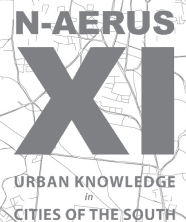


The theoretical underpinnings of pedagogic action relating Urban and Regional knowledge and planning practice The Buenos Aires University case



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Abstract

The importance of addressing the issue of the theoretical underpinnings of education in the fields of both Regional/Urban (R/U) *knowledge* and *planning practices* is commensurate with that of the field itself. This is so because education takes on a paradigmatic meaning, in so much as its involvement becomes a means of reproduction of the very field, which makes use of its theoretical and practical references to shape up its body of knowledge in line with the requirements of every particular circumstance.

The present paper aims at:

- i.* considering the most significant thematic nodes connected with regional/urban planning theory and practice in general, and their transformation over time;
- ii.* discovering how these nodes, and the different stances in relation to them, have been influential in the way this particular field has been taught;
- iii.* taking into account that regional/urban planning studies at Buenos Aires University have undergone for quite some time now, multiple transformations.

Regarding *i.*, it is generally accepted that in the wake of WWII, General Systems Theory and its emphasis upon the generalized conditions of articulation of the different dimensions of Reality also involved the spatial sphere, until then, and even if only temporarily, regarded as autonomous. Concomitantly and consequentially *regional/urban planning practices* were essentially focused on *physical planning*, disregarding how non-physical phenomena behaved and generated substantive consequences in spatial terms.

Moreover, the field's *temporal behavior* was perceived as short-termed, linear, evolutionary and deterministic, far from Chaotic-like/probabilistic alternatives, which would later on replace them.

Nonetheless, the *regional and urban scales* of the disciplinary field tended to be considered rather distinctive and autonomous, being the former included within the scope of Economics, and the latter, as already pointed out, within that of Physical Planning.

Moreover, the alluded structural transformations involving the three mentioned nodes

-i.e. the *thematic structure* of R/U reality, its *temporality*, and the (at least two) *articulated spatial scales*- were tributary of the ideological, scientific and factual transformations of a very broad general character taking place within the aforementioned time framework.

Finally, in terms of *planning practices*, and particularly taking into account the extent of *public and private sector* involvement, it can be said that governmental intervention in the form of standardized and merely indicative Master Plans was intensive before WWII; contrariwise to the later scenario where Strategic Planning emerged, hand in hand with significant increases in the Private Sector's involvement and determination.

Regarding *ii.*, it is important to underline that amidst this context, planning studies used to be focused, even if only temporarily, on the *physical dimension*, understood to

be made up of *deterministic and locally* restricted behaviors aimed at the formulation of rather *standardized* and merely *indicative* urban planning regulations. This explains why during this period most urban planning practitioners had architectural backgrounds and became educated, not as R/U thematically integrated planners, but as urban physical planners. Nowadays, both the academic background and professional insertion strategies of urban planning practitioners have become far more diverse.

Regarding *iii.*, Buenos Aires University is an interesting case to consider since professional planners have been educated in this institution for over sixty years, within the framework of the aforementioned theoretical stances, which differ from today's. Throughout this period, educational guidelines were significantly transformed in terms of the three main thematic nodes of the disciplinary field already mentioned, and in relation to the different stances of professional practice. In addition to the fact that training of researchers in the field has been set in motion.

Keywords

Urban/Regional thematic issues Urban/Regional temporal settings
Urban/Regional scales Urban/Regional theory Urban/Regional education

Theoretical framework of the field of Regional and Urban Planning

It is generally accepted that Regional and Urban Planning (R/UP) was established as a formal disciplinary field at the onset of the XXthC. Also, that Patrick Geddes, of Scottish decent, and his pioneering book, *Cities in Evolution*¹ are recognized as early paradigmatic references in relation to such time in history.

Neither the *origin* of such contribution -Scotland became implicated in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, which gave rise to several negative impacts such as an environmental crisis, severe public health problems, as well as an uneven income distribution that became associated with social exclusion at a very early stage-, nor the *temporal* framework -in which such transformations were sustained in an ongoing fashion- nor Geddes's initial *professional profile* -Botany- which explains his interests in biotic processes, key to urban life quality, as well as the mutually articulated nature of the diverse thematic interests that such disciplinary origin naturally recognized, already fully entrenched in the Darwinian paradigm, are surprising at all.

This theoretical conception of the disciplinary field -clearly linked to what decades later would be called, in a broader sense, the Paradigm of Complexity²- became much more significant in theoretical terms than in relation to the generated regional/urban planning practices that it informed, which could be called *introductory*.

