

Beyond soft planning: Towards a *Soft turn* in planning theory and practice?

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Cristina Cavaco 

CIAUD, Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design, Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

João Mourato 

Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

João Pedro Costa 

CIAUD, Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design, Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

João Ferrão 

Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract

Over the last decade, soft planning has become an increasingly visible concept in planning literature. Since the term soft spaces was firstly coined, soft planning has been used to describe a growing number of practices that occur at the margins of statutory planning systems. However, as soft planning-related literature proliferates, so does the diversity of approaches and planning practices it encompasses. Such diversity fuels long-standing questions about what can or cannot be considered as soft planning as well as about its usefulness for today's planning theory and practice. To shed light on this still unclear conceptual outline, this article divides the soft planning debate into five contextual components (ethos; governance; politics; policies; spaces; and scale) while paying particular attention to the relationship between soft planning and strategic spatial planning. The aim is to foreground soft planning as a concept, and add clarity and awareness on the challenges, the risks and opportunities, planning currently faces.

Corresponding author:

Cristina Cavaco, CIAUD, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon School of Architecture, Rua Sá de Nogueira, Pólo Universitário—Alto da Ajuda, Lisboa 1349-055, Portugal.

Email: ccavaco1@campus.ul.pt

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Introduction

Over the last decade, soft planning has become an increasingly visible concept in planning literature. Since Phil Allmendinger and Graham Haughton coined the term soft spaces to frame the Thames Gateway development (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007, 2009), soft planning has been used to describe a growing number of practices that occur at the margins of statutory planning systems (Faludi, 2013; Illsley et al., 2010; Kaczmarek, 2018; Luukkonen and Moilanen, 2012; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Purkarthofer, 2016; Stead, 2014; Waterhout, 2010). The use of soft planning translates planning solutions that go beyond traditional administrative boundaries and introduce new governance processes between formal and informal structures and institutions. These develop at different scales, ranging from the European level (Faludi, 2010, 2013; Luukkonen and Moilanen, 2012; Purkarthofer, 2016, 2018; Stead, 2014) to regional approaches (Kaczmarek, 2018; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Waterhout, 2010) and local community-led initiatives (Illsley et al., 2010).

However, as soft planning-related literature proliferates, so does the diversity of approaches and planning practices it encompasses. This diversity, in face of a still unclear conceptual outline, fuels long-standing questions about what can or cannot be considered as soft planning and how it is useful to planning theory and practice. In fact, soft spaces (e.g., (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007), soft planning (e.g., (Kaczmarek, 2018; Purkarthofer, 2016), and soft spaces of planning (e.g., (Illsley et al., 2010) seem to be used interchangeably without a clear-cut distinction and definition. Additional complexity arises from the fact that soft planning practices to a certain degree seems to replicate the paradigm shift from traditional land-use planning to strategic spatial planning (Albrechts, 2004; European Communities, 1997; Nadin, 2007; Vigar, 2009). Several questions therefore arise: What exactly distinguishes soft planning from strategic spatial planning? What is new in soft planning and how useful is it for planning theory and practice? What normative debate does it entail and how significant is it to better understand the risks and opportunities planning is facing today? Last but not least, can the conceptual systematization of soft planning contribute to expand this debate to other geographic contexts? So far, this is undoubtedly a heavily geographically skewed debate, which largely reflects an European Anglo-Saxon discursive hegemony stemming from planning practices in the UK (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007; Vigar, 2009), Nordic countries (Olesen, 2011; Purkarthofer and Mattila, 2018; Stead, 2014), and the Netherlands (Waterhout, 2010). Eastern (Kaczmarek, 2018) and Southern European perspectives (Cavaco and Costa, 2019; Elorrieta, 2018; Ferrão, 2014; Giannakourou, 2011; Mourato and Rosa Pires, 2007; Oliveira and Breda-Vázquez, 2010) are a marginal minority with soft planning rarely used explicitly.

In short, soft planning is conceptually and empirically far from systematized. This paper addresses this issue by examining whether a *soft turn* is taking place in planning theory and practice and, if so, what does it entail. First, we identify possible origins, core features, and approaches behind soft spaces and soft planning (The emergence of an alternative planning concept?). Second, we outline soft planning as a *construct* in planning theory, using five key "contextual components of planning" to comparatively review soft planning and strategic spatial planning (For a piecemeal interpretation of soft planning). In sum, we review a conceptual debate looking for how it sheds light on emerging planning practices. Finally, we reflect on the relevance of such *construct* to foreground soft planning as a *concept* and thus clarify and raise awareness on the risks, challenges, and opportunities that planning currently faces (Final remarks).

The emergence of an alternative planning concept?

Conceptualizing soft spaces

The contemporary soft planning debate can be traced back to 2007, when, in their critical review of the Thames Gateway Regeneration Project, Phil Allmendinger and Graham Haughton coined the term "soft spaces" to characterize "the fluid areas between formal [planning] processes where implementation through bargaining, flexibility, discretion and interpretation dominate," in opposition to "hard spaces, (...) the formal, visible arenas and processes" of statutory planning systems (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007: 306). The *leitmotif* for such conceptualization was the emergence of new governance and planning scales in-between administrative boundaries and institutionalized planning approaches, demanding "a more flexible, networked and asymmetrical attitude to governance, planning and regeneration" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007: 306). Since its conceptual debut, the arguments in favor of soft spaces largely fit into two rationales: the changing geography of planning boundaries and the changing procedural nature of territorial governance (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, 2010; Haughton et al., 2010; Haughton and Allmendinger, 2008).

