

**Comprehensiveness, Trans-disciplinarity and Sustainability in
Urban Analysis and Planning:
Some Considerations on the Brazilian Case.¹**

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Abstract

The “justification for planning is often comprehensiveness”, say Campbell and Fainstein (1997: 9), introducing their Readings in Planning Theory. The production and reproduction of capitalist urban space is in fact a complex process that requires comprehensive analysis for planning. But, which comprehensiveness? The first institutionalized Brazilian experience in urban planning was based on one kind of comprehensive planning methodology. However, it was not in fact an integrated analysis, but an assemblage of disciplinary analyses. More recently, urban analysis is changing to introduce the trans-disciplinary perspective, as a consequence of the perception of the mentioned complexity of urban space production and reproduction. Such complexity requires, besides the historical perspective, the political, the social, the spatial and the environmental dimensions of urban theory approaches. This new form of comprehensiveness is different from previous forms based on disciplines. On the one hand, it is observed that the disciplinary approach almost always leads to biased views of urban issues, depending on the emphasis given to each discipline. On the other hand, it is suggested that other theories such as those based on social production of space and on environmental thought constitute together appropriate theoretical approaches to urban analysis. Incorporating the historical perspective and the political praxis, these theories can be viewed as a new form of comprehensiveness, more appropriate to analyze urban space and to propose a planning process identified with the idea of sustainability in environmental, social, spatial and political terms. The article reviews comprehensiveness in planning in Brazil since the origins of institutionalized urban planning, when a disciplinary approach was adopted. It was in this period (1971) that the first graduate program in urban and regional planning was created. The ways in which the graduate programs associated to ANPUR (National Association of Urban and Regional Post-graduate and Research Programs – Brazil), and specifically the Graduate Program in Geography of the Federal University of Minas Gerais are incorporating these complex issues in their courses curricula will constitute the concluding part of the article.

Key words: comprehensiveness, trans-disciplinarity, planning courses, urban Brazil.

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The Birth of Institutionalized Urban Planning in Brazil: The “Old” Comprehensiveness

A so-called “planning for the integrated local development” was established in Brazil in the sixties. This was the answer of the military government to the progressive idea of urban reform that was thought and proposed by organizations of the civil society in the early sixties, just before the military coup in 1964. From this moment until the end of the seventies, urban issues were always motive of public policies; through either the simple process of elaboration of plans or the provision of the general conditions of production and reproduction, including collective means of consumption. It can be said that the former had its summit from the middle of the sixties to the early seventies, and the latter, from this date to the end of the seventies. The aim here is not to write about the history of this experience, but to identify and analyze the methodology that support such experiences of planning in Brazil.

Until the sixties, some Brazilian cities and towns had their “master plans”, based on a methodology of progressive-rationalist urbanism. Those “master plans” gave prominence to “mainly the functional character and the technical aspects of urbanism, emphasizing in this way the action of engineers as professionals related to the urban problem. The city is viewed mainly as a technical problem...” (MONTE-MÓR, 1980: 25). After that, there were some attempts to include the contribution of social scientists, giving a more comprehensive character to urban analysis. But, a disciplinary and presumably integrated approach to urban analysis only came after the military coup, when an institutionalized process of elaboration of local plans started in Brazil. From a total of almost five thousand Brazilian municipalities, only 281 managed to conclude their plans in the period from the mid-sixties to 1973, 68% of them with less than 50 thousand inhabitants. Other 76 were in progress in that year, totalling 357 local plans based on the methodology of “planning for the integrated local development”. Most of those plans were not put into practice, remaining in a state of inertia in the City Halls’ shelves.

In methodological terms the idea was that of comprehensiveness. According to Monte-Mór (1980: 30), in that period, “the cities were no longer seen only as problems of engineering techniques and architectural beauty. Sociologists, economists, political scientists, in short, the social scientists, have discovered the city as a locus to study the

industrial capitalist society that was consolidating in the country”. In other words, Monte-Mór (1980: 40) says that urban analysis for planning went from “the functional perspective spatially intra-systemic of the “progressism” – housing, leisure, work and circulation – to the disciplinary optic – economics, sociology, engineering, etc”.

In fact, comprehensiveness was always present in the mind of those dealing with the idea of urban planning: scholars, intellectuals, researchers, academics, graduate students, and even some urban planners. The character of comprehensiveness changes, however, according to the succession of social events and processes and their spatial expression, besides the theoretical approach given to urban analysis. Thus, a comprehensiveness based on an assemblage of disciplinary analyses seemed to be appropriate to deal with the “urban question”, in this first moment of urban planning in Brazil. Technical rationality was the mainstream of urban planning approach of that moment when state power was in the hands of the military and of a technocracy. In political terms, it was an ambiguous moment. On the one hand, urban planning methodology and resources were centralized in a central state institution, led by well-intentioned technicians, mostly architects. On the other hand, the execution and implementation of urban plans were under the responsibility of local governments, which had no political and financial autonomy under the military regime. Being elaborated by private firms or consultants, urban analysis for planning was almost always a well-elaborated diagnosis within each discipline, but did not constitute an actually integrated analysis, as it would be expected as a result of a comprehensive methodology.

