

EXPLORING THE VOID BETWEEN PLANNING FROM ABOVE AND PLANNING FROM BELOW

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Abstract

This paper argues that regional planning has lost much of its practical relevance as strategic decision-making has become increasingly centralised while participatory governance has shifted attention toward the local scale. Positioned between top-down regulation and bottom-up initiatives, the regional level has become an underexplored arena of spatial planning. Drawing on debates in strategic spatial planning and regional governance, the paper revisits the role of planners as facilitators, moderators, and agents of transformation rather than producers of regulatory plans. It proposes a renewed approach to regional development based on cooperation between actors from above and below, combining public support, civil-society engagement, and experimental governance. Building on examples such as the German Internationale Bauausstellungen (IBAs), the paper advances the concept of regional laboratories as temporary, flexible institutions capable of addressing complex territorial challenges beyond administrative boundaries. Finally, it argues for a reorientation of European cohesion policy toward strategically selected functional regions of European significance, where collaborative experimentation can foster innovation, resilience, competitiveness, and territorial cohesion. The paper concludes that the future of regional planning lies not in restoring traditional hierarchical approaches but in creating institutional spaces that connect strategic vision, local initiative, and transformative action.

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Introduction

In the 21st century spatial planning is trapped between rationales and principles of planning from above and planning from below, neglecting the field in between above and below. Regional planning, a traditional field of transformative action in between planning from above and planning from below planning has lost sympathy among planners. Some scholars even assume regional planning to be dead. Though tirelessly praised by academia, strategic regional planning is more and more been hampered by legal regulation and well-meant bureaucratic directives. Accepting that Pan European spatial planning does not find political support and acupunctural cohesion policies do hardly address forthcoming regional spatial challenges, it could make sense to explore options of strategic regional development and planning in the void between above and below. This could also be a chance to replace practised cohesion policy of the EU by focussing on a few regions that are particularly confronted with forthcoming spatial challenges affecting Europe's global competitiveness as a whole. In times of global geopolitical turbulences, slowbalisation, climate change and regional populism yearning for more top-down policies, while insisting on bottom-up traditions, this paper suggests an alternative policy to fill in the void. It aims to encourage spatial planners to take over a new role by becoming moderators in complex regional transformation processes in regions, which are important for Europe, but not hampered by local, regional and national administrative and political boundaries and EU regulations.

Regional Planning, a Forgotten Field in Spatial Planning?

In recent decades, regional planning has lost its original role in developing public infrastructure, influencing the locational choices of private industries, securing access to natural resources, and protecting nature while avoiding urban sprawl. There is abundant literature on strategic regional planning, innovative governance, and targeting planning, yet numerous obstacles and legal arguments hinder efforts to translate theory into action. The regions between the above and the below have become an uncharted territory of spatial planning. This void could be filled by revitalising regional spatial development policies. While the local dimension of development is gaining increasing support among European planning communities, the regional dimension is gradually being neglected, despite the significance of strategic planning and governance in academic research (see, for example, Albrechts 1999/2010, Kunzmann 2000, Martinelli et al. 2013). Many reasons are given for this disregard, although, at least in Germany after 1945, regional planning has been very successful in developing industrial infrastructure, promoting small and medium-sized towns as central places, and controlling urban sprawl. In the European market-led environment, economic, ecological and social regulation to control market forces, protect the environment, and moderate social disparities is increasingly centralised. Though daily conflicts between infrastructure development and ecological concerns are increasingly in the hands of upper tiers of governance. Local governments' willingness to cooperate regionally, in turn, is limited. The growing inclusion of local residents in planning and decision-making processes, favouring the local dimension of development, distracts from regional challenges and tasks. Is regional planning dead? In 2020, John Harrison, Daniel Galland, and Mark Tewdwr Jones explored this question, arguing that high-level control, nostalgia, and job-saving motives within administrations are responsible for the demise of regional planning in Great Britain. They aimed to re-energize planning debates in regional studies and reposition planners as orchestrators and enablers of planning. They rightly argue that a future form of regional planning will have to attach less importance to a physical plan and focus more on aligning different types of spatial intelligence across various organizations. Regional planning should rather center on achieving spatial alignment in a fragmented and highly diffuse landscape. The suggested to explore new approaches to regional problems (Harrison et al. 2020). More reasons could be added to their insights: geographical traditions, a focus on collecting, interpreting, and visualising data, and on writing review papers for publication in international English-language journals, or the distance from political arenas. All these reasons led to the absence of a creative, action-oriented spirit among regional planners within established regional institutions.

