

Urban Planning Across Europe: Insights into Planning Cultures of Switzerland, Greece, and Serbia

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Abstract: The research explores the planning cultures in three distinct European contexts: Solothurn (Switzerland), Patras (Greece), and Belgrade (Serbia). Grounded in the conceptual framework of planning culture, which posits that spatial planning practices are deeply influenced by societal, institutional, and professional contexts, the analysis examines three key dimensions: social setting, planning process, and planning environment. The multiple case study methodological approach employed in this research illuminates both the diversity and commonalities in planning cultures, highlighting the importance of cultivating context-sensitive planning practices. The Solothurn case exemplifies a decentralised, consensus-based planning culture rooted in Swiss direct democracy, where collaborative processes and independent expertise are pivotal in shaping innovative spatial solutions. In contrast, the Patras and Belgrade cases reveal the challenges of centralised decision-making, administrative fragmentation, and the marginalisation of planning professionals and public participation in Greece and Serbia, respectively. On the one hand, these findings underscore the profound influence of political, economic, and cultural factors on the conceptualisation, implementation, and experience of spatial planning across diverse European contexts. On the other hand, the analysis suggests that effective spatial planning must be tailored to local cultural environments rather than applying universal models. The research ultimately contributes to the broader discourse on the cultural embeddedness of planning and offers insights for practitioners, policymakers, and scholars seeking to develop more nuanced, adaptive approaches to addressing contemporary urban challenges.

Keywords: Urban planning, planning cultures, cultural embeddedness, multiple case study, Solothurn, Patras, Belgrade.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1990s marked a significant shift in spatial and urban planning, emphasising macro-scale beyond nation-state approaches and strengthening transnational networks across Europe. Network-building in other policy domains, such as the Transnational European Transport Networks (TEN-T), primarily influenced this shift. Consequently, core spatial and urban planning policies, beginning with the European Spatial Development Perspective (CEC, 1999) and followed by the Territorial Agendas of the European Union (EU, 2007, 2011, 2020), emphasised principles formulated to enhance horizontal cooperation among various sectors and vertical coordination among institutional entities across European geographical scales. Such evolution in the planning approach led to a proliferation of studies focusing on the international dimension of planning. For example, some scholars focused on examining the influences of political, social, administrative, and legal frameworks on planning systems and traditions (CEC, 1997; Farinós Dasi, 2006; Nadin *et al.*, 2024; Newman & Thornley, 1996; Reimer *et al.*, 2014), while others aimed to elucidate the concept of the Europeanisation of planning (Dühr *et al.*, 2007, 2016; Faludi, 2014, 2016).

However, while providing useful overviews of planning contexts across Europe, these studies were limited by their emphasis on formal planning structures. By focusing primarily on legal and administrative features and statutory instruments, they failed to consider “the role of cultural traditions, values, habits, and semantics” (Othengrafen, 2010: 88) in explaining various spatial developments in Europe. This shortcoming highlighted the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding planning practices across Europe. Accordingly, scholars have increasingly turned to the concept of planning culture. Rather than relying on singular authorities (e.g., any intergovernmental or supranational body) or purposes, the evolving culture of spatial planning (COMMIN, 2009; During & van Dam, 2007; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009a) emerged as a crucial factor in elucidating differences in spatial planning approaches in Europe, eventually opening new avenues for transboundary cooperation. More precisely, planning practices are culturally embedded or, in other words, deeply rooted in a society’s culture, reflecting its unique values, norms, and traditions (Othengrafen, 2010). This means that different communities have their ways of approaching urban planning, based on their specific cultural backgrounds. By studying how various communities use their local institutions to shape their planning processes, it is possible to gain valuable insights into how planning

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systems work in different cultural contexts (Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013; Reimer, 2013). Such a planning culture approach recognises that managing uncertainties in urban planning is a shared responsibility. It moves away from the idea that there is only one correct way to plan cities, typically imposed from the top down. Instead, it acknowledges that different cultures may have different, equally valid approaches to urban planning. By investigating planning approaches through the lens of their specific temporal and spatial contexts (Healey, 2011) and by scrutinising the methodologies employed in different settings, it is possible to uncover distinct planning cultures affected by the intertwined relationships between 'soft' factors, such as intangible societal factors and 'hard' frameworks like formal institutional structures (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009a; Othengrafen, 2012; Sanyal, 2005;). In other words, it is vital to reveal the nuanced ways in which planning is conceptualised and implemented across various societies.

This paper aims to explain how individual visions, stakeholders' everyday routines, and deep-rooted societal values affect various planning practices. By attending to individual perceptions, knowledge, behaviour, collective actions, and social norms and beliefs, this paper first depicts how culture influences planning practice in various contexts and then elucidates the nature of the planning process across diverse European planning environments. Taking the three case studies into account, the analysis concerns the following research questions: (1) What broader societal conditions and fundamental beliefs shape specific planning practices? (2) How do the relevant actors/agents contribute to the planning process? (3) What is the dominant planners' position in the respective planning processes?

