowledge transfer, they can be in the business of knowledge exchange within the framework of smart pluralism, whereby each faction learns that its interest can be best advanced through persuasive engagement rather than coercive dominance.

But our advocacy of agonistic planning is not unproblematic. For instance, the issues of power and inequity remain intractable. Nevertheless, the basic objective is for forms of planning that promote living with difference and disagreement in respectful acknowledgement of 'the other'. Within this framework, it is forms of civic empowerment, mediation and negotiation that provide transformative learning opportunities for participants, so that not only their arguments change, but they change as well. Beyond interest-based bargaining and horse-trading, scope for mutual growth and broader civic welfare is pursued. This involves the maturation of collaborative planning so that it is more globalized, more stereoscopic. Thus, collaborative planners need to appreciate arenas other than the local, even though they might not actually operate a great leverage on external structural constraints. Indeed, we need to guard against the delusion that somehow through local action the global frame will shift (à la butterfly effect). Moreover, as indicated in our case study, an agonistic approach that offers not only more inclusion, but also diverse forms of communication, including rhetoric and polemic, and more discordant exchanges in the process, also offers a formidable challenge. Methodologically, the contemporary planner would need to be not only gifted in facilitation and arbitration for proactive engagement, but also skilled in semiotics and hermeneutics for analysis. Speaking realistically, planning education has yet to catch up with this ambitious remit. Finally, without the wider civic role for citizens to influence politicians to make an uncollaborative world more conducive to collaborative practice, any refinements outlined here will be stymied.

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### Notes

1. A "strong programme" . . . inculcates students into regurgitating theories to pass exams and academics into publishing academic work' (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2002: 214).

2. This triadic taxonomy was originally formulated by Warren Weaver but Jacobs (1961) deserves the credit for adapting it to the urban planning discipline.

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