The first acknowledges the rise of planning spaces, non-nested administratively, spatially fluid, and function-driven. Here we must highlight the way planning has been affected by devolution or decentralization trends that push a spatial rescaling of state powers up (to supra or trans-national bodies), down (to lower tiers of government), and outward or sideways (e.g., to specific sectorial bodies, non-state territorial actors or private stakeholders). State theory defines this as the "hollowing out" of the nation-state (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Jessop, 1994; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999; Roodbol-Mekkes and Van en Brink, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2009), that is, the functional and territorial re-configuration of the state's political space towards the "filling in" of other governance spaces in rather fluid and heterogeneous geographies (Jones et al., 2005).

The second rationale in support of soft spaces is the changing procedural nature of territorial governance in face of established institutional and administrative traditions, considered to be "slow, bureaucratic and not reflecting the real geographies of problems and opportunities" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 619). Consequently, the

development of more open, collaborative and non-hierarchical governance arrangements took place alongside, and in-between, the existing formal ones. For one, there are governance and multi-level governance solutions that require increasing coordination, integration, and partnership-based approaches. In addition, there are meta-governance solutions that outline the role of governments to steer, control and coordinate the different socio-spatial governance arrangements, that is, “the governance of governance” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Jessop, 2004).

In light of these rationales, soft spaces’ literature revolves around four controversial features:

Informality—soft spaces take place outside the established statutory system, as informal planning arenas, albeit alongside legitimately accepted formal frameworks. While (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007; 308) recognize that “there has always been a distinction between the formal and the informal in planning,” Kaczmarek (2018) states that hard and soft planning are compared, highlighting the mandatory, official, normative, and regulatory character of the former, and the voluntary, unofficial, conceptual and analytical, petitionary and recommendatory character of the latter.

Voluntarism—soft spaces are non-mandatory planning processes that do not comply with a set of legal obligations and established statutory planning rules. Rather, they are dependent on the willingness of the parties involved to participate and engage, whether they are public, private, quasi-public, academic, voluntary, or community sectors (Haughton et al., 2010). Declarations of intent made in a lobbying environment replace formal commitments and official ties (Olesen, 2011).

Complementarity—despite the dualistic position that tends to oppose hard and soft planning spaces, it is commonly accepted that they do not replace, but rather complement each other (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Purkarthofer, 2016; Stead, 2014; Waterhout, 2010). Rather than excluding parties, hard and soft spaces are “mutually constitutive” (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2008: 143), “gradient positions on a shared continuum of spatial closure and territorial definition” (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012: 277). As a meta-governance practice, soft spaces interweave the formation of new spatial entities with the need to institutionalize them, while introducing innovative behaviors and opportunities within the rigidity of the formal system.

Effectiveness—soft spaces emerged to enhance planning performance through more effective development and more efficient policy responses. This focus on “delivery” fuels the degree of expeditiousness, flexibility, and ambiguity that have been brought inside formal institutionalized settings (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

Genealogy of a concept

Long before Allmendinger and Haughton started the debate on soft spaces, the word “soft” had already been used in other policy contexts. A key example is Joseph Nye’s “soft power.” Nye first came up with the term of soft power in the late 1980s, early 1990s, to portray the hegemony of the United States of America not only in terms of hard military and economic power, but also of its ability to influence the international scene in view of a geopolitical balance. According to (Nye, 2004: preface), soft power is “the ability to get

what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”. Against coercion, command, and inducement, the “sticks” and “carrots” of hard power, soft power is about achieving the intended outcomes through persuasion, seduction, emulation, and cooption. It acts by inspiring and engendering others’ cooperation through intangible resources such as values, culture, institutions, or policies. Focused on changing world politics, Nye acknowledges the increasing importance of soft power, particularly in a global information age where global threats such as terrorism and climate change demand greater trans-national cooperation and integration of nongovernmental actors. Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy also play a growing role. Since the late 1980s, soft power has entered the public discourse, acknowledged by elected officials, academics, and editorial writers, crossing the borders of the United States into Europe and the rest of the world (Nye, 2004, 2013). However, despite the similarities, Nye’s soft power has not been explicitly mentioned in the debate about soft spaces.

Even prior to Nye’s epithet, the word “soft” was used to qualify the normative framework under which international law was generally applied. In 1980, in an article discussing the “infinite variety” of international law, R. R. Baxter distinguished between “hard” and “soft law,” also called as “weak” or “fragile” law. As (Baxter, 1980: 549) said, “there are norms of various degrees of cogency, persuasiveness, and consensus which are incorporated in agreements between States but do not create enforceable rights or duties”. Instruments (political treaties, voluntary resolutions, or agreements, etc.) are deliberately left unclear as to their legal application to serve international cooperation between States and help in the pursuit of conflicting goals. Different purposes are at play: managing mutual privileges and duties; generating pressures and influence the conduct of States; and pushing international law in new directions (Baxter, 1980). In 1984, T. Gruchalla-Wesierski developed a framework to understand what soft law is. He defined discretion and subjectivity as its most distinguishing features, regardless of whether legal or non-legal instruments were considered (1984). By the late 1980s, C. M. Chinkin (1989) already acknowledged a vast body of literature on the subject, further developing the concept.

In the 1980s, the awareness of soft dimensions of power and their use in a political international context is likely to reflect a certain zeitgeist, in a time when intangible attributes such as social, relational, and emotional skills were brought to the forefront. Emotional intelligence, for instance, focused on how emotions, in parallel with cognitive skills, affect intra and interpersonal relationships and shape people’s behavior and thinking, became widely spread in the late 1980s and 1990s, following P. Salovey and J. Mayer (1989) and, especially, D. Goleman’s work (1995).