Summing up, what is important to retain is that, as said above, planning as a process did not exist in the period from 1964 to 1973. The same can be said in relation to the period from 1974 to 1979, when an effective urban policy was put into practice in Brazil. Its goals were tied to those of a modernizing economic policy centrally commanded by the military government. Thus, urban policy in that period was in fact a strategic program to endow some selected cities and metropolitan regions with the necessary conditions of production to support economic growth. Created in 1973/74, the metropolitan regions are an exception as far as planning is concerned. Most of them experienced an effective process of comprehensive analysis for planning. Except for the short period from 1975 to 1979, however, when good analyses were prepared, the metropolitan institutions of

planning did not have the necessary financial and administrative autonomy to consolidate planning as a continuous process. Since the eighties, the nine settled metropolitan institutions either due to the state crisis or to other reasons were decaying, meaning that a continuous process of analysis for local and metropolitan planning was interrupted and lost.

The institutionalization by the central government of that experience in plan making led to the creation, in 1971, of the first graduate course on local planning in Brazil. It was financially supported through an agreement between the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and the Ministry of Interior, which was responsible for the urban policy during most of the military political regime. It is worth saying that there is no undergraduate planning courses in Brazil. The graduate course, known by the acronym PUR (Urban and Regional Planning), was born within a graduate program in engineering – COPPE (Coordination of the Graduate Programs in Engineering – UFRJ). This graduate program was created in 1965 with the main objective to be rather “a center of high level technical and professional formation to endow the country with self-technological capacity, [than] another regular engineers’ school to attend routine demands of the existing labor market” (NUNES et alli, 1982). According to a former director of COPPE, the PUR should be a program of urban planning of a quantitative character, that is, the engineering of planning. In his own words the idea was “to develop urban planning using mathematical methods under the engineering of planning point of view. (...) the disciplines of urban sociology, economy, history, necessary to the urban planning, would be given by lecturers coming from other areas of the university” (NUNES et alli, 1982).

On the one hand, those orientations show that, in spite of the disciplinary comprehensive approach mentioned above, planning education was seen with a strong mathematical bias. On the other hand, the lecturers “have discovered the city as a locus to study the industrial capitalist society that was consolidating in the country”, as said above, which, in the last instance, means to deal with contradictions and conflicts, which rational and biased mathematical models are unable to grasp. A crisis then dominated the relationship between COPPE and PUR until 1976 when most of the lecturers were dismissed. The PUR was restructured into an independent institute within the university organization named IPPUR (Institute of Urban and Regional Planning)

and is, nowadays, the most consolidated graduate program in the area of urban and regional analysis and planning.

From the Attempt to Create an Urban Planning Process to the Emphasis in Management and Governance in Urban Policy-making.

The eighties can be characterized as a period of political, economic and State crisis. In this context, the idea of planning in general and urban planning in particular for the long or even the medium term was abandoned. Despite that, it was a moment of intense movements related to the urban question - led by intellectuals, popular movements and other organizations of the civil society - particularly those aiming at the proposition of an urban reform, based on the construction of a legal land use and occupation system. These movements were responsible for presenting an amendment to a new Constitution, promulgated in 1988, just after the end of the military regime in 1985.

The 1988 Brazilian Constitution introduces the Master Plan as a “basic instrument” to be adopted by the local governments as a way to pursue “the social function of the urban property”, the primary principle of the proposed urban policy. So, a first question is: what is the nature of this proposed Master Plan? How does it relate to planning?

It can be said that urban planning is hardly a well-elaborated concept in present-day Brazil. A result of this initial lack of definition refers to the quantity and variety of interpretations on what must constitute a Master Plan, given by the local constitutions that follow the national one. Some of these local laws provide a complete prescription of the composing elements of a Master Plan, better identified with the old idea of comprehensiveness. That is, a comprehensiveness encapsulating the activities of the whole apparatus of local government. These kinds of prescriptions can lead to reductionisms, mainly when the Master Plans are prepared by consultants that are not acquainted with the whole mobilization and discussion that supported the inclusion of reformist measures about new forms of appropriation of urban land in the constitutional text. In these cases, the elaboration of Master Plans becomes an automatic issue disconnected of both a new praxis and a theory that had contributed for advancements in the process of understanding the production and organization of urban space.