The paper applies the following structure. A conceptual framework of planning cultures follows a succinct introductory overview. After a brief note on the methodological approach applied, the paper's core section focuses on elucidating the planning cultures in Switzerland, Greece, and Serbia by illustrating contemporary planning practices in Solothurn, Patras, and Belgrade, respectively. The paper concludes by comparing planning approaches from various contexts, highlighting both commonalities and distinctions, thus demonstrating how deeply planning and development are influenced by their cultural environments.

2. PLANNING CULTURE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding spatial development in Europe requires more than examining the formal planning system's institutional, legal, and regulatory frameworks, giving structure to the statutory rules. On the contrary, it is crucial to consider 'everyday planning practice,' which is influenced by hidden factors and unwritten rules deeply embedded in the values, norms, beliefs, visions and behaviours of actors involved in the planning process. Different scholars highlight different cultural aspects of importance for spatial and urban planning. Sanyal (2005) highlights different socio-economic patterns and various perceptions of planning tasks and responsibilities. Friedmann (2005: 366) emphasises both the formal and informal ways of understanding, formalising, and implementing spatial planning tasks. Faludi (2005: 285-6) stresses the roles and attitudes of planners regarding the appropriate role of the state, market forces, and civil society in influencing social outcomes. Getimis (2012: 29) stresses the "role, perceptions, values, interpretations, beliefs, attitudes and collective ethos of the actors involved in planning processes."

Given the previous, planning culture could be understood as a multifaceted concept comprising several 'cultural segments' or 'cultural layers.' It can be elaborated through two primary dimensions: (1) a horizontal dimension, which includes visible elements like planning processes and decision-making arrangements, and (2) a vertical dimension, encompassing underlying social structures and governance models. The horizontal dimension is more susceptible to change, while the vertical dimension tends to be more stable and deeply rooted (Gullestrup, 2009).

However, despite the ambitious attempt to expand beyond the classical 'planning system' concept, many contemporary studies remain at the level of general statements on institutional structures (Fürst, 2009), while others focus on only a few cultural aspects or categories (Ernste, 2012; Getimis, 2012), hence falling short of providing a comprehensive operational framework for analysing specific planning cultures in different localities. Nevertheless, the 'culturised planning model' proposed by Knieling and Othengrafen (2009b) offers a valuable framework for understanding the influence of culture on spatial planning. More precisely, this model revolves around three key cultural aspects:

1. Societal environment: underlying and unconscious beliefs, thoughts and feelings that affect planning;
2. Planning environment: shared assumptions, values and cognitive frames taken for granted by members of the planning profession;
3. Planning artefacts: tangible planning products, structures and processes.

Despite being criticised for various reasons, e.g., being static and not reflecting differences over time and between geographical scales (Purkarthofer *et al.*, 2021), using interchangeable variables (Getimis, 2012) and neglecting individual perceptions (Ernste, 2012), the 'culturised planning model' has its merits. Briefly, the social setting in which planning occurs is influenced by various systemic factors, ranging from political forces to economic incentives. The complexity of these interacting systems necessitates social learning across diverse institutional and organisational networks. Cultural awareness is crucial for spatial planners, as it enables them to understand better the context in which they operate. This awareness facilitates continuous capacity-building and allows planners to conduct socially justified activities, resulting in more sustainable spatial solutions. The concept of 'cultural embeddedness' (Alexander in Reimer & Blotevogel, 2012) or 'spatial consciousness' (Healey, 2006), i.e., the degree to which concepts of place, spatial organisation, and territorial identity are integrated into policy cultures, profoundly influences spatial development patterns within specific territories. Finally, effective planning requires not only expertise but also experiential knowledge and skills. Engaging stakeholders in the planning process while incorporating scientifically and ethically informed impacts demands deliberation. Such a deliberative learning process can lead to innovative planning practices that enhance people's ability to shape the places they inhabit.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multiple case study approach to examining planning cultures in three distinct European contexts: Solothurn (Switzerland), Patras (Greece), and Belgrade (Serbia). The overall aim is to find out how the projects responded to contextual demands (e.g., political ideologies, economic (re)structuring), changes to the planning approach in terms of involving and/or ignoring the influence of

numerous stakeholders, and the position, roles, and responsibilities of planning professionals. In all three cases, the initial/idea phase that garnered much of debate about various complex urban development projects will be elucidated. More precisely, the focus is on the following examples: the revitalisation of the brownfield site in Solothurn, the redevelopment of railway infrastructure in Patras, and a megaproject development in Belgrade. The cases were selected for pragmatic reasons, as the author has closely observed their progress over the years. This long-term engagement allows for an in-depth understanding of their context-dependence, the nature of the planning approaches applied, and the role of planning expertise. Additionally, these cases represent planning practices rooted in historically and ideologically distinct traditions, providing a rich basis for exploring how planning cultures are embedded within diverse contexts.