The following period that could be called *intermediate*, which in the Western Hemisphere included the time span up to the 50s of the XXthC., and given the need to overcome the mentioned urban ills, to manage the demands generated by intensive urbanization, and the two massive postwar reconstruction instances involved, it becomes easy to understand why, under the mentioned set of pressing circumstances, simplifying the resulting conceptual frameworks in the practices of the disciplinary field became common pursuit. Such practices did effectively undergo a process of marked conceptual degradation, consisting in a *reductionist remission of a physical nature* -on one hand, in the sense of resigning to consider the power linked to the necessary multidimensionality of the disciplinary field, and on the other, the *intensive relational character* existing in such diverse contents-. Similar reductionist stances also affected the relations between diverse *spatial scales*, as well as issues relative to the *extended temporality* of R/U events.

This *intermediate* period was characterized by intense interventions of public administrations in urban planning and management. Despite the already mentioned

1 Geddes, 1960

2 Morin, 1994

conceptual weakening of such practices and in view of the scantily valuable subsequent changes that came about in connection with global considerations of urban events – the resulting compact character of the configurations must be appreciated, even in the complex case of large agglomerates, as in Paris, very different from those existing in London, which was at the time engaged in deepening out a secular process of diffuse regional urbanization.

Thus, in a simplifying and low-efficiency requirement framework, such interventions became increasingly more formally assimilated to Physical Schemes instead of Master Plans as they were supposed to be called. Most of them could be characterized as exclusively *physical*, restrictively *local in scale*, even though spatially global -but neither in line with regional urbanization conditions, nor considering such options and implications. They were temporarily *undefined and* of a merely *indicative* nature, failing to consider mutant conditioning factors and those of a structural scope, while having at times an unsustainable *deterministic* character.

Furthermore, during this period, no direct and active community involvement took place in the Regional and Urban Planning processes. Much to the contrary, these were circumstances in which corporate real estate interests were articulated with those governmental actions that proved to be functional to them in terms that could hardly be called transparent.

After the 2nd Postwar period, once the traumatic process of reconstruction was overcome, and within the framework of the structural transformations taking place, particularly those of a general cultural and scientific character -namely the acceptance of the General Systems Theory (GST)³ as a comprehensive paradigmatic reference, as well as those relative to Development Theories, which, in their more progressive interpretations, entailed a more egalitarian income distribution, conceptualized as a forerunner of long-lasting peace and social equality conditions. A considerable number of nations, with different levels of development and diverse political identities, adopted the Welfare State as their model of government, governance and public administration. Such context and in the light of the extraordinary demands and potentials spawned by a global process of sustained economic growth that took place till the mid 1970's -“*the glorious thirties*”- granted impetus, demand and transcendence to R/UP. As far as R/UP is concerned, this period can be considered *mature*.

Furthermore, the fact that this disciplinary field clearly deserved to be included within the already mentioned Complexity Paradigm, of a notoriously non-reductionist nature, was increasingly accepted.

From our viewpoint, such an inclusion takes place through its adscription, in a mutually articulated pattern, to GST and Chaos Theory⁴ as well as through its mandatory contextualization, in the best Kantian style, of Regional/Urban phenomena in Spaces and Times of specific characteristics. Moreover, such articulation proves to be inscribed within the cultural *Modernism* current, substantively focused on the notion of *Rationality*.

Which factors sustain R/UP's inclusion in the Paradigm of Complexity? The following circumstances attempt to answer this question:

- a. that the disciplinary field must necessarily entail, in both its analytic and propositional instances, a wide variety of *thematic areas* constitutive of Reality, necessarily including among them, those of a social, cultural, economic, environmental, physical, functional and politico/institutional character;
- b. that each and every one of these areas operate under conditions of *specific and differential variability*;
- c. that none of these thematic areas operate autonomously, but rather following patterns of *mutual universal articulation of a systemic character*;
- d. that as a consequence of the above-mentioned b. and c. considerations, the levels of relative incidence and mutual articulation conditions among the different thematic areas, are specific to each singular circumstance. In

3 Van Bertalanffy, 2004

4 Grebogi and Yorke, 1997

other words, since these relations are of a systemic character that involves dominions and variables subject to diverse behaviors, each specific R/U system operates under distinctive conditions of *structural identity*. Moreover, as a result of its adscription to the postulates of Chaos Theory, R/UP is called upon to abandon the oversimplifications relative to linear and non-chaotic determinism, to become positioned, instead, within hypotheses of a more complex type of variability, associated with uncertain, probabilistic and merely referential assumptions;