Another result refers to the inexistence of clear limits between planning, master plan, government plan, instruments for policy implementation, and so on. My understanding is that the Master Plan should be essentially an instrument of planning, responsible for congregating basic analysis to support the implementation of urban legislations, particularly those related to land use and occupation control. What is actually important then is planning, which should include, besides the Master Plan elaboration and revision, a constant and relatively autonomous process of urban analysis. This has been a kind of “a lost link” in urban administration in Brazil.

What has been observed is the priority for those aspects related to the creation of participatory forms of urban administration through either deliberative or consultative councils; of a participatory budgeting, among other forms, aiming to broaden the representative democracy by means of an urban governance process. There are already several analyses attesting the advancements in the process of democratic consolidation at local level due to these new forms of governance. That is, the participatory character of some local administrations is consolidating and institutionalizing a kind of practice, still in embryo, of democratic decision-making in the cities. Either in its embryonic form or already consolidated, this kind of decision-making depends on a systematic and constant knowledge of the city. That is, either for socialized decisions or for other forms of governmental decision, it is essential a certain type of comprehensive and continuous urban analyses. This new comprehensive approach cannot be similar to the old one. First, because the latter was much more identified with a false integration of disciplinary approaches, as said above, than with the idea of a deep knowledge of a complex urban space. Secondly, and certainly more important, it is necessary to avoid the autonomy of the technical dimension of analysis (which can not be equated to planning autonomy) that was responsible for a kind of inversion of values in the attempts to apply comprehensive planning in the past. That is, the establishment of objectives and priorities were derived from a presumed integrated disciplinary analysis, based on a technical rationality, disregarding the social actors of the local political scene. It was not therefore considered the political nature of planning that should be implicitly or explicitly manifested in the establishment of objectives and priorities.

However, the abandonment of urban planning based on a continuous and comprehensive analysis of the production and reproduction of urban space is not only a

result of the emphasis given to governance, observed since the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution. Since the early nineties, it has been also a consequence of the minimum state ideology based on neoliberalism. Besides that, it is necessary to take into consideration the breaking of spatial barriers, a result of a historical sequence of revolutions in the means of transport and communications (HARVEY, 1995), and the changes related to a restructured and flexible process of production. As a result, local governments are competing for the attraction of highly mobile and flexible investments, and financial and consumption fluxes, searching for the insertion of localities in a globalized economy through a process of management that Harvey (1996) calls urban entrepreneurship. The instrument for that has been the strategic planning, which is in fact, a strategic form of governance, where only the participation of the most economically privileged actors is taken into consideration.² There is no doubt that this fact has been also a strong opponent to the reinsertion of a constant and continuous process of urban planning in Brazil.

Souza (2003: 31) referring to the above question says:

“The weakening of planning is followed by the popularization of the term *management* [gestão in Portuguese] which is a revealing symptom: as management means rigorously the administration of resources and problems *here and now*, operating therefore in the short and the medium terms, the favoring of the idea of management to the detriment of a consistent planning represents the triumph of the “immediatism” and myopia of the over-conservative ideologists of the “free market”” (emphasis in the original).

Summing up it can be said that the pursuing of either more democratic forms of governance or the competitive insertion of localities in a globalized economy, have led, even by different ways, the local administrations to neglect a planning process which incorporates both a technical, comprehensive and continuous analysis, and the political aspects through governance. To consider the latter out of a consistent planning process means to equate it to strategic actions tied to the short term of one government period.

This neglecting of planning as a process, should not be happening in those local administrations where progressive political parties are in power. It is observed in those

² For a critical analysis of strategic planning in general and in Brazil in special see Vainer (2000).

administrations that new forms of governance are under the responsibility of those militants of social movements that have fought for urban reform during the eighties.³

On the one hand, this fact has overcome the old discussion about the separation between the technical and the political nature of urban planning. That is, those responsible for the elaboration of plans and new forms of governance are also participating in the process of establishing objectives and priorities. On the other hand, those militants are also committed with the solution of old and persistent urban problems that require urgency and participation, leading to the establishment of new forms of short-term governance as mentioned above. Important parts of the planning process are thus forgotten, specially a more comprehensive and continuous analysis of the dynamics and transformations of urban space. This is one of the hypotheses of a research in progress that analyses the case of Belo Horizonte, the capital of the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Another hypothesis about the inexistence of a complete process of planning refers to the place that planning activities occupy within the administrative structure of municipalities. Depending on that form of insertion, urban planning may have different roles: to be a simple activity of revising the Master Planning; to be equated to a government plan, either strategic or not; to be submitted to a kind of pragmatism if it is within an institution responsible for a fragmented and immediate form of decision-making. All of them may be, simultaneously or in different moments, occurring in the administration of Belo Horizonte. As said above, however, the search for empirical evidences for this is still in progress.