Though numerous books and academic publications have promoted the field, it seems that they had not had much impact. As many authors rightly observe, regional planners are often stuck between tradition, linearity and regulation. Louis Albrechts, a fervent pioneer and bridgebuilder between theory and practice who has promoted strategic (regional) planning during his long professional and academic life, argues that strategic planning should be more creative, should *"create a future environment and should be centred on the*

elaboration of a mutually beneficial between top-down and bottom-up local uniqueness" (Albrechts 2010, 21). And he stresses *"embeddedness"* as a crucial dimension of planning, meaning that planning should reflect endogenous social conditions and that planners are embedded in social relations and their connections with the natural environment, characterised by feelings, attachments, and practical concerns. *"Embedded means to be part of something, Embedded planners, as part of an autonomous self-organizing civil society, should be active in making claims, resisting, and struggling on behalf of a fair and sustainable place/community within a framework of democratic institutions"* (Albrechts 2025, 219). In a chapter of the book on *"The Value of Place"* (Moulaert and Mehmood 2025). In the same book Andreas Novy and Nora Dornis suggest a new role for of strategic planning *"Planning without hybris: top-linked governance to empower bottom-up initiatives"* (Novy and Dornis 2025). The diminishing status of top-down spatial planning has prompted the German Academy of Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association (ARL) to explore and propose new perspectives on spatial development in the state (ARL 2022). Analysing the reasons for the decline and in keeping with the spirit of the subsidiarity principle, a revision of practised state planning has been called for, reorganising the division of labour between state and local planning. Instead of hierarchical, top-down planning, both tiers must complement each other. Local governments are asked to cooperate (Weick 2022, 158). Pleading for a more transformative approach, another author on the project recommends bringing together representatives of civil society and economic and political stakeholders (Miosga 2022, 180).

Spatial planning from above or from below?

Planners who are permanently monitoring, articulating and blaming spatial disparities cannot contribute much to closing the growing gap between rich and poor regions. They have neither appropriate non-legal instruments nor the public power and generous budgets needed to reduce spatial disparities. They have to acknowledge that more public intervention and more legal regulations will not change decision-making in a market-oriented environment. Hence, what can planners really do? One field they can explore is acting as moderators of spatial development between directives and incentives from above and complaints, contributions, and actions from below. The business community knows that planning is the basis for success, if only done by private enterprises, not by the public sector. Management students learn that planning from above drives CEO policies, defines visions and goals, and saves time initially, though it overlooks implementation details and underestimates risks, while planning from below, driven by employees, improves accuracy and facilitates risk identification, but is time-consuming and neglects longer-term perspectives and risks. Urban and spatial planners, too, love planning, but they are always meandering between social and ecological challenges and dreams, and the hard economic and political reality that secures their income. They have to decide where and how they wish to realise their dreams, and where they can contribute their competence to just, sustainable and resilient urban and regional development. They have the choice to use their planning competence either to support transformation activities through people-oriented and civil society-oriented planning from below, or to guide and promote transformation from above, arguing that the latter is more effective. Or they consider themselves to be active moderators between the two options, aiming to achieve compromises on strategic action, combining or just moderating between these two options, and, this is particularly important, beyond administrative boundaries. Spatial planning from below is the well-established routine management of planning and decision-making processes, or is just what traditional urban planners do. Their traditional tasks is zoning, land use planning, and urban regeneration, including involving citizens, land owners and investors in planning and decision-making processes. Even in times of AI technologies this will not change. As a rule, planners working in local governments promote local projects which local budgets can support. Though local planners are also focusing on actions, experiments, and new cooperative lifestyles at the local level within a broad regulatory system, by supporting a diverse spectrum of civil society groups. They accept regulations from above or, while generously interpreting top-down directives and using legal leeway to develop local projects, tolerate all kinds of innovative projects proposed by local civil society groups. The number of groups of the civil society that sympathise and experiment with degrowth strategies, promote co-working places in vacant office buildings, operate cooperative three-generation housing, take care of cultural centres, which public budgets can no longer afford, engage in actions to reduce mobility or return to the countryside and start a new life in bio-initiatives (Magnaghi 2010 /2014 Lange et al. 2020). All such initiatives are increasingly visible in Western societies, and more and more books report on the aspirations, rationales, achievements, and failures of these groups. As individuals, planners can engage in local civil society activities or support their aims and actions within the regulatory framework and the local political milieu. It can be expected that the number of civil society members is steadily growing in a capitalist world ruled by authoritarian regimes, supported