- e. that even within the framework of rather archaic conditions of urbanization and regional structuring have local and global relationships always become significant, leading to specific conditions of functional polarization under each particular circumstance. That is to say, that the consideration of such (merely) relational or causal phenomena involving such scales -more specifically, some *particular set of scales* pertaining to each particular circumstance- becomes highly significant. Under the current circumstances, and as a consequence of the very high and increasing levels of functional integration at a worldwide scale, and taking into consideration the very powerful communication and integration devices set underway, such scalar considerations tend to implicate a wide multiplicity of meaningful instances necessarily demanding consideration;
- f. likewise, and as a consequence of, on one side, the long-term and complex programming demands related with material equipments and social processes and, on the other, given the progressive increase of the cultural and material capital resources available, the timetables involved in planning the former and preserving the latter also become amplified and diversified;
- g. generally speaking, all types of human actions targeted to the achievement of specific objectives refers necessarily to the Principles of Rationality, Functionality and Complexity. In the case of R/UP, normally aimed at identifying and selecting multidimensional means used to attain complex goals, be they of an essentially material character or of those in which the implication of actors as well as their behavior become particularly involved, such action strategies become the key to maximize efficacy and efficiency levels, as well as the conditions of equity and sustainability of all implicated processes.

Furthermore, within the framework of ideologically “progressive” stances, and in the light of “*development-driven*” active strategies, R/UP practices also respond to a set of general main *objectives*, among which we can mention those related to the achievement of Development -in terms of economic growth among several other factors-, and also due to the increase of democratic content in the public administration’s procedures. To this end, promoting the direct involvement of each and every stakeholder and social sector implicated in the planning and management processes and particularly those with a communitarian character, participative of costs, and thus beneficiaries par excellence of the outcomes produced by such management practices, is of the utmost importance.

Within the framework of the relatively high sophistication of the theoretical cleavage of the R/UP disciplinary field in the stage which we have named *mature*, the factual practices informed by such conceptual framework can be characterized by the following traits: i. the generalization of such public administration practices -at least in settings distant from liberal ideological scenarios-; ii. the relative proximity between academic actions and the field of professional practice; iii. multidimensional and interdisciplinary approaches; iv. the promotion of mutually associated local and regional settings; v. the consideration of as many temporal frameworks as are pertinent; vi. the adoption of *probabilistic stances* -as opposed to non-chaotic deterministic choices- connected with behavioral dynamics of Reality; vii. the promotion of active and direct community involvement throughout all R/U planning and management processes.

This period also witnessed the gradual generalization of more favorable stances in

relation to Postmodernist approaches to the field of R/UP, markedly antagonist with those that construe Reality with a Rationalistic rationale and inclined to appreciate non-integrated or segmented strategies instead of fostering integration and globality⁵ in relation to their objects of analysis and intervention. Thus, the segmented consideration of the three nodes around which we have conceived the profile of the disciplinary field

-thematic domains, space and time- clearly put forth the fundamental differences in relation with the postulates of the period we have named *mature* within the field of R/UP. Most surely, such circumstances are associated with the widespread revitalization of the Liberal Paradigm, fostering the implementation of *institutional decentralization*, through processes that fueled local and sector-based approaches, instead of integrated and global ones, the *segmentation of administrative jurisdictions* -again prioritizing local actions vis-à-vis those of global scope-, the *deregulation* of private initiatives, as well as the *privatization* of historically governmental urban services. All these processes brought about higher levels of socio-economic stratification, amplifying previously existing social differentiation and political conflicts and struggle. Such conceptual circumstances and operative modalities could be characterized as *disintegrated*. As a matter of fact, professional practices sustained by such criteria operate upon varied Regional and Urban fractions as well as entailing both mutually segmented thematic components and spatial and temporal fragments.

Education within the field of Regional and Urban Planning

As already mentioned, the disciplinary field of R/UP has undergone highly diverse historical conditions as regards its conceptual foundations, which have recognized general *ideological, cultural and scientific* trends in each of their temporal frameworks of reference, as well as the different types of problems they have been called upon to act. Moreover, such conceptual references become verified and critically valued in relation to their proven capacity to overcome the difficulties they were supposed to solve.

Within such a multi-referenced framework, understanding the reasons why the field's conceptual construction conditions are constantly changing becomes quite easy.

On the other hand, each disciplinary field aims at providing its own sustained reproduction. In other words, ensure the existence of new agents to take on the development of social roles -both academic and professional- that make up the characteristic responsibilities of such intervention domain. To this end, educational proposals in line with the conceptual understanding of each disciplinary field and with the conditions of operation upon which it will be called upon to act must be offered.

As already stated, the conceptual identities of the field of R/UP in each of the periods that have been identified have been quite diverse. Hence, the educational texts, characteristic of each period, should have similar levels of diversity.