Concerning planning, “soft” was also brought to light a few times before Allmendinger and Haughton’s contribution. Soft planning’s first reference dates back to 1967, when Bernard Solasse (1967) introduced *la planification souple* to explore the advantages of an indicative, and not prescriptive, planning style. In a capitalist economy, with the opening of borders for a common market, planning was considered a means to foster a balanced development among the tensions created between the state, social and market forces. Later, in 1995, Tim Marshall acknowledged the emergence of a softer planning style, which described a type of planning flexible enough to welcome market trends, instead of

being structured upon State's power and structural public investments. A "less ambitious" type of planning though, particularly linked to the "neoliberal offensive of the 1980s" (Marshall, 1995: 29, 32). At the turn of the millennium, Andreas Faludi upheld "planning as a 'soft' process" looking towards planning as a mutual interactive learning process rather than a simple technique focused on blueprints' material outcomes (Faludi, 2001: 107).

From soft spaces to soft planning

Conceptually, soft spaces have evolved alongside the idea that spatial planning is undergoing a transformative change. Despite never mentioning "soft planning," Allmendinger and Haughton often refer to "new planning" or "new spatial planning" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Haughton et al., 2010). However, and arguably triggered by the soft spaces debate, soft planning has recently experienced a significant revival (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Faludi, 2013; Kaczmarek, 2018; Purkarthofer, 2016).

With Faludi, the term soft planning was definitely brought to the forefront in 2010, this time with the EU and European spatial planning at the center of the discussion. Faludi perceives the EU as a soft space *par excellence*, the first global democratic governing experiment to abolish frontiers, the very notion of space as a hard object endowed with legal personality and in need of being administrated according to the rules of a sovereign entity, being it either a nation-state or a sub-national authority. Moreover, taking stock of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Faludi argued that "the real planning is soft," that is, "soft spaces require soft planning (...) that relies on a joint formulation of strategy, while retaining dispersed, and thus flexible, powers of action" (2010: 14, 21). Faludi not only claims for soft planning the status of "pointing the way" for European spatial planning (2013: 1311), he considers it a crucial means of achieving the objectives of the EU's territorial cohesion policy. However, according to Luukkonen and Moilanen (2012), this is still far from being achieved due to entrenched patterns of behavior rooted in traditional administrative frames.

In turn, Dominic Stead (2011, 2014) focuses on spatial rescaling and the consequences of European territorial cooperation on the emergence of new governance scales. In particular, EU's Territorial Cooperation Programmes (e.g., INTERREG) and the materialization of trans-national development strategies which require fuzzy boundaries and collaborative policy initiatives beyond the borders of nations. Stead (2011) sees soft spaces as "multi-area sub-regions in which regional strategy is being made between or alongside formal institutions and processes" (2011: 163).

Notwithstanding, whilst soft spaces seem conceptually outlined, greatly due to Allmendinger and Haughton's systematization (2015), soft planning needs further clarification. For this purpose, (Stead 2014: 682) distinguishes "planning in hard spaces"—which "often closely resembles Euclidean planning (...), where decision-making takes place in uniform, general-purpose, nested administrative units"—from "planning in soft spaces"—which "more closely resembles relational planning (...), where decision-making occurs in flexible, functionally defined, overlapping decision spaces". In turn, Eva Purkarthofer disentangles the Europeanization of spatial planning to examine the

encounter between the European spatial planning and national planning systems in light of the relationship between soft and hard planning (Purkarthofer, 2016).

Additional difficulty arises from the significant conceptual overlap between soft planning and strategic spatial planning. In fact, both share a relational, rather than absolute, view of planning space; a strategic, rather than a regulatory, planning rationale; both emphasize complex, fluid, and networked, rather than hierarchical and unidirectional, planning governance arenas. Thus, the question that arises is: what makes soft planning stand out, conceptually and normatively, as a planning policy practice?

For a piecemeal interpretation of soft planning

This section reviews a systematized reading and interpretation of soft planning literature vis-à-vis its relationship with strategic spatial planning. We focus on what (Waterhout, 2010: 8) defined as the “contextual components of planning”, that is, the inter-related constituent factors or dimensions that not only provide a context of planning, but are also influenced by the planning process itself. Expanding on Allmendinger’s lens (2016), we look into five components: ethos, governance, politics, policies, and spaces/scales. With the latter in mind, we critically review the soft planning debate looking into emerging ideas and interpretations and how these give insights into rising planning practices. Influenced by Munck’s conceptualization of democracy (Munk, 2009) and Tate’s perspective on qualitative methods in planning (Tate, 2020), we aim to establish soft planning as a *construct* (systematic identification of its constitutive attributes and substance) and contribute to develop the signification of soft planning as a *concept* (Kerlinger, 1973), that is, the methodological confirmation of its underlying meanings and purposes while making room for a more tangible and intelligible conceptualization of soft planning.

Ethos in soft planning

Over the last two decades a new political and ideological planning ethos emerged. This trend can be traced back to the late 1990s, early 2000s, with the UK’s New Labour “Third Way” planning and devolution reforms. These fueled the rise and integration of “spatial planning” to portray “a new planning age” characterized by the ambition to overcome the failures and limitations of former planning arrangements, be it the traditional state-led post-war fix (i.e., land-use planning), or the later market-led right-wing planning, deregulation, and centralization (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000).

In the UK and the Netherlands, spatial planning acquired particular relevance, epitomizing the Giddensian “third way” political and ideological quandary: the ability to combine, in a virtuous trade-off, major social and environmental objectives with a supportive market-led planning (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones, 1999). (Allmendinger, 2016: 21) called it “the search for a ‘perfect fix’”: facilitate growth whilst pursuing environmental, climate change, housing affordability, and social inclusion goals.