by powerful, globally active tech firms in the US and China, and by banks and investment funds that control the flow of surplus money and pension funds. National governments, like the one in Germany, are shifting an increasing share of social duties to local governments, without raising their share of national income, trade, or value-added tax to improve their local budgets. Consequently, local governments increasingly have to rely on civil society's willingness to take over transformation duties for which they have either no funds or only insufficient funds.

Spatial planning from above, respectively policies and programs supporting or regulating or just influencing the transformation in the broad field of urban and regional development at lower levels is practiced by the European Commission, by international organizations, national and regional ministries, advised by a large group of public and private research institutes and influenced by lobby groups that contribute arguments or express vested interests to influence standards and norms in political decision making processes. Planning from above is carried out by the national headquarters of political parties, which set ideological priorities and compel local and regional party members to follow the party's thematic directives to win elections. Though planning from above is done not only by regional and national governments and, increasingly, by the EU Commission, but also by many voices and legal influencers working in a whole range of powerful non-governmental organisations and on social media. They, in turn, are driven by the voices of their respective discourse environments, including countless lobbyists and representatives of interest-led industrial and consumer organisations, who influence and often welcome laws and ordinances made from above. By supporting local projects, they can convince local decision-makers to adhere to their principles and rules. By establishing and financing supranational research programmes, researchers are accepting the underlying priorities and neglecting the concerns of local people. They are increasingly tired of voting for candidates from established political parties.

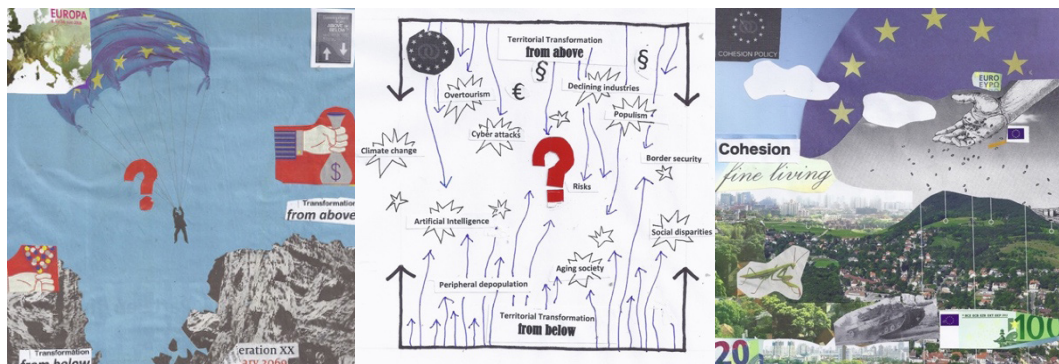


Fig.1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3 Spatial development initiatives in the void between above and below.
Collages and image by the author

Spatial development initiatives in the void between above and below

Already 45 years ago, addressing efforts in international development aid, Walter Stöhr and Taylor recommended a blend of "top-down" policies and "bottom-up" local development to promote effective regional development (Stöhr/Taylor 1981). Times have changed, but the suggestion earns a revival. In times of rising populism, local-level urban planning is gaining even greater importance to mitigate the implications of market-oriented economic and spatial development. On the other hand, an increasing share of regulatory power is shifting to the European Commission, raising concerns among citizens and national governments. This suggests that it is worthwhile to explore how grassroots actions below could be combined with support from above to address particular challenges in regions beyond administrative boundaries, how regions could benefit from cooperative action of local initiatives and government taskforces. Such task forces could be authorised to experiment in regional laboratories. In the context of an unchallenged market economy they could innovate regional development. This would be a field where spatial planners could act as change agents, as catalysts and moderators. With their broad competence, could they combine the local commitment of civil society groups beyond individual attitudes and values with strategies from actors from above? They could establish and support regional laboratories to test innovative strategies through regional experiments. Independent from established administrative boundaries these regional laboratories could for example :

- Explore neglected potentials of regional transformation,
- Search for windows to revitalise over-regulated regional planning m
- Identify projects which encourage actors from above and from below to join forces.
- Find ways and means to achieve trust between regional actors above and below.
- Except for regional actors temporarily exempt from bureaucratic regulations, assess the implications,
- Allow experiments of intercommunal cooperation beyond the vested interests of political parties.
- Create room for local experiments,
- Streamline regional development processes to accelerate decision-making,
- Build regional information platforms to understand infrastructure deficits.
- Coordinate regional development by information.