The research is grounded in the conceptual framework of planning culture, which posits that spatial planning practices are deeply influenced by various contextual rules as well as intangible factors. Accordingly, the analysis is structured around three key dimensions of planning culture, as identified in the literature (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009b), to elucidate the following variables:

1. Social setting: This dimension examines the broader societal context, including political systems, economic conditions, and cultural norms that shape planning practices;
2. Planning process: This aspect focuses on the procedural elements of planning, including decision-making mechanisms, stakeholder involvement, and the implementation of planning policies;
3. Planning environment: This dimension explores the professional context of planning, including the role and status of planners, their education and skills, and their relationships with other actors in the planning process.

Data for each case study was gathered through an extensive examination of a wide range of documents. A triangulation method was employed in data collection to ensure an objective comprehension of urban developments in Solothurn, Patras, and Belgrade. Specifically, the data collection involved: (1) official documents such as national laws, plans, strategies, regulations, and contracts that reflect the stance of

state, regional, and local authorities as well as the perspectives of planning professionals, (2) secondary sources, including academic articles on contemporary urban development in Switzerland, Greece, and Serbia that offer a critical view of current urban practices, and (3) articles from newsletters, media reports, and personal statements, which convey the broader narrative surrounding the selected cases.

The analysis utilises a qualitative methodology, aimed at identifying and interpreting key themes and patterns within each aspect of planning culture across the three case studies. This includes: (1) documentary analysis of primary sources, (2) content analysis of academic literature addressing current developmental challenges, and (3) discourse analysis of newspaper articles, media coverage and statements. The multiple case study framework facilitates the recognition of both similarities and differences in planning cultures, underscoring how various societal, institutional, and professional contexts shape spatial planning practices. This approach offers a detailed understanding of how planning cultures both influence and are influenced by their specific environments, thereby contributing to the broader discussion on the cultural embeddedness of planning practices in Europe.

4. PLANNING CULTURES ACROSS EUROPE

4.1. The Collaborative Planning Culture in Solothurn, Switzerland

In 2008, the closure of the Norwegian wood-processing factory Borregaard AG in the Canton

Solothurn, spanning over the river Aare across a 107-hectare site belonging to Riedholz and Luterbach municipalities (Figure 1), transformed a revenue-generating enterprise into a company with a distinct environmental burden on its immediate area, posing potential public health risks. Rather than deflecting responsibility or seeking national intervention, canton officials proactively coordinated the site's purchase in collaboration with three private employers. Such a response reflected an acute awareness of Switzerland's limited flat land resources and a commitment to sustaining economic prosperity. The cantonal Structural Plan, i.e., a framework plan for the area of the Canton Solothurn, had anticipated this eventuality as early as 2005, claiming the site to be of cantonal importance and, hence, laying the groundwork for the site's future redevelopment (Scholl *et al.*, 2013). This proactive planning exemplifies the well-established tradition of plan-making understood and accepted by all stakeholders involved, known as the test-planning procedure. The details on the planning process and planners' position depicted below illustrate the test-planning method applied to the Riedholz/Luterbach case throughout 2011 (Scholl *et al.*, 2013; Scholl, 2017).

4.1.1. Social Setting

The concept of pluralism is deeply embedded in the Swiss political ethos, manifested through directed democracy as the core principle. Consequently, Swiss decentralised spatial planning decision-making processes, informal planning approaches when addressing complex spatial challenges, and large



Figure 1: Ex-wood-processing factory area in Riedholz/Luterbach, Canton of Solothurn (2012).

Source: Mario Teuss.

citizen participation in planning practices through various initiatives and referenda are considered a norm (Keller *et al.*, 1996; Scholl, 2017). Largely due to the country's limited land reserves (Swiss Federal Council, 2012) and the judicial stipulation from 2014 to foster infill development instead of construction on Greenfield areas (RPG SR700), the hallmark of Swiss spatial planning culture is the 'bottom-up' cooperation between various institutional levels and the collaboration among different sectors – public, private, and civil (Perić *et al.*, 2023). In other words, the Swiss decision-making style is highly decentralised, prioritising collective responsibility and multisectoral cooperation. The Brownfield redevelopment process in Solothurn exemplified this collaborative approach, resulting in modifications to the cantonal Structural Plan, hence demonstrating how cooperation thrives within a consensus-based direct democracy (Staub, 2011).