Despite largely centered in Northern-Central Europe, the debate achieved meaningful dissemination with the so-called Europeanization of planning, that is, the influence of the

EU on domestic planning (Bohme and Waterhout, 2008). It claimed growing convergence between planning and regional development along with a shift from land use towards a strategic, development-oriented and governance-centered planning style; in short, a more ambitious and holistic territorial approach looking for better place-making based upon collaborative vision, policy integration, and governance coordination. “Strategic spatial planning” (Albrechts, 2004; Friedmann, 2004; Newman, 2008), “collaborative planning” (Healey, 1997), “integrated spatial planning” (Vigar, 2009) or, simply, “spatial planning” (Kunzmann, 2006; Nadin, 2007; Tewdwr-jones et al., 2010) were some of the buzzwords that framed this new planning ethos. Within the latter, soft spaces and soft planning practices found room to flourish, fostered by a mix of emerging dynamics (i.e., strategic thinking and integration, devolution and re-territorialization, neoliberalism and globalization) (Haughton et al., 2010).

However, this discussion is not without controversy. First, this “new planning age” is deeply rooted in conceptual ambiguity. Literature revolves around the elusive character of spatial planning. While some suggest that it is a social construct rather than a stable concept (Inch, 2012), others refer to the fluidity and malleability of meanings and diversity of practices it encompasses (Haughton et al., 2010). Others, still, refer to spatial planning as an “empty signifier,” that is, a comfort term that means “everything and nothing,” merging different, sometimes contradictory, narratives (Gunder and Hillier, 2009).

Conceptually, soft planning feeds this storyline of a search for a new planning ethos. There, the epithet “soft” not only emphasizes the blurring of clear-cut administrative borders and governing formalities, but also accentuates the relational and emotional aspects of planning, in view of the potential political conflicts, interpersonal challenges and wicked problems, which planning is dealing with more than ever. Although no direct relationship has been established between soft planning and the emotional aspects of planning, literature points to a latent connection (Ferreira, 2013; Hoch, 2006; Lyles and White, 2019). Sandercock, for instance, delves on planning as “*a process of emotional involvement*,” while raising the need for an alternative “sensibility” to regulatory planning, looking forward to aspects such as “city senses (sound, smell, taste, touch, sight)” and “soft-wires desires of citizens” (Sandercock, 2004: 134; 139).

In contrast, “soft” also raises other interpretations, in which flexibility and fluidity can lead to uncontrolled spaces of maneuver. In this regard, soft planning raises a normative dilemma on how benign or harmful this “new planning age” really is. At first, in the late 1990s, strategic spatial planning was welcomed enthusiastically, giving planning a major progressive, emancipatory and aspirational role. The revival of strategic spatial planning served the motto of “rescuing planning” from inefficiency and ineffectiveness, while pursuing the public interest and sustainable development. Strategy-making was highlighted as a powerful machinery of transparency and accountability to achieve consensus, policy integration, and long-term vision (Albrechts, 2004; Friedmann, 2004; Healey, 1997). Several cases around and outside Europe—for example, Hanover city region, Flanders, or Northern Ireland (Albrechts et al., 2003), Vancouver and Hong Kong (Friedmann, 2004), or Perth (Albrechts, 2006)—were seen as innovative and promising experiences on how valuable strategic planning was. The momentum gained with the

drafting of the European Spatial Development Perspective (1999), a good example of how strategic spatial planning was invested with the hope to reinvigorate planning, resonating across the European national planning systems (Kunzmann, 2006).

Nevertheless, the initial enthusiasm dropped when evidences fell short of expectations (Newman, 2008). Despite the endeavors and signs of change, a more cautious and reflexive insight was adopted, recognizing the difficulties and shortcomings that such a normative project met in practice (e.g., tensions between administrative boundaries and governance approach; problems with selectivity and an action-oriented framing; dominant discourse of economic competitiveness) (Albrechts, 2006; Healey, 2006). In the UK, the demystification of spatial planning also occurred when New Labour's reforms began to be more and more perceived as a continuation of Thatcherian recipes rather than a real overhaul (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000). According to (Allmendinger, 2016: 117), "this shift was not a naive attempt to 'square the circle' but a deliberate tactic to deliver growth", a second phase and a softer form of neoliberalism, as said by Olesen, 2014: 292).

A rather critical new discursive chapter arose then, moved by the idea that strategic spatial planning was under a "neoliberal turn" to which soft spaces appeared to be key players (Olesen, 2012, 2014). According to Olesen, after an earlier phase (1990s), in which strategic planning was seen as an impetus to urban and regional competitiveness and entrepreneurship, a new wave of neoliberalism emerged (2000s) that thwarted the ethos of spatial planning in its noblest values and aspirations. Literature on soft spaces and soft planning describes this in several ways: how soft spaces fast-tracked market-led development projects (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007, 2009); how soft planning's focus on delivery, expeditiousness and streamlining became a "shortcut to democratic processes" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010; Stead, 2014: 682); how soft spaces were used to narrow down disruptive thinking into normalized growth-oriented discourses (Haughton et al., 2013); how soft spaces fostered the depoliticization of spatial planning (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, 2012); how devolution and spatial rescaling paved the way for the decline of state-led strategic planning at national and regional scales (Galland, 2012; Olesen, 2014; Roodbol-Mekkes and Van en Brink, 2015). As a gateway to neoliberalism and despite the optimistic insights (e.g., inducing experimentation and policy transfer; disrupting entrenched policy discourses; creating room for new ways of power and local empowerment; in a word, introducing innovation in planning), soft planning reflects a process of disenchantment and brings to light the fall of strategic spatial planning as an emancipatory social and political project.