Such explorations would require temporally and spatially limited leeways for experimental action and strategic regional transformation. To this end, two IBA initiatives in Germany could serve as templates. Despite the slightly misleading name “International Building Exhibition”, these regional initiatives are not building exhibitions, as they are rather regional laboratories to experiment with innovative approaches to regional challenges, which, for multiple reasons, the established administrative system is unable to handle. During 1989 and 1999, upon initiative of Karl Ganser, and support of Johannes Rau, the prime minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the IBA Emscher Park, an agency established for ten years only, carried out a regional development project save the industrial heritage of the declining coal and steel region and to realize innovative projects to promote, among others, projects such as housing, landscaping with arts, land and nature reclamation and cultural industries. The internationally much acclaimed ten-year project was deliberately operated in a space beyond administrative local or district boundaries (Kunzmann 2004, Kloke et al. 2023). Another Initiative following the format of an IBA is carried out by a newly established regional IBA agency in the metropolitan city region of Munich, aiming to improve “regional spaces of mobility” (IBA München 2026). By inviting the initiative to the civil society, it is hoped that mobility-improving solutions can be found, approaches which the existing local and regional authorities have not managed. The aim of the initiative is to network committed regional actors and to create templates for future action.

Strategic Spatial Planning in the Void Between Above and Below: A Visionary European Laboratory

Geographical conditions and two thousand years or more of history, of trade and industrial innovations have shaped the present urban system of the European continent, where a few metro-regions are attracting innovative industries and services. Today, they are vigilantly protected by vested national governments. Despite all programs and promises, the European Commission’s morally ambitious yet futile cohesion policy from above can never create balanced spatial development in Europe within a geopolitical environment dominated by liberal market forces. On the contrary, EU economic policies aimed at competing with the US and China will instead strengthen those metropolitan locations, which have the potential to provide the conditions for innovative transformation and attract creative labour forces that secure global competitiveness. European regions, where an increasingly industrialised agriculture dominates the regional economy, will continue to produce basic and specialised food, supported by EU agricultural policies. European regions, where climatic conditions, scenic landscapes and urban heritage attract stressed citizens of metropolitan city regions in Europe and culturally curious tourists from Asia, the Middle East and the US, will continue to be promoted by EU policies and maintain their profiles. These regions will benefit from their endogenous potential and policy support from above, though, in all European states, living conditions in lagging regions differ from those in regions that are more successful at managing transformative processes. The planners’ dream of creating equal living (and working) conditions across Europe will remain a never-ending dream, which even the acupuncture EU Cohesion policy cannot achieve. Instead of the ambitious watering-can approach supports everything from bicycle lanes around Lake Garda to the production of arms in Estonia. Times when the cohesion policy had some political, science-based rationale to win over local governments and autocratic regimes require a revision of this watering-can cohesion policy to make Europe more competitive. To this end, it could make more sense to exclusively support regions in Europe which contribute to its competitiveness. Such a policy could support five types of regions of European importance (Fig.3). Obviously, being aware that any definition of what kind of regions are important is debatable, one such definition could include:

- First, regions that are promising locations for innovative knowledge industries suffer from structural contradictions and internal infrastructural challenges, energy and water resource shortages, and ongoing intraregional political disputes, all of which hinder the development of internal consensus-building strategies.
- Second, regions hit by overtourism, where the interests of a majority of beneficiaries of global tourist flows have a considerable impact on the quality of life of local residents, not directly and indirectly linked to the tourist industry
- Third, semi-urbanised agro-industrial regions beyond metropolitan city regions, where structural transformation processes are blocked by cultural and legal differences along the inner European borders.
- Fourth, peripheral regions in Europe are deliberately left to nature, where the remaining residents, who protect the regional ecosystem, fully depend on public subsidies to remain.
- Fifth., European border regions, which provide security for the European Union as a whole, have to adopt development strategies that balance military and non-military spatial requirements.