We recommend placing the focus on a restricted though paradigmatic set of either educational texts or theoretical references in relation to each of these periods.

As regards the initial stage we have called *introductory*, we will consider Geddes's seminal work, *Cities in Evolution*.

This document was clearly disruptive in relation to the conceptual shortcomings and the operative tradition of the disciplinary field at the time of its publication, when professional practices were limited to tracing the physical aspects of new urban sectors as well as determining regulations connected with the building stock, tasks that were carried out exclusively by architects and civil engineers. As already pointed out, Geddes's discourse became the corner stone of the disciplinary field itself, alluding more directly to its essential conceptual foundations than to those of an operative nature. Such paradigmatic rupture entailed a repositioning that involved the following elements: a) vindication of the existence of different identity conditions

of the disciplinary field of R/UP, conceived as one of a scientific character; b) its multidimensional and systemic character, anticipating the formulation of GST that was to be disclosed after the 2nd.WW; c) its demonstrative character; d) the articulated consideration of local and regional events; e) the consideration of extended temporal frameworks; f) the promotion of specific educational strategies; g) the promotion of generalized social appreciation of the disciplinary field; h) the assumption that the R/UP field imperatively and unavoidably pertained to the scope of the governmental sector.

As already stated, the following period, which we have called *intermediate*, did not turn out to be particularly flourishing in terms of the field's conceptual reconfiguration, although it did incorporate some of Geddes' most relevant postulates. Among them, and in its most archaic version, the one relative to the mandatorily multidimensional nature of the field, consisting in considering the incidence of sectors beyond the physical one, but only and precisely in relation to it. To gain further insight into this period we suggest referring to the publication *Urban Land Use Planning*⁶ by F.S.Chapin Jr., since it provides a detailed instrumental stance to the transformational demands of the time, explaining in more quantitative than qualitative terms, the restructuring conditions of urban land use as a consequence of the diverse structural dynamics that affect the City. The author's deterministic position should be underlined, i.e. the prevailing consideration that Reality is subject to linear transformation dynamics.

The following period, which we have called *mature*, has proved to be startlingly rich in the incorporation of highly valuable structural transformations into the conceptual framework of reference of the R/UP field. Such transformations have had a widespread influence on the educational literature of the field.

The contributions that G.F.Chadwick⁷ makes through *A systemic vision of Planning*, as well as those made by B.McLoughlin⁸ in *Urban and Regional Planning. A Systems approach*, are in our opinion highly transcendental. Both of them have helped specifically to concrete Geddes' premonitory postulations regarding the sound foundations that GST provides, and more generally through the construction of the Paradigm of Complexity. These are the type of contributions that, by adopting comprehensive and consequential grounds, have granted the disciplinary field of R/UP a status equivalent to those of other scientific disciplines, making it possible to be used as a suitable reference in the practice of the professional activity.

Finally, and in relation to the emerging positioning we have called *disintegrated*, inscribed in the Postmodern current of the R/UP field, the available bibliographic references do not suffice to draw any final conclusions, which is also the case of the mentioned cultural current as a whole.⁹

In this regard, the positioning provided by E.Soja¹⁰ proves to be highly representative. His writing could be metaphorically termed as *splintered* since he is highly critical of the configuration conditions of socio-economic relationships within the so-called context of "advanced capitalism", marked by extreme levels of stratification, exclusion and socio-ecological segregation, while on the other hand, simultaneously and paradoxically, by setting value upon the supposed interest and cultural potentialities of the equivalent physical and functional segmentation and global urban restructuring, which become at present typically characterized by sprawling large urban regions. His analyses are mainly connected to the meaningful Los Angeles Agglomeration.

The Buenos Aires University Case

Education in the field of R/UP as graduate studies specifically focused on this subject-matter in the Buenos Aires University date back to 1947. At that time the School of

6 Chapin, 1965

7 Chadwick, 1973

8 McLoughlin, 1971

9 Harvey, 2008; Huyssen, 2006

10 Soja, 1989

Architecture was separated from the Faculty of Natural Sciences where it used to operate until then, under a regulative framework stipulating that it should offer at least two different degrees.¹¹ From then on, and only with the exception of some years during the last military dictatorship (1976/1983) when its activity was symptomatically suspended, together with that of the School of Social Sciences that had at the time seat in the Law Faculty, it has continued to operate in the same institutional setting to this day.

Throughout this period some sector-based thematic issues dealing with the R/UP field were also offered as academic subjects included in different undergraduate curricula within Agronomics, Architecture, Biology, Engineering, Geography, Law, and Sociology, just to mention a few of the most noteworthy, with the highly significant absence of Economics.