Governance in soft planning

The understanding of governance has gradually shifted after the 1980s. Drawing on Charles Lindblom's (1965) precursory ideas of "partisan mutual adjustment" (non-centrally coordinated decision-making), governance came to be seen as a specific "democratic" and "pluralist" style of decision-making (Healey, 1997); a "governance-beyond-the-State," reflecting "the emergence of new formal or informal institutional arrangements that engage in the act of governing outside and beyond-the-state"

(Swyngedouw, 2005: 1991). Jessop called it “heterarchy” or “selforganization,” a restricted mode of decision-making, which involves networked and non-hierarchical coordination mechanisms of interdependent organizations with multiple stakeholders, where overall control from outside the system is not possible—the “self-organization of interorganizational relations” (Jessop, 1998: 47).

The difference between “old” and “new” governance discourses has taken on multiple labels: “shift from government to governance” (e.g., Swyngedouw, 2005), “rise of the governance paradigm” (e.g., Jessop, 1998), or “multilevel governance” (e.g., Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Overall, private economic stakeholders and civil society engaged with a greater role in policy, decision-making, and administration, reconfiguring “governmentality” regimes under the so-called “hollowing out” of the State (Jessop, 1994; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999). Negotiation, public-private partnerships, and other forms of multi-level and multi-actor collaboration, association, and alliance were brought to the forefront, in light of an emerging shift in the patterns of the relationship of the state-market-civil society triad; patterns that could not be grasped just by linear, hierarchical (top-down) and dichotomic (e.g., public vs private) schematic assumptions that used to describe conventional forms of governmentality.

In the planning realm, governance discourses emerged alongside the increasing complexity and fragmentation of planning duties. A standard state-run planning model has given way to a complex networked melting-pot of multi-level, multi-sector, and multi-actor interconnections that involve the coordination and integration of multiple, often divergent, territorial interests and assets. With the resurgence of strategic spatial planning (Albrechts et al., 2003; Davoudi and Strange, 2009; Sallet and Faludi, 2000), an increasing intertwining between governance and spatial planning has been acknowledged by scholars and practitioners (Ferrão, 2014; Gualini, 2010; Healey, 2003, 2006; Madanipour et al., 2001; Schmitt and Danielzyk, 2018) and an array of critical actor-network-based explanations gradually challenged current governance practices in face of the complexity and uncertainty shaping the future of planning (Beauregard, 2021; Rydin, 2013a, 2013b).

This “planning-governance nexus,” however, gave rise to two conflicting interpretations (Jessop, 1998; Schmitt and Danielzyk, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2005). The first, inherent to the revivalist spirit of strategic planning and the communicative turn in planning, assumes a positive stance and the strengthening of planning democracy (Ali, 2015; Gisselquist, 2012; Grisel and Van de Waart, 2011; Healey, 2003; Tasan-Kok and Vranken, 2011). The second, puts governance at the service of neoliberal agendas once devolution of powers and responsibilities becomes a gateway to neoliberal agendas, weakening public institutions and bypassing legitimate democratic procedures (Haughton et al., 2013; Newman, 2008; Olesen, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2005).

Soft planning has been mainly associated with the rise of such neoliberal pressures. In fact, while strategic spatial planning is understood as a public-sector-led activity, drawing upon the powers of the State and a strong role of public administration (Albrechts, 2004; cf. Albrechts et al., 2003), and playing an active part in bringing together multi-level democratic governance solutions (Healey, 2006), soft planning discourses evolved in an altogether different direction. The issue is not that powers, responsibilities, and tasks have

been transferred to non-statutory spheres of decision-making, but the fact that these are often endowed with effective authority despite lacking formal democratic legitimation, fueling what Rosenau and Czempiel define as “governance without government” (cit. by Gualini, 2010: 68). Accountability and transparency are threatened as soft approaches might foster unchecked decision-making processes (e.g., the status of stakeholders and entitlement to participate are ill-defined; the systems of representation are diffuse and opaque); thus, growing unaccountability, lack of transparency and democratic deficit in planning (Haughton et al., 2013; Olesen, 2011; Stead, 2014). In this regard, Swyngedouw (2005: 1999) considers that the “proliferation of asymmetric governance-beyond-the-state arrangements” is nothing but a democratic fallacy full of contradictions.

In short, the concept of soft planning bears the seal of the tension between territorial governance either as a way to hijack democratic powers and responsibilities, or as the very facilitator of pluralist democracy and representativeness, built upon the legitimacy and accountability of public and institutionalized powers and the entitlement and empowerment of individuals and collective parties to participate.

Politics in soft planning

According to John Forester and Louis Albrechts, planning is a “political choice.” Planners are asked not only to guide the affairs and navigate inevitable spaces of conflicting antagonism and competition between different stakeholders and policy sectors, but also actively participate in the exercise of political power (politics), namely by restraining interests that are likely to threaten the democratic planning process and the public good (Albrechts, 2003b; Forester, 1982). In its emergence of the 1990s, strategic spatial planning was endowed with such a mission: acting as a “catalyst for change” by using strategy-making to deal both with the “planning content” and with “the planning process (disagreement, conflict), and its social and political context (realities of inequalities, differences)” (Albrechts, 2003a: 906). Using new ways of “soft power” such as persuasion, emulation, argumentation, and consensus-building in detriment to the coercive ways of rational planning (e.g., regulations; top-down authority) (Ferrão, 2014: 95–96; Healey, 1997; Nye, 2004), strategy building was viewed as a democratic drive for inclusiveness, transparency and accountability, fostering the empowerment of individuals and groups, namely “ordinary citizens” and “deprived groups” (Albrechts, 2003b; Albrechts et al., 2003). Collaboration was understood as “power-sharing” while consensus-building is to be disclosed through “multilayered culturally-embedded, intersubjective processes,” that is, collaborative dialogue (Healey, 1997: 263).