The robust economic position of Swiss cantons significantly enhances the efficiency of planning procedures. The Solothurn case exemplifies this: when private investment in land development was scarce, cantonal authorities, recognising the site's strategic importance, intervened by purchasing the land to halt further deterioration (Staub, 2011). This action underscores the unique power distribution among various sectors in Switzerland, emphasising the pivotal role of cantons. Their financial autonomy enables them to prioritise optimal land use over expedient, potentially compromising solutions (Papamichail & Perić, 2023). Moreover, cantons demonstrate remarkable institutional capacity in coordinating future initiatives both laterally (across various cantonal departments) and hierarchically (fostering an ongoing dialogue with municipalities and federal spatial planning entities). This democratic, cooperative governance model – characterised by decentralised authority and the cultivation of diverse stakeholder networks – establishes an ideal framework for collaborative planning endeavours (Scholl *et al.*, 2013). Such an approach not only ensures balanced development but also promotes long-term sustainability in spatial planning.

4.1.2. Planning Process

Swiss planning methodologies diverge from standardised protocols, instead favouring bespoke solutions that emphasise pragmatism and action-oriented strategies (Keller *et al.*, 1996; Scholl *et al.*, 2013). The Solothurn project exemplified this approach through its transparent stakeholder engagement

process, which carefully considered the diverse interests of citizens, private enterprises, multi-level authorities, and independent experts. Notably, despite inherent power imbalances, the concerns of less influential stakeholders were given due consideration (Staub, 2011). The canton played a central role in orchestrating this process, exerting influence both indirectly through the cantonal Structural Plan guidelines and directly by initiating and actively participating in the planning process. This involvement included providing initial funding for the participatory planning process and appointing expert committee members to offer specialised guidance on potential site development trajectories.

To mitigate potential abuses of this influential position, a highly transparent planning process was implemented, incorporating several key elements: 1) clear role delineation, 2) recurring consultation forums, 3) engagement of multiple competing project teams, and 4) collaborative synthesis of various proposals into a final strategy (Scholl *et al.*, 2013). These principles form the cornerstone of the 'test-planning' method – an informal yet highly effective planning approach not codified in law but integral to fostering efficient and meaningful planning outcomes (Scholl, 2017). This methodology facilitates collective intelligence among stakeholders (Staub, 2011) and ensures that collaboration is driven by mutually acknowledged challenges (Grams, 2011). Within this framework, planning experts refrain from imposing unilateral solutions, instead prioritising consensus-building as the foundation of successful test-planning initiatives (Papamichail & Perić, 2018). This approach not only enhances the quality of planning outcomes but also builds trust and shared ownership among diverse stakeholders.

4.1.3. Planning Environment

The Swiss planning landscape, underpinned by direct democracy and a strong commitment to sustainable spatial development, affords planners considerable autonomy. This environment encourages the cultivation of innovative planning concepts and individualised approaches (Scholl, 2008). The successful redevelopment of Solothurn's brownfield site was made possible through the engagement of a specialised expert cohort and a meticulously structured planning process.

Alongside key stakeholders such as cantonal officials, private investors, and local community

representatives, significant emphasis was placed on integrating independent experts from beyond the cantonal administration. Despite the complexity introduced by multiple stakeholders, the process maintained its efficiency through a well-defined organisational structure, stratified into strategic and operational tiers. At the strategic level, an executive board comprising cantonal representatives held primary decision-making authority. The operational level was spearheaded by an expert committee, composed of both cantonal and external specialists, tasked with 1) formulating goals, vision, and strategy, and 2) evaluating proposals from various project teams based on predetermined criteria (Scholl *et al.*, 2013).

The expert committee emerged as the linchpin of the entire process, serving as the primary mediator. This multidisciplinary team, equipped with both technical expertise and advanced mediation skills, fulfilled dual roles: advising the executive committee and identifying optimal planning solutions (Grams, 2011; Staub, 2011). The positioning of planning expertise in a role that transcended conventional boundaries proved instrumental to the success of this planning approach. This expanded role of planners not

only enhanced the technical quality of the solutions but also facilitated smoother stakeholder negotiations and more holistic decision-making processes. Furthermore, this approach has set a precedent for future planning initiatives in Switzerland, emphasising the importance of integrating diverse expertise and fostering collaborative problem-solving in complex urban development projects.

4.2. The Fragmented Planning Culture in Patras, Greece

The proposed railway link between Athens and Patras, Peloponnese's principal urban centre, is a crucial infrastructure project aimed at mitigating the longstanding East-West transportation disparity in Greece. Despite its strategic importance not only in national terms but also for the entire Europe, and, hence, great policy and financial support from the European Union, the past two decades have seen protracted deliberations and inconclusive studies regarding the integration of railway infrastructure into Patras' urban landscape. This deadlock is largely attributable to the fragmented administration of waterfront zones along the existing rail corridor (Figure



Figure 2: Central Railway Station in Patras (2015).

Source: Theodora Papamichail.

2), resulting in disjointed decision-making processes. Such an administrative complexity has fostered a reluctance to collaborate among key stakeholders, including local government, the Hellenic Railways Organisation (OSE), and its real estate arm, ERGOSE (Papamichail & Perić, 2018), exemplifying broader challenges in Greek spatial planning and infrastructure development relying upon the (foreign) private sector initiatives under the umbrella of 'capital urbanisation' (Perić & D'hondt, 2022). The following lines elucidate the specificities of planning debates around Patras' railway infrastructure development in its initial phase from 2015 until 2017.

4.2.1. Social Setting

Greece's administrative planning structure draws inspiration from the Napoleonic model, characterised by a 'fused system' that emphasises national-level planning while accommodating municipal plans (Newman & Thornley, 1996). More precisely, while the central government plays a dominant role in setting overall planning policies and guidelines, local municipalities still have some authority to create and implement their own plans within this national framework. Nevertheless, such a system has never been fully implemented in the Greek context. Although the 1990s saw reforms aimed at devolving planning responsibilities to regional and local entities, current planning decisions remain tethered to national spatial planning directives (Perić, 2016; Perić & D'hondt, 2022). The national ministry maintains primary authority in formulating urban plans, while municipalities' roles are largely confined to issuing building permits, reflecting a planning culture deeply rooted in urbanism tradition. Consequently, Greek planning predominantly focuses on localised place-making, with a conspicuous absence of comprehensive strategic planning at the national level (Papaioannou & Nikolakopoulou, 2016; Papamichail, 2019). This framework has led to a marked inefficiency in Greek spatial planning practices.

The ongoing economic turbulence has further exacerbated planning challenges, creating an unstable fiscal environment that promotes fragmented decision-making across various planning echelons and stakeholders, often resulting in ad-hoc development initiatives (Pappas *et al.*, 2013; Perić & D'hondt, 2022). The planning sector's vision has been compromised by recent trends towards privatisation of planning functions, outsourcing, and growth-centric planning strategies (Reimer *et al.*, 2014). The establishment of

the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF) epitomises this privatisation trend, transferring numerous public service responsibilities to private entities. This shift has profoundly impacted Greek planning and development, often leading to the regularisation of unauthorised constructions and the expansion of urban master plan boundaries (Papamichail & Perić, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive, collaborative framework among administrative entities and public bodies in charge of strategic spatial planning has resulted in conflicts and delays in critical infrastructure projects (Papamichail, 2015, 2019). The challenges surrounding the integration of the railway line into Patras' urban core serve as a telling example of these systemic issues.

4.2.2. Planning Process

The predominance of top-down decision-making in plan approval and implementation has created an environment that stifles participatory and collaborative planning efforts. Despite initiatives since the 1990s to align Greek planning with the European Union's priorities and goals by introducing new stakeholder engagement mechanisms (Giannakourou, 2011), the development of planning policies and instruments remains neither intersectoral nor interdisciplinary. Notably, the overlap of responsibilities and interests across administrative tiers hinders collaborative approaches (Zifou, 2015). As a result, Greek spatial planning is characterised by limited citizen participation mechanisms and inadequate conflict resolution strategies among various planning levels and actors (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2016).

In Patras, the conflicts were primarily rooted in the administrative fragmentation of the waterfront area, leading to a lack of cooperation among responsible authorities (Papamichail, 2015). As local authorities had limited influence over future railway development planning, the Greek Ministry of Transportation proposed three scenarios for railway development in Patras, ostensibly to address municipal concerns. These options included bypass, underground, and ground-level solutions (Papamichail & Perić, 2018). The core discussions on selecting the optimal scenario involved various stakeholders, including port authorities, environmental groups, political parties, academic institutions, and local community organisations. Notably, key players such as OSE, ERGOSE, and planning experts were excluded from these deliberations. As a result, the debate degenerated into political posturing, with support for

ambitious yet potentially unsustainable projects like the €700 million bypass proposal, without considering an integrated urban development model. Such a process once again highlighted the fragmented nature of decision-making and the prevalence of top-down approaches, lacking genuine collaboration. Consequently, spatial planning in Greece tends to be product-oriented, suffering from a lack of coordination among actors regarding institutional boundaries and being devoid of effective monitoring mechanisms (Pappas *et al.*, 2013; Papamichail, 2019; Perić & D'hondt, 2022).

4.2.3. Planning Environment

The marginalisation of planning experts in discussions about railway solutions that will significantly shape Patras' urban future underscored the diminished status of professional planning in Greece (Papamichail & Perić, 2018). This situation arose from two primary factors. First, local spatial planners lack the formal authority to propose strategically visionary solutions, as strategic planning is centralised within national ministries, despite their often-ineffective outcomes. Local planners are largely restricted to processing building permits and supporting decision-makers, primarily from the national government or the private sector (Othengrafen, 2010). The requirement for urban plans to conform to national guidelines, which are essentially formulated by the ministry, leaves little room for local planners to implement innovative approaches or exercise professional autonomy (Perić, 2016). This centralised structure presents significant obstacles to introducing integrated spatial and transport models, representing a truly strategic planning approach (Papamichail, 2019).

The second factor contributing to planners' weak position is rooted in their educational background. Specialised degrees in spatial planning have only been available in Greece since the beginning of new millennium (Othengrafen, 2010). Currently, the majority of spatial planning tasks are undertaken by architects, whose training emphasises urban design over comprehensive strategic planning. This focus on the built environment often results in a lack of holistic planning approaches. Moreover, skills considered essential for planners in Western contexts, such as negotiation, mediation, and facilitation, are largely underdeveloped in the Greek planning environment (Papaioannou & Nikolakopoulou, 2016). Public participation in planning processes is minimal, with citizen voices often only emerging when personal interests are directly threatened. Meanwhile, planners frequently find themselves sidelined in debates dominated by more influential actors (Perić & D'hondt, 2022).

4.3. The Authoritarian Planning Culture in Belgrade, Serbia

The Belgrade Waterfront project, initiated during a political campaign in 2012 as a flagship project of the country's then-largest opposition party, faced a heated three-year debate on its merits before its construction officially began in October 2015 with laying the cornerstone for a 90-hectare development along the riverbank (Figure 3). This project, which spans a 30-year development timeline, is strategically positioned near the confluence of two rivers and the historic city centre. Consequently, it garnered significant attention, not only locally but also regionally and nationally, attracting primarily foreign investment, particularly from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Perić, 2020).



Figure 3: The area of the Belgrade Waterfront project in its early construction phase (2016).

Source: Google Earth.

4.3.1. Social Setting

Serbia, a transitional, post-socialist country, faces the dual challenges of decentralising power through the devolution of spatial planning responsibilities while simultaneously adapting to the pressures of a neoliberal agenda (Vujošević, 2010; Vujošević *et al.*, 2012). The decentralisation is, however, greatly endangered as, since 2019, Serbia has held the status of a hybrid regime, i.e., the regime between autocracy and democracy (Zeković *et al.*, 2023). The Belgrade Waterfront project starkly reveals the superficiality of the tendency toward decentralisation, as the city authorities, who should ideally set priorities for riverfront development within the city boundaries, find their influence severely curtailed. Instead of an intricate coordination between city and national governance in the realm of large-scale projects, it is the national government that imposes decisions on the local level (Perić & Maruna, 2022).

The Belgrade Waterfront project also epitomised a fervent embrace of neoliberals, often at the expense of the public interest (Perić, 2020). Negotiations for this project were heavily skewed in favour of the foreign developer's demands, with national interests being sidelined in favour of promises such as job creation and the involvement of Serbian subcontractors. The agreement between Eagle Hills, a UAE-based company, and the Serbian government obligated the state to undertake significant infrastructural changes, including the removal of existing railway infrastructure, investment in a new railway station, and the provision of comprehensive site infrastructure, all while leasing the land to the foreign investor for 99 years (OG RS 3/2013). This approach underscored the ad hoc nature of Serbia's spatial planning strategy, where the drive to attract large-scale foreign investments frequently preceded long-term public interest. As a result, the land has been increasingly commodified, paving the way for various financialisation mechanisms to infiltrate the urban landscape (Zeković *et al.*, 2023).

4.3.2. Planning Process

The global shift towards collaborative stakeholder involvement in spatial development bypassed the Belgrade Waterfront project, where key decisions were made at the highest political levels, with the prime minister playing a central role. This 'political decisionism' (Zeković & Maričić, 2022) effectively excluded public debate and marginalised a broad range of stakeholders, including the professional planning community. Planners, although attempting to

advocate for public interest, were ineffective in influencing the project due to their outdated understanding of societal needs and failure to adapt their professional roles (Perić, 2020). The political marginalisation of planners was pronounced, as they were deemed inadequate in addressing the needs of contemporary Serbian society, which increasingly revolved around economic rather than societal benefits (Perić & Maruna, 2022). For example, planners from the Belgrade Urban Planning Institute, a public planning office, were engaged only to translate the project designed by the international planning and design office Skidmore, Owings and Merrill into adjustments to the Belgrade Master Plan. Any further expertise was disregarded, reflecting the high-level politicians' complete disregard for professional expertise.

On the other hand, the close feedback between the two national governments (Serbia and the UAE), and between Serbian high-level politicians and Eagle Hills, a private company backed by the UAE government, strongly influenced the planning process. By prioritising private interests over public interests (OG RS 34/2015), the Serbian planning approach saw the emergence of neo-performative planning, where projects took precedence over strategic planning (Zeković *et al.*, 2023). The 'plan follows the project' logic applied in the Belgrade Waterfront project demonstrated a tendency to jeopardize the Serbian planning approach in the long run, as evidenced by current urban developments across Belgrade (Zeković & Maričić, 2022). Finally, combined with civil society's limited success in highlighting the project's legal and ethical shortcomings, this project underscored a broader disregard for democratic processes in urban development (Maruna, 2015).

4.3.3. Planning Environment

Contrasting with the Yugoslav era, where planning professionals were integral to the decision-making process, valued for their multidisciplinary approaches, and recognised as guardians of the public interest (Blagojević & Perić, 2023), contemporary Serbian planners find themselves increasingly marginalised. The Belgrade Waterfront project exemplified how the once-dominant concept of public interest has been eroded, with planners struggling to address the demands of private interests (Perić, 2020). This was mainly due to a failure to evolve their professional expertise to meet the complexities of modern, pluralistic societies. By continuously clinging to

outdated methodologies, Serbian planners failed to adapt to the changing dynamics of stakeholder engagement (Perić & Maruna, 2022).

More precisely, the professional expertise of Serbian urban planners remains narrowly focused on technical aspects, such as plan production, at the expense of the broader, more complex issues of process management and stakeholder engagement. Primarily trained in technical faculties, they often lack the necessary skills in facilitation, mediation, and negotiation, which are crucial for effective planning in a pluralistic society. The response of the National Association of Architects (NAA) to the spatial concepts proposed by foreign architects for the Belgrade Waterfront project highlighted this limitation. The NAA's critique was focused on design quality, neglecting the broader strategic considerations and the multidisciplinary approaches necessary for effective urban planning (Perić, 2020). Such a narrow technical focus revealed a significant gap in the professional mindset, hindering the ability to address the complex demands of contemporary urban development (Maruna, 2015).

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of planning cultures in Solothurn, Patras, and Belgrade reveals significant variations in the way urban planning is conceptualised, implemented, and experienced across different European contexts. The study underscores the profound influence of social, political, and economic factors on planning practices, highlighting the concept of 'cultural embeddedness' in spatial development.

In Solothurn, a planning culture is characterised by decentralised decision-making, strong citizen participation, and a pragmatic, action-oriented approach. The Swiss case exemplifies a collaborative planning model where diverse stakeholders, including independent experts, play crucial roles in shaping spatial outcomes. Rooted in direct democracy and consensus-building, such an approach fosters innovative solutions and demonstrates the potential for effective brownfield redevelopment. The test-planning procedure employed in Solothurn showcases a flexible, inclusive approach to complex spatial challenges, allowing for the integration of various perspectives and expertise.

Contrastingly, the Patras case illustrates the challenges faced in a more centralised planning

system. Despite efforts towards decentralisation, Greek planning remains heavily influenced by national-level decisions, often leading to fragmented and ineffective outcomes. The prolonged conflicts surrounding the railway integration project in Patras highlight the consequences of administrative fragmentation and limited local autonomy in planning matters. The case also reveals the struggles of planning professionals to assert their expertise in a system that often prioritises political considerations over technical and strategic planning insights.

The Belgrade case presents a stark example of how rapid transitions in political and economic systems can shape planning culture. By demonstrating the vulnerabilities of planning processes to political influence and the challenges of balancing public interest with private investment in a post-socialist context, it also reveals the struggles of planning professionals to adapt to new realities and maintain relevance in a changing socio-economic landscape. The marginalisation of both professional planners and public input in favour of top-down, politically driven decision-making exemplifies the challenges faced in transitional planning contexts.

Comparing these cases through the lens of social setting, planning process, and planning environment reveals both striking differences and some underlying similarities.

Social Setting: The cases present a spectrum of governance approaches. Switzerland exemplifies a decentralised, consensus-based system rooted in direct democracy. This setting provides a fertile ground for collaborative planning, where various stakeholders' interests are considered and balanced. Notably, deliberation does not have to be part of the statutory planning procedures – informal planning is highly regarded in the Swiss direct democracy. In contrast, Greek policymaking is embedded in a more centralised framework despite attempts at decentralisation. The persistent influence of national-level decision-making illustrated by a clientelist approach often overshadows local initiatives and priorities. Serbia showcases a transitional post-socialist context, where political favouritism persists under market-oriented reforms, leading to the prioritisation of private interests over public good. A common thread across all cases is the challenge of balancing public interest with economic development pressures, albeit manifested differently in each context. In the Solothurn case, this balance is sought through inclusive processes, while in Patras

and Belgrade, economic imperatives often overshadow public interest considerations.

Planning Process: The planning processes in these cases reflect their respective social settings. Solothurn's test-planning approach emphasises stakeholder collaboration and transparent decision-making, allowing for the integration of various perspectives and fostering innovative solutions to complex spatial challenges. In contrast, Patras struggles with fragmented decision-making and limited local autonomy. The prolonged debates over railway integration demonstrate the inefficiencies arising from this fragmented approach. Dominated by top-down impositions of decisions brought by high-level politicians and the marginalisation of local (city) authorities, professional planners and public input, the Belgrade case exemplifies how political interests can override established planning procedures and public consultation processes. A shared challenge across all cases is the need to navigate complex stakeholder landscapes, though the strategies and outcomes vary significantly. Solothurn's approach actively seeks to engage diverse stakeholders, while Patras and Belgrade struggle to create meaningful platforms for stakeholder engagement.

Planning Environment: The role and status of planning professionals differ markedly across the cases. Swiss planners enjoy considerable autonomy and are valued for their expertise in facilitating collaborative processes. They are seen as key mediators in balancing diverse interests and technical considerations. Greek planners face limitations in strategic decision-making, often confined to technical roles. Political considerations frequently overshadow their expertise, limiting their ability to influence strategic spatial decisions. Similarly, Serbian planners struggle to adapt to new realities, clinging to outdated technical expertise while lacking skills in stakeholder engagement. The Belgrade case highlights how planners can be sidelined in major urban development projects when they fail to adapt to changing socio-economic contexts. In both cases, planners prove to be supportive actors at best, or passive observers at worst. A common theme is the evolving nature of planning expertise, with varying degrees of success in adapting to changing societal demands. While Swiss planners have successfully embraced roles as facilitators and mediators, their Greek and Serbian counterparts face challenges in redefining their professional identities in changing planning contexts.

The previous overview of similarities and differences in addressing complex planning problems across various socio-political and economic settings highlights how planning cultures are deeply embedded in their specific contexts yet also face similar challenges in adapting to contemporary planning paradigms. The methodological approach employed in this study proves valuable in unpacking the complexities of planning cultures. It allows for a nuanced exploration of how broader societal factors interact with specific planning practices and professional norms to shape spatial outcomes. The comparison reveals that while formal planning structures and processes may differ, the underlying challenges of balancing diverse interests, ensuring public participation, and adapting to changing socio-economic conditions are shared across different contexts.

However, the analysis also reveals limitations in the current conceptual framework of planning culture. While it provides a useful lens for comparing different contexts, it may not fully capture the dynamic nature of planning cultures, particularly in rapidly changing environments like post-socialist countries. Future research could benefit from a more explicitly temporal dimension, examining how planning cultures evolve over time in response to changing political, economic, and social conditions. The Belgrade case, in particular, highlights the need for frameworks that can better capture the complexities of transitional planning contexts.

Moreover, the study highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics in shaping planning cultures. The Belgrade case demonstrates how formal planning structures can be overridden by informal political processes, suggesting that future conceptualisations of planning culture should pay greater attention to the role of power and influence in shaping planning outcomes. This consideration is also relevant for the Greek case, where the interplay between national and local power structures significantly impacts planning processes and outcomes.

The comparative analysis also reveals the importance of institutional capacity and governance structures in shaping planning cultures. The Swiss case demonstrates how well-established democratic institutions and a culture of consensus-building can foster collaborative and innovative planning approaches. In contrast, the Greek and Serbian cases

highlight how institutional fragmentation and centralised power structures can hinder effective spatial planning.

To conclude, this comparative analysis reinforces the importance of cultural sensitivity in spatial planning, suggesting that effective planning approaches must be tailored to their specific cultural contexts, rather than applying universal models. For practitioners and policymakers, this implies a need for greater flexibility and adaptability in planning processes, as well as a deep engagement with local cultural norms and practices. The success of the Solothurn approach, for instance, cannot be directly transplanted to contexts like Belgrade or Patras without considering the underlying cultural and institutional differences. For scholars, this study points to the ongoing relevance of planning culture as a conceptual framework while also highlighting areas for further theoretical development. Future research could explore how planning cultures can be more effectively leveraged to promote sustainable and equitable urban development across diverse contexts. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine how planning cultures evolve over time, particularly in response to global challenges such as climate change, rapid urbanisation, and economic restructuring. The study also underscores the value of comparative research in illuminating both the diversity and commonalities in planning cultures across Europe. By understanding these variations and shared challenges, we can work towards more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to spatial planning that are better equipped to address the complex urban issues of the 21st century.

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