From the Disciplinary to the Trans-disciplinary Approach to Urban Analysis for Planning and Governance.

Some empirical information about the graduate programs associated to ANPUR seems to be a good starting point for this discussion. From the 39 components of ANPUR⁴, 32 maintain graduate courses and research activities related to urban and regional issues.⁵

³ More recently this has been also occurring at federal level with the creation of a Ministry of Cities.

⁴ This information refers to the period immediately before the last biannual meeting occurred in May 2005 (Source: www.anpur.org.br).

⁵ The other seven are only research centers.

The ANPUR's website inform that these 32 graduate programs cover a large variety of disciplinary approaches (Table 1).⁶

Table 1: Disciplines covered by the 32 graduate programs associated to ANPUR

<i>Disciplines</i>	<i>Number of occurrence</i>
Public administration	3
Social science	7
Demography	2
Economy	8
Engineering	3
Geography	5
Urbanism	11
Law	1

Source: www.anpur.org.br

It can be observed that urbanism, economy and social science are the most significant disciplinary approaches to urban analysis for planning and governance in Brazil. Some of this information might be incorrect, insofar as they are not based on an accurate research. It can be said, for instance, that most of the graduate courses in geography incorporate important disciplines related to the economy, to social science and even to urbanism. Conversely, some of graduate courses in urbanism might eventually be incorporating a geographical approach to urban analysis.

The tracks defined for the last biannual meetings of ANPUR are probably more appropriate as a means to understand the content of those mentioned graduate courses curricula. At least in the last decade, the tracks of ANPUR's meeting are structured around the following subjects related to the area of urban and regional analysis and planning: management/governance, regions and territory, environment and ecology, history and design of cities, intra-urban issues and culture. This is certainly evidence that education and research activities in urban and regional analysis and planning are changing from a disciplinary to a trans-disciplinary approach.

⁶ Some of this information might be incorrect, insofar as they are not based on an accurate research. It can be said, for instance, that most of the graduate courses in geography incorporate important disciplines related to economy, social science and even urbanism.

This has been a tendency in the Graduate Program in Geography of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), where I have been teaching for the last 16 years. The graduate program - MSc and PhD in Geography – has two areas of emphasis: environmental analysis and organization of space. They are in fact interconnected, except when geomorphology is the focus in the former. It can be said, however, that urban studies are inside the latter, where the understanding of the cities and urbanization has been that of trans-disciplinary processes. Besides the courses related to the specific area of geography, such as theory and epistemology in geography, the area of urban and regional studies incorporates the following courses:

- Population, space and environment
- Spatial processes
- Demographic dynamics
- Territory, region and urban network
- Organization of urban space
- Urbanization, politics and citizenship
- Urban and environmental planning and governance

There are also the so-called “special topics”, that allow to develop relevant and emergent themes for the area of urban and regional studies.

Focusing on different theories, those courses incorporate the trans-disciplinarity through the environmental thought, political economy of space, political ecology, post-structuralism, cultural studies, and critical theory in general. What is important to retain is that this kind of approach introduces important dimensions of theory for urban and regional analyses such as politics, history, space, and, more recently, the environmental theory. That is, given the nature of the sociospatial processes in the Brazilian social formation, the search for knowledge production about urban and regional issues is almost always also a search for possibilities of social changes (COSTA, 2004). Besides the mentioned nature of sociospatial processes in Brazil, the adoption of this kind of approach was also a reaction to the previous approach based on the “political economy of urbanization” (CASTELLS, 1972; HARVEY, 1981; LOJKINE, 1981, among

others), which had a very strong economic bias (COSTA; COSTA: 2001). These emphases on theory do not mean that empirical analyses are not taken into consideration in researches developed by academics and graduate students in the Graduate Program in Geography – UFMG. On the contrary, most of the MSc dissertations and PhD theses are based on sound empirical analysis, which is necessary even when they aim at a critical perspective.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that, on the one hand, the mentioned Graduate Program in Geography and possibly most of the graduate programs associated to ANPUR, are introducing the trans-disciplinarity and a new comprehensive perspectives in their curricula. It is reasonable to believe that this also means a focus on the possibility of sustainable cities and urban agglomerations, in ecological and political terms, insofar as environmental aspects and politics have been central for either theoretical analysis or the identification of possible praxis for social changes. As mentioned above, this is very important in a capitalist peripheral social formation. To be socially effective, however, this kind of approach should be introduced as a continuous process in the planning institutions of cities and regions. This is not happening in Brazil. The reason for this, as already mentioned in the first part of this article, is the urgency that is characterizing urban administration in the country in the name of either progressive governance or strategic planning. This is in short the main challenge that the planning process is facing in Brazil.

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