Yet, an alternative interpretation of this planning-politics nexus has come to light. As criticism of promising strategic spatial planning emerged, belief on the politics of planning perished. Building on Eric Swyngedouw’s (2005) thesis on the contradictory face of inclusive governance, that is, the “Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-State”, Allmendinger and Haughton were some of its most severe critics (Allmendinger, 2016; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, 2012; Haughton et al., 2013). As argued, based on consensus and the search for win-win solutions—“seeking to fuse opposites into a holistic, unifying outcome” (Allmendinger, 2016: 140), to which the Giddensian “beyond

left and right” ambivalence had contributed, this new planning age was nothing more than a way of putting antagonism and contestation aside while fostering the depoliticization of spatial planning,—the rise of a “post-political condition” that betrays a disengagement with the political. The truth is that the techno-scientific legitimation of broader accepted consensus (e.g., growth and sustainable development; policy integration; climate change), presented as unconditional universal axioms in a “there-is-no-alternative” setting, configures a post-ideological and post-political condition where shared preferences, choices, and agreements are reached in an uncritical and, therefore, apolitical way. The process of depoliticization shows the shift of strategy building and decision-making from a contested political field to a managerial-technocratic framework that many advocate as inevitable in a modern pluralistic society, where social class movements have been diluted into plural individual choices.

However, the question is not depoliticization itself, but rather how it ends up in a process of camouflaged depoliticization. The thesis shared by Swyngedouw, Allmendinger and Haughton is that whenever governance arrangements pave the way for the inclusion of certain groups and individuals beyond the accountable actors of pluralistic democracy, that is, the formal spaces of politics—“via a proliferating maze of opaque networks, fuzzy institutional arrangements, ill-defined responsibilities and ambiguous political objectives and priorities” (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1999), as is characteristic of soft planning arrangements, there is the risk of misusing power in a particularly non-transparent way. Allmendinger and Haughton (2012: 90) claim that “this system gives the superficial appearance of engagement and legitimacy, whilst focusing on delivering growth expedited through some carefully choreographed processes for participation which minimize the potential for those with conflicting views to be given a meaningful hearing”. Swyngedouw (2005, 2009) stresses that the consolidation of post-politics leads to a “democratic deficit,” enabled by the commodification and marketization of governance arrangements. The empowerment of certain corporate mechanisms necessarily means the disempowerment of other presumably weaker actors or marginalized communities. Likewise, Kristian Olesen (2014: 289) draws attention to how “the normalisation of neoliberal discourses in strategic spatial planning” (e.g., growth; competitiveness) contributes to fostering a “post-political planning condition, in which conflicting views struggle for recognition and are rarely considered to be meaningful”. Following these ideas, soft planning arrangements run the risk of becoming a caustic ground for democracy, stimulating backstage maneuvers that restrains wide political debate and antagonism to specific market-based interests and demands, eluding all political legitimacy.

Nevertheless, other more optimistic voices are making themselves heard. In response to Allmendinger and Haughton’ advocacy, Jonathan Metzger (2011: 195) calls for a “radical democratic(izing) makeover” of spatial planning. The aim is to challenge “neocorporatist governance structures” by providing “‘court’ institutions” within the planning process to “entail experimentation [and] accommodate fruitfully dissensus already at an early stage” of the process. Likewise, in face of the failure of a win-win-win solution to reduce noise at Brussels Airport, (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010) demand a space for open controversy—the “repoliticization” of political governance.

Policies in soft planning

In a government-based style of governance, policies traditionally arise by means of a system of law, that is, a set of binding legal rules, codes, and procedures that execute a command-and-control logic, typical of highly regulatory States. By its very nature, planning is strongly policy driven. Traditionally, it operates under and through a system of rules that guide and circumscribe planning practices, namely through land-use zoning and regulation and development rights permits. Despite their differences and the extent to which they bind the discretionary power of decision makers and practitioners, planning systems usually provide a policy framework for the management of land-use change (European Communities, 1997);

Nevertheless, the 1990s spatial turn fostered a significant shift. Following the Europeanization of spatial planning and the rise of strategic spatial planning, criticisms targeting the rigidity and lack of effectiveness of land-use planning emerged (Nadin, 2007). Instead of prescriptive and subject to rule-binding compliance, strategic spatial planning has adopted an indicative and performative policy approach, providing flexible and general strategic guidance to frame policy integration and the coordination of territorial actors (Albrechts, 2004; Rivolin, 2008). In this light, “policies become principles which are drawn into an argument about decision criteria, not fixed into a priori rules” (Healey, 1997: 217). An open space for discretionary decision-making has been introduced on the delivery of spatial development choices, as spatial plans became non-binding policy tools, leaving the legitimate control of planning activities to monitoring, evaluation, participation and negotiation (Rivolin, 2008).

This trend towards flexibility and less coerciveness is not unique to spatial planning. Soft law and soft policy instruments have become popular in multiple policy fields, particularly in the development of international law and sustainability, and climate change agendas (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Fajardo, 2014; Terpan, 2015; Wurzel et al., 2013). Fajardo (2014) claims there is no single formula for what soft law is, although the debate dates back to the 1980s (Baxter, 1980; Chinkin, 1989; Gruchalla-Wesierski, 1984), when “relative normativity” and “different intensity of agreement” in international law was already evident. Not believing in the possibility of a dual binary choice between hard and soft law, (Abbott and Snidal, 2000: 421–422) tried to make a distinction: “hard law (...) refers to legally binding obligations that are precise (or can be made precise through adjudication or the issuance of detailed regulations) and that delegate authority for interpreting and implementing the law. (...); soft law begins once legal arrangements are weakened along one or more of the dimensions of obligation, precision, and delegation”.