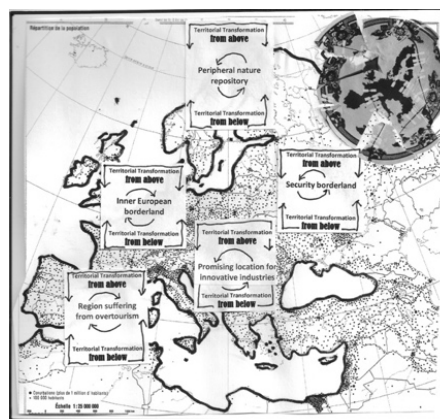


Fig.4 Laboratories of regional transformation in Europe

These regions could be considered particularly important to Europe as a whole. This importance can be much better communicated to the European electorate. Regions identified through in-depth regional studies could be selected as targets for a revised EU cohesion policy. The selection could be based on a few criteria: the region has to be functional, not administrative. In cooperation with representatives of the regionally embedded actors of the civil society, responsible public institutions agree on a functional border, establish and co-finance a regional agency limited for a period (for example for 20 years), appoint a communicative project manager and a small technical support team, as well as political and professional members of a supervisory board, clearly define the focus and the aims of the initiative and confirm the participation from below, who have responded to the call for participation and feel committed to participate in the implementation of the regional strategy agenda, which the responsible project team has prepared, formulated and communicated. All this is organized outside the legal and political responsibilities of local and regional administrative institutions, which are doing routine local and regional development. Support for these regions and the European Commission's approach to their support could convince European and national parliaments, replace the cohesion watering-can policy, and reduce the dominance of the most dominant city regions. Europe, such as Paris, London, Frankfurt, Lombardy, the Oresund, and the capital city regions of Berlin, Madrid, Brussels, Warsaw, or Vienna, does not require support from European cohesion programs. Their development is in the interest of their respective national governments anyway. A spatially defined in-between policy could make European regions with innovative potentials globally competitive. When filling in the uncharted space between planning from above and planning from below, the focus is on cooperation. This would cushion the deficiencies of regions that are important for balanced spatial development on the continent or that require support to ensure security. Successful future-oriented transformation in these regions could serve as demonstration projects for other European regions. It would replace the practised acupunctural policy and give cohesion policies a targeted but hitherto much-neglected spatial dimension.

Conclusion

Replacing practised EU cohesion policy certainly remains an academic dream, though there are arguments for revising the policy to end its acupunctural character and focus on spatial priorities, which are important for making Europe competitive and maintaining the quality of life of regional citizens. For various reasons, individual regions alone cannot manage the challenging transformation processes. Europe needs a spatial vision that is easy to understand, communicate, and widely accepted by the majority of Europeans. Such a European vision could focus on selected territories that are essential to the future sustainable and resilient development of the whole continent. The suggested approach to support the transformation of regions, which for various reasons cannot be managed by regional authorities, aims to establish temporary, locally embedded regional agencies in the political abyss between planning from above and planning from below. Such temporary agencies could benefit from EU political and financial support from above and commitment of local groups of civil society. They could mobilize implementing agency independent from governmental borders, from local, regional and national administrative barriers and independent from opposition from established local and regional parliamentary decision-making bodies. The selection of regions for such an approach would have to be based on careful, data-driven ESPON research, followed by intensive debates in the European Parliament and a call for applications from national governments that are open to such a visionary approach. It would give EU regional policy a new momentum and exempt local governments from excessive EU bureaucracy. Regional planning will not regain relevance by returning to the comprehensive, regulatory models of the past. Its future lies in occupying the neglected space between top-down governance and bottom-up initiatives, where planners can act as facilitators of cooperation, experimentation, and territorial transformation. Rather than producing more plans, planners should help build institutions capable of linking strategic objectives with local capacities. In this sense, the challenge for European spatial planning is not simply to manage territories, but to create the conditions under which regions can collectively shape their own futures.

For communicative spatial planners enthusiastic about driving, as moderators, a people-oriented transformation in regions between the above and the below would be a much-noted field of action. Training spatial planners to become communicative and visionary moderators of regional development, rather than just servants and henchmen of data-driven AI, would be a worthwhile future challenge for planning schools.

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