The mentioned program of graduate studies in R/UP admitted during its first 20 years of existence only graduates in the fields of Architecture and Engineering, in line with its physically-based orientation. Moreover, the seven subjects that comprised the curricula of the program at that time were in charge of Architects with vocational interests in a number of branches from within the field of Social Sciences. Thus, during this first period of graduate studies all conceptual references were clearly aligned with those that characterized the field at the time, which we have named as *intermediate*.

During the phase of academic normalization following the mentioned period of military government the theoretical orientation of the academic program changed substantially, taking on traits of the period we have called *mature*. This is evident through the potential professional backgrounds of its students - broadened to include those pertaining the whole field of R/UP: Ecology, Economics, Geography, Law, Political Science, Sociology, among others; also, the multiplicity of the thematic lines involved in the education being offered -which now sums up 26 subjects-; and finally, the professional antecedents of its professors, which in this setting involves teachers with higher educational degrees in the fields they teach.

The administration format adopted to manage the educational program also changed substantively by constituting a round-table Academic Committee, integrated by the representation of both teachers and graduates as well as members of the disciplinary field, in their condition of researchers and professional practitioners.

Two particular elements regarding thematic issues considered strategic to education are signaled out: i. the deepening of theoretical aspects relative to, on one hand, the characteristics and dynamics of the processes of urbanization, and on the other, those pertaining to the field of Planning Theory; ii. the emphasis placed on community involvement planning processes.

The educational process unfolds into four semi-annual periods with partial dedication. Complying with the academic requirements associated with this learning process enables acquiring the degree of Specialist in Urban and Regional Planning.

During a rather short period of time students were able to select their second-year courses from a Macro/regional orientation or a Micro/Local one. After a short period of time involving only three student cohorts such alternatives became cancelled.

Furthermore, during their fourth semester students are required to become involved in a simulative praxis of an either academic or professional character.

During 1986 the now called Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning became incorporated into the Masters and Doctoral degrees offered by the University, and the Program of Urban and Regional Planning was the first to offer a Master's Degree within it, incorporating a set of three supplementary subjects, and requiring the elaboration of a Thesis at such level.

The issue of professional rights and duties in relation to the degrees offered by the R/UP Program has had a rather long history of transformations, regressions and misgivings. The initial condition in which the offered degrees of either Architect or

Engineer Urban Planning Expert -or that of Urban and Regional Planner, which eventually replaced them- empowered exclusive professional rights in the field of R/UP has at present changed. Today, "plain" Architects, as such -i.e. with no graduate studies in R/UP (sic) - exert the exclusive right to professionally unfold this type of responsibilities. Such circumstances arise in response to a generic criterion of the Buenos Aires University, which stipulates that *professional* rights and duties are exclusively associated with undergraduate degrees, and *academic* rights -a quite ambiguous notion- with graduate studies. Undoubtedly most of this situation is closely related to vested interests of the local architectural associations which, in absolutely irresponsible terms professionally speaking, have fought and conquered to obtain such exclusive capacities of professional rights and responsibilities.

The vital issues relative to the institutional consolidation of education regarding the field of R/UP as well as those relative to research in this disciplinary field within the scope of the University have undergone a period of promising potential which ended up however in altogether frustrating terms. As a matter of fact, during the last years of the 1990s the Secretariat of Science and Technology of the University set in motion two complementary initiatives, dealing, on one hand, with the creation of the Center of Advanced Studies, aimed at concentrating the different graduate multidimensional studies, and on the other, with the creation a set of Special Research Programs to deal with high priority issues; two of them had direct bearing on the field of R/UP, namely those centered respectively upon Urban Studies and the Environment. These two programs proved to be highly efficient in articulating the interests of members originated in diverse strains of specialization and involving representatives of several of the Departments of the thirteen Faculties of the University. But neither could the R/UP Graduate Program be resettled within the Center of Advanced Studies -which, as a matter of fact, disappeared few years later on-, nor did the Special Research Programs continue in operation. To this day, only four such Programs have been activated anew, and only one of them dealing with Social Exclusion has direct although partial bearing upon the R/UP field.

From the date it was initiated in 1948, 226 students have graduated from the program, fifteen of them have gotten a Master's degree, and a smaller proportion have acquired a Doctor's degree.

At present, each yearly cohort of students that has to comply with admission examinations is made up by around thirty members. Around half of them have an architectural background, while the rest have mostly graduated from studies in the field of Social Sciences. Also, approximately half of the student body is made up by Argentineans, while the rest come from other Latin-American countries, and marginally, from the rest of the world.

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