Notwithstanding the soft side of strategic planning, embedded in its performative rather than conformative planning rationale, soft planning raises the bar significantly. Considering all three dimensions (Abbott and Snidal, 2000) - obligation, precision, and delegation, literature on soft planning points to a greater coexistence between binding and non-binding, regulatory and non-regulatory policy instruments, while setting the stage for the emergence of informal planning arrangements and instruments alongside statutory planning policies (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2008: 143). An example is the innumerable territorial strategies and other urban policy documents that emerge at a sub-

national level fostered by EU initiatives. This is the case of the dominant EU Cohesion Policy and the provision of Structural Funds, despite the fact that spatial planning is not a formal European competence (Cavaco and Costa, 2019; Luukkonen and Moilanen, 2012; Purkarthofer, 2016). In contrast to traditional mandatory and coercive policy tools, these policies promote the flexibilization of planning norms, the voluntary and non-mandatory nature of planning provisions, and the non-statutory and often unofficial character of planning arrangements set by assignment or delegation (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007, 2009; Kaczmarek, 2018). However, informal planning instruments also raise questions on the legitimacy of planning approaches (Stead, 2014). As (Healey (1997: 215) highlights, “a policy-driven approach helps to render the exercise of governance power in a society legitimate”. The way soft planning policies foster spatial planning de-regulation puts its democratic legitimacy at risk, especially if monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are absent. In short, while opening new windows for policy innovation in view of greater adaptation, efficiency, and effectiveness of planning instruments, rarely possible in regulatory planning orthodoxy, soft planning also poses risks to the legitimacy of planning processes as a reliable and accountable activity.

Spaces and scales in soft planning

If the question is to examine whether and how a “soft turn” is taking place in planning theory and practice, then what has changed in the geography of planning practices? Davoudi and Strange (2009) argue that planning systems evolve based on different conceptions of “space” and “place.” This impacts the way plan-making is addressed and territory understood. At the end of the 20th century, a new sense of spatiality emerged as the positivist conception of an absolute three-dimensional space, built on Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics, gave way to a non-Euclidian vision of a relational and multidimensional space, with variable geometry, spatially fluid and conditioned by everyday cultural and social processes. This rationale informs the “spatial turn” in planning and the rise of strategic spatial planning. Territory took center stage as a co-ordination platform of strategy-making in a multi-level governance framework. As the notion of space changed, planning scales became fluid and overlapped, shifting “from being ‘hard-edged’ containers to flexible and less-defined spaces” (Galland and Elinbaum, 2015: 69). In contrast to the traditional form of physical planning oriented towards the design and regulation of administrative-bound spaces, strategic spatial planning has taken a collaborative and multi-scalar approach, where functionally driven territorial dynamics, as well as the geography of flows and networks, gain ground over the nested hierarchy of bounded territorial units jurisdictionally attached to a cascade-like system (Galland and Elinbaum, 2015).

(Allmendinger 2016: 164) differentiates “territorial space” and “relational space”: the former is “the jurisdictional space by which the administration and politics of planning are bounded”; the latter is “extraterritorial,” “open, porous and comprised of dynamic and varied actor networks”, exposing planning to other non-territorial dimensions beyond local issues. In short, territorial space fosters the “predict and provide” rationality of land-

use planning while relational space embodies a governance-based spatial planning rationale.

In light of this “spatial turn,” the territorial rescaling of planning spaces has become a hot topic of debate (Brenner, 2003; Gualini, 2010; Mackinnon, 2010; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999; Roodbol-Mekkes and Van en Brink, 2015). Some authors stress the “relativization of scale,” questioning the loss of primacy of central State powers and the unbundling between territoriality and state sovereignty whenever the geographic scales of institutional power become fluid and borders no longer stand hand in hand with sovereignty (Faludi, 2013; Gualini, 2010; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999). Others emphasize the processes of “de-territorialization” or “re-territorialization,” that is, the redistribution of powers and responsibilities across different scales and tiers of government (Roodbol-Mekkes and Van en Brink, 2015; Tewdwr-jones et al., 2010). Others still focus on the continuous rise and fall of planning scales, recognizing the emergence of alternative ad-hoc planning spaces, at either a supra-national, sub-national, regional, or supra-municipal scale (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007; Illsley et al., 2010; Purkarthofer, 2018; Stead, 2014).

In this scenario, soft spaces conceptually translate the emergence of these new ad-hoc planning spaces. Running on a myriad of alternative scales, rather than on those of statutory powers, soft spaces both feature the creation of new levels of geographical resolution to address specific territorial phenomena in a place-based and tailor-made view, and host a new entangled geometry of governance arrangements and relationships making them “new spaces of governance.”

However, Allmendinger (2016) argues that soft spaces are more than the simple materialization of a relational notion of space within spatial planning practices, as they escape the territorial and relational spaces duality. “Soft space” provides a third notion of space, between the fixity and territoriality of statutory hard spaces and the fuzziness of governance relational spaces. These are, therefore, functional planning arenas that provide “temporary alignments of space” to deal with particular territorial issues under specific time-limited circumstances. Paasi and Zimmerbauer (2016) add that boundaries are not exactly fuzzy or porous, but rather “penumbral borders” due to their occasional character. These not only reflect the changing temporality of social practices, as they are multi-layered (administrative, social, economic, juridical, cultural, etc.) and, therefore, capable of overlapping different degrees of permeability whenever “activated in both context- and time-contingent junctures” (2016: 87).

Soft spaces are thus often referred to as “spaces of delivery,” a vehicle for the rather “pragmatic” and “opportunistic” planning rationale of soft planning. Without disclaiming the necessary spatial fixation of bounded powers, there is enough elasticity to embrace these together with a number of other extraterritorial arrangements and external issues, in a pliable and stretchy, yet utilitarian and down-to-earth manner. As such, paradoxically, soft spaces enable both neoliberal advancements and promising planning experimentation and disruption.

Final remarks

Despite its increasing dissemination, there is no explicit theory of soft planning so far. Nevertheless, we believe that an implicit theory of soft planning is taking shape. Focusing on five core analytical dimensions (ethos, governance, politics, policies, and spaces and scales), we critically reviewed how the debate about soft spaces and soft planning has evolved vis-a-vis the orthodoxy of strategic spatial planning. We aimed to expand soft planning as a *construct* and contribute to its clarification as a meaningful *concept* for the development of contemporary planning theory. In fact, soft planning is likely to be one of the most significant concepts and debates for understanding the deep-rooted challenges and transition planning is facing nowadays. This article aims to shed light on such “soft turn” and pave the way for rethinking and enhancing current planning practices.

The debate on soft planning is intertwined with that of strategic spatial planning and the “spatial turn” of the 1990s. More than a “revolution” (to use Metzger’s (2011) words), soft planning builds on the principles and flagships of strategic spatial planning (e.g., strategy-making; policy integration; collaborative governance; long-term visioning; development-led action). However, a transition is underway. This “soft turn” rests on a set of emerging, and often troublesome, trends (e.g., the rise of informal planning; territorial rescaling; blurring and entanglement of borders; depoliticization; neoliberalization; democratic atrophy; discursive normalization) that raise a rather paradoxical and contradictory dilemma unseen in the enthusiastic times of strategic planning. Like strategic spatial planning (cf. Albrechts, 2006), soft planning raises a normative controversy about the underlying values of planning practices. Yet, soft planning raises the bar and places normative ethics at the core of the discussion by opposing two often clashing stances. While some (e.g., Allmendinger, Haugthon, Olesen) emphasize the devious side of soft planning by advocating for obscure processes of neoliberal hijacking, others, on the contrary, adopt a more optimistic view, keeping confidence on soft planning approaches and lessons learned (e.g., Faludi; Purkarthopher); by refusing “resignation” and looking into solutions to mitigate risks and re-establish the democratic foundation of spatial planning (e.g., Metzger); in short, by highlighting the rare room for governance, policy, and institutional innovation that soft planning entails.

The question though is not to choose between the two sides, but rather address this conflictual quandary in its several dimensions and envisage how divergent perspectives may contribute to better address today’s planning challenges. “Soft” is actually a metaphor that accommodates this dual-sided ethos of soft planning: either perverse permissiveness or progressive flexibility. As such, this paper can raise awareness on both the risks and the opportunities planning is facing today, potentially presenting planning theory and practice. The consolidation of soft planning as both a *construct* and a *concept* is, therefore, a meaningful step not only to induce positive change in planning practices, but also to disseminate this debate to other geographic contexts.

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ORCID iDs

Cristina Cavaco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3074-8066>

João Mourato  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0891-4897>

João Pedro Costa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6069-7052>

João Ferrão  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7729-1908>

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Author Biographies

Cristina Cavaco Architect, Associate Professor at the Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa and researcher at the Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design, where she develops research in spatial planning, urban development and policies. She has coordinated several funded research projects. Between 2012 and 2016 she served as a Deputy Director General the Directorate General of Territorial Development, where she has been in charge matters such as territorial development, spatial planning and urban policies. She was the Portuguese Representative in several European and International Programs such as the ESPON 2020, URBACT III and HABITAT III, and an expert in the European Commission's Expert Group of Territorial Cohesion and Urban Matters and the European Environment Agency's EIONET National Reference Center on Land Use and Spatial Planning.

João Mourat Research fellow and lecturer at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. Having completed a PhD in Town Planning at the Bartlett School of Planning—UCL University College London, he researches the evolution of Planning as a public policy in Portugal, with a particular focus on the dynamics of institutional adaptation and policy learning in face of the challenges of a socioecological transition towards sustainability. João works and publishes at the intersection of planning and transitions' theory with an emphasis on the issues of power, agency and the politics of transitions' governance.

João Pedro Cost Architect (TU Lisbon, 1993), Master on Contemporary Architectonic Culture (TU Lisbon, 1998) and PhD on Urbanism (TU Catalonia, Barcelona, 2007). He has the habilitation to full professor in Urbanism (ULisboa, 2012). He is Associate Professor of Urbanism at the Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa, where he is the President of the Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design and the Coordinator of the Urbanism PhD Program. He develops the research activity in the areas of adaptation to climate change, waterfront rehabilitation, urban and spatial planning policies and urban morphology. He is the guest editor of the special issue "City and Port: Waterfront Integration for Sustainability," in the journal *Sustainability*. In the 2017 municipal elections in Portugal, he was candidate to Vice-President of the City of Lisbon, by the Social Democrat Party, being a Councilman in the opposition at the City Council (without executive functions).

João Ferrão Geographer, Research Professor at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. He has over 30 years of experience in the areas of human geography and planning. He has been the national coordinator of several international networks and projects under different EU and Latin American funding programmes. He advised the

OECD and coordinated various public policy assessment studies for the Portuguese Government and European Commission. Ferrão was Secretary of State for Spatial Planning and Cities, President of the Portuguese Association for Regional Development and Pro-Rector of the University of Lisbon. He was a member of the Portuguese Scientific Council for the Social Sciences and Humanities. He is a member of the National Council for the Environment and Sustainability and of several scientific academies, including the Academia Europaea and the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon.