Moving forward Comparative Planning Studies: Beyond Planning Cultures and Institutionalism

Clemens de Olde*
Abstract

From the onset of the millennium comparative planning studies have entered a new phase. Inspired by a dissatisfaction with existing work, various perspectives have branched out beyond researching the formal aspects of planning systems into the cultural dimensions of planning practice. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the literature on these ‘cultural comparative planning studies’ that has appeared in the English-speaking world over the past fifteen years. Two strands can be identified in this body of work. On the one hand there is a perspective that views planning as a fundamentally cultural activity represented by the work under the heading of planning cultures. On the other side various authors point out the insufficiencies of this approach for research and propose institutional perspectives for researching planning practice. By discussing their fundamental assumptions the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches are discussed. The paper concludes by formulating a way of moving forward in comparative planning studies by fusing both perspectives.

Keywords: planning cultures; institutionalism; comparative research; culturised planning model;

Biographical note

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1. Introduction

Comparative spatial planning research has existed for decades but since the 1990s some of it has been presented under the heading of ‘planning cultures’. The planning cultures perspective1 regards planning as a ‘culturally contingent form of practice’(Friedmann, 2012) and proposes to fill a gap in the body of explanatory theories of how space is shaped by focusing on cultural influences on spatial development practice.
Despite various theoretical and empirical contributions on the topic to date, the explanatory power of the planning cultures perspective remains limited. It has not yet been able to fulfil its promise to provide a coherent body of work that enriches comparative knowledge of planning practices worldwide. Various authors point out this unfocused character, calling its subject of comparison ‘vague’. (Janin Rivolin, 2012, p. 63) They apply institutional perspectives to increase focus and account for both cultural and systemic aspects of planning.

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview and a critical discussion of the literature on comparative planning studies that has appeared in the English-speaking world over the past fifteen years, particularly regarding those accounts that account for the cultural aspects of planning. For purposes of brevity these studies will be grouped under the heading of ‘cultural comparative planning studies’ in the discussion below. Next, the strengths and weaknesses of the two strands in these theoretical approaches – planning cultures and institutionalist – are discussed and an attempt is made to move comparative planning studies forward by fusing these perspectives. The paper closes by providing three additional points of attention for a successful continuation of this body of work.

The contents of this paper are developed as part of this author’s ongoing PhD research, which is a comparative study of the transformation of the planning cultures of Flanders and The Netherlands at the turn of the millennium. Since the aim of the current paper is to provide a review and a theoretical discussion that research will be the topic of future publications.

Paragraph two describes the advent of perspectives in cultural comparative planning studies in the English-speaking world. It reconstructs the debate of the past fifteen years by listing major publications chronologically and providing a brief overview of their content. In the third paragraph the institutional and planning cultures perspectives are subject to a critical discussion that inquires into their fundamentals and discusses the strengths and weaknesses following from those. The final paragraph suggests taking the strengths of both approaches and fusing them as a way of moving forward ‘cultural comparative planning studies’ into the next decade.
2. The advent of cultural comparative planning studies

2.1 Origins in the late 1990s

The English-language literature on cultural comparative planning studies reviewed in this paper consists of three edited book volumes, one monograph, two theme issues of journals, and a handful of individual papers and book chapters, totalling some sixty-five contributions published since the year 2000. This inventory shows that in the space of fifteen years a modest literature has sprung up concerning culturally informed comparative planning studies and there are no signs of a lull. At least one more theme issue is in preparation and there are several (PhD) researchers working on the topic that can be expected to publish more in the years to come.

Interest in culture and planning existed before the onset of the current millennium, as described by Friedmann (2012) and Othengrafen (2012), but most authors argue that with the EU Compendium of Spatial Planning Systems and Policies (1997) and the European Spatial Development Perspective (1999) the first steps were taken towards integral comparative work on planning. They note however that these studies remain mostly concerned with formal and institutional variables and only briefly describe cultural aspects of the planning process. (Friedmann, 2012; Fürst, 2007; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009; Nadin, 2012; Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013; Reimer, Getimis, & Blotevogel, 2014; Sanyal, 2005; Stead & Nadin, 2009)

Most contributions then, agree that comparative studies before the new millennium were mainly centred on comparing organizational and institutional structures including law, procedures, instruments and administrative structures. Ernste pointedly phrases the common criticism of these studies as amounting to a ‘reductionist conceptualization of spatial planning’. (Ernste, 2012, p. 88)

There also seems to be consensus that previous explorations of the interplay of culture and planning lack attention to actual planning practices and contextual factors of planning activity. In their comparison of Dutch and Flemish planning practice De Jong and De Vries (2003, p. 32) state: ‘There is much known about the formal systems, but the meaning of this knowledge and its usefulness for daily action is not always very great. Insight into the informal side of the matter is seriously lacking.’ (translation by author)
The term planning cultures was already in use in the 1990s in Germany (as Planungskulturen) where attention to it preceded that in the English-speaking world, an attention that was recently revived.iii (Friedmann, 2012; Levin-Keitel & Sondermann, 2015) During this decade the term also appears sporadically in English. Wegener (1994) mentions the different planning cultures of the United Kingdom and Germany, and De Vries and Van den Broeck (1997) describe the Benelux as a ‘microcosm of planning cultures’. Both publications however employ planning cultures as a blanket term for various planning environments and not yet as an analytical perspective driving research. The first attempt to do so can be dated to the start of the new millennium. A lecture series at MIT in 2001 led to a symposium dedicated to the topic a year later which resulted in the first edited volume titled Comparative Planning Cultures. (Sanyal, 2005) In the introduction planning cultures are defined as: ‘(...) the collective ethos and dominant attitudes of planners regarding the appropriate role of the state, market forces, and civil society in influencing social outcomes.’ (p. xxi) The result is a diverse collection of accounts of how cultural factors influence planning all over the globe including such diverse places as, Indonesia, Mexico City, and The Netherlands to name a few. (Cowherd, 2005; Davis, 2005; Faludi, 2005) Interpretation of the term planning cultures was left mostly up to the authors, though many adopted the definition provided in the introduction, taking more or less freedom with it. Indeed, Friedmann (2012) remarks, because of this freedom the volume consists of many chapters rich in planning culture insights that only partially fulfil the promise of being comparative.

2.2 CULTPLAN and the culturised planning model
The next major publication in the literature on planning cultures is the volume by Knieling and Othengrafen (2009). This book is in part the result of the European Union-funded project CULTPLAN, titled: ‘Planning Cultures in Europe: Coping with cultural differences in planning and cooperation’ which ran from 2005-2007. CULTPLAN researched the cultural dimensions of international cooperation in 20 EU-financed INTERREG III spatial projects. (During & Van Dam, 2007; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009, pp. xxi-xxii) In the context of the project an interpretation of culture was developed based on the cultural theory of Gullestrup, extended with the perspectives of
a number of other authors. Combined with theories from the organizational sciences, cross cultural studies, and sociology this work resulted in Othengrafen’s *culturised planning model* which first appears in the edited volume and is described extensively in his monograph. (Othengrafen, 2012) Thus far the publications surrounding this culturised planning model form the most extensive body of work on planning cultures and therefore the perspective merits further elaboration.

The *culturised planning model* does not just describe the activities of planners. It extends to a broad range of professions that are concerned with the built environment. This widens the scope of comparative planning research to consider the actors concerned with ‘flanking activities’ such as politicians, journalists, and researchers because these too add to the frame in which spatial development takes place.

Othengrafen’s point of departure is an anthropological understanding of culture, which consists of: ‘(...) *“shared meanings” as they are conceptualised in the basic philosophy of life and values among a group of people, and of the way in which these shared meanings are visualised or manifested in people’s social interactions, as well as in the results of those interactions.*’ (Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013, p. 1272) This understanding of culture includes: ‘(...) *incorporated and unconscious routines, traditions, ideologies, practices and norms that guide the actions of members belonging to a specific culture.*’ (Othengrafen, 2012, p. 19)

Culture in this approach then, is a relatively stable unity of societally shared meanings that guide the perception and action of actors, both on a manifest and a non-manifest level. These meanings form a ‘reservoir’ of implicit knowledge that is applied in current policymaking, planning and reporting. Planning practices represent: ‘(...) *a mental “usable repertoire of unique cases”, which guides planners’ actions, particularly when confronted with a new situation.*’ (Othengrafen, 2012, p. 3)

The development and implementation of planning systems, can partly be explained by the cultural attitudes towards spatial planning. Perceptions, routines and values influence actions of planners consciously or unconsciously. These elements are part of planning culture: ‘Planning culture is thus the result of the accumulated attitudes, values, rules, standards and beliefs shared by the people involved or the “built environment professionals”.’ By uncovering these cultural elements through
‘thick descriptions’ it becomes visible why those professionals ‘do what they do.’ (Othengrafen, 2012, pp. 4-5, 8)

Based on Gullestrup’s theory, the distinction between manifest and non-manifest levels of culture is one of the main assumptions both in the CULTPLAN project and of its extension by Othengrafen. (During & Van Dam, 2007) This distinction can be recognized in the pyramid-shaped culturised planning model, which is reproduced as a table below. The planning artefacts at the top are the most manifest ‘symbolic’ expressions of planning culture. This ‘tip of the iceberg’ (this author’s metaphor) provides an indication of the dominant elements of planning culture. The influences of societal culture, at the bottom, are most difficult to observe and research. They often only appear in the most general of descriptions, secondary or ‘grey literature’ or in value research such as the well-known work by Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede which is also a source for Othengrafen’s model. In the brief application to the transformation of spatial planning in Luxembourg by Chilla and Schulz (2014) information about the societal environment is derived from sources in the political sciences treating the characteristics of Luxembourg’s democratic system. In the middle lies the planning environment, which can be seen as the ‘subculture of the planning community’. This is the level that most closely resembles the notions of organizational or institutional culture that was already part of planning research in the past. For each level a number of topics of research is presented. The table contains only a selection for the purposes for this paper, Othengrafen’s body of work contains more extensive tables and appropriate graphics.

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<tr>
<td><strong>Level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Specifications</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Top is more focus, bottom more context</strong></td>
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<td>Planning artefacts</td>
<td>Urban design and structures; urban plans</td>
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<td>Planning environment</td>
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Shared assumptions; values and cognitive frames that are taken for granted by members of the planning profession

Societal environment

Underlying and unconscious; taken-for-granted beliefs; perceptions; thoughts and feelings which are affecting planning

Self-conception of planning; people’s respect for and acceptance for plans; significance of planning; social justice; socioeconomic or socio-political social societal models; concepts of justice; fundamental philosophy of life…

content of planning; objectives and principles planning is aiming at; traditions and history of spatial planning; formalised layers of norms and rules…

Figure 1. The culturised planning model. (Adapted from Othengrafen (2010, 2012); Othengrafen and Reimer (2013)).

The distinction between manifest and non-manifest elements is important for understanding the model because changes in the manifest artefacts can indicate shifts in the underlying levels. This also gleans insight into the relation of the levels in the culturised planning model. The manifest spatial artefacts are ‘symbolic representations’ of non-manifest elements, implying they are ‘fed’ from the underlying two levels. However it should be noted that Othengrafen & Reimer do not imply that all artefact-level spatial (planning) activity is automatically a function of the two underlying levels. It is possible that new planning artefacts appear on the manifest level that do not necessarily reflect new developments on the underlying levels. The levels of the model should not be taken too rigidly then. Indeed, the culturised planning model is positioned as an ‘open system’ that combines structures and institutions. Othengrafen and Reimer (2013, p. 1279) The model offers a structured inventory of cultural influences on spatial planning. It is not a theory, rather it is positioned as an analytical tool to sensitize research to cultural elements of planning processes. (Othengrafen, 2012, pp. 185-186) Indeed in a later publication Othengrafen tempers expectations of the model’s explanatory capabilities: ‘What the conceptual approach does not offer is a blueprint for research on planning cultures, at least not in terms of providing immediately
available knowledge of a planning culture when applying the approach in a certain region or city.' (Othengrafen, 2014, p. 13)

2.3 (Re)introducing institutionalism

The next iteration in the development cultural comparative planning studies can be located in a 2012 theme issue of Planning Practice and Research, dedicated to International Comparative Planning Methodology. The aim of the issue is to ‘(...) critically review previous methodologies adopted in European comparative planning, and suggest alternative approaches.’ (Nadin, 2012, p. 3) While not explicitly including the term in the titles, various contributions discuss researching planning cultures as a part of comparative studies. (Ernste, 2012; Getimis, 2012; Janin Rivolin, 2012; Reimer & Blotevogel, 2012)

Most of these contributions criticise the planning cultures perspective for their insufficient focus and propose new approaches to increase the analytical power of comparative studies. Ernste suggests an actor-centred analysis employing cultural frames. Three other contributions focus on institutional approaches. The comparison of planning institutions was also the focus of planning studies previous to the rise of the planning cultures perspective, albeit with limited attention to the ‘softer’ cultural elements. In a sense these contributions can then be viewed as a re-introduction of institutional perspectives. The propositions are for a strategic-relational institutional approach addressing planning practices on levels from the individual to the national (Servillo & Van Den Broeck, 2012), a combination of researching planning systems and planning cultures employing the notion of institutional milieus (Reimer & Blotevogel, 2012), and a comprehensive model of institutional technologies offered by Janin Rivolin (2012). While not part of the theme issue the historic institutionalism proposed by Taylor (2013) can also be added to this list.

It is not possible in the space of this paper to discuss each of the approaches in depth. Most important is that they all stress the benefits of employing a more ordered analytical frame for comparative planning studies that can account for social-structural variables along with cultural influences than what previously was offered by the planning cultures perspective.
Three other criticisms on comparative studies, and by extension the planning cultures perspective, appear in these contributions. (Nadin, 2012) The first regards the interplay of actors and structures. The experiences of individual actors in planning practices in the wider context in which they operate deserves more attention as actors’ interpretations and actions shape the larger planning practice as a whole. (Ernste, 2012; Servillo & Van Den Broeck, 2012) Secondly, research into (the transformation of) planning cultures should be more attentive to the intermingling of various scales of policymaking. Both Getimis (2012) and Ernste (2012) indicate that most studies of planning culture remain at the national level and that there should be more attention to a multiscalar approach. The third point of criticism appearing from the contributions to the volume is the difficulty of describing transformation of spatial planning systems and –cultures. Nadin puts the question succinctly: ‘How can comparative research help to explain the dynamic evolution of planning systems and the framing and reframing of planning?’ (2012, p. 4) The usual approach in comparative studies of researching concrete spatial projects, regardless of scale, often leads to static descriptions of one project or system at one moment in time.

2.4 Towards methodological integration

The youngest edited volume in the cultural comparative planning studies is the one by Reimer et al. (2014) which has the aim of describing ‘(...) the coexistence of continuity and change and of convergence and divergence with regard to planning practices across Europe since the 1990s’. (2014, p. xvi) The book is the result of a European Research Group that has developed a 'systematic and methodological framework for the analysis of changes in planning systems and practices.' (2014, p. xv) This framework was consistently applied by all the contributors to the book. By focusing on transformation of planning systems and –cultures the volume addresses a large gap in the planning cultures perspective so far.

More so than the previous publications there is a move towards methodological integration of various empirical studies. Both ‘formal and informal institutions’ receive attention in this approach (p. 1), the authors do reiterate their (2012) criticism of
previous comparative research as insufficiently focused. Referring explicitly to the
volume by Knieling and Othengrafen (2009) they state: *Although recent comparative
studies on planning cultures highlight important cultural aspects of planning, they lack
operational and systematic methods of comparative analysis and remain at an abstract
level. It is the exception to find integrated analytical perspectives that use the concept of
planning culture to compensate for the aforementioned weak spots in the "classical"
research of planning systems.* (p. 4)

The analytical model described in the volume is an institutional one, building on the
perspectives brought forward by the authors of the 2012 journal. The transformation of
planning systems is investigated according to five topics: scope, modes and tools, scale,
actors and policy style. (p. xvi) Planning cultures in the context of this volume then are
understood as ‘manifestations of locally and topic-related planning practices within
structural framework conditions’. (p. 12)

The conclusions of the volume discuss the movements of convergence and
divergence over the twelve countries that are presented by a host of different authors.
Despite employing the most extensive and consistently applied methodological
framework to date, the descriptions of transformation in the volume do remain
somewhat at the surface. The chapters dedicated to the development of planning
cultures in various countries describe what has changed, but only to a limited degree the
way this has happened. This may be caused by the national level at which most of the
accounts are focused and which omits the description of micro-level practices.

The final iteration in the cultural comparative planning studies literature is a special
With four contributions the issue is smaller in size than the previous volumes and the
papers included in this collection all have a different ways of approaching comparative
study. The culturised planning model returns in the contribution by Knieling and
Othengrafen (2015) while De Vries (2015) uses culture and institutions as sensitizing
concepts that provide a perspective that is attentive to shared structures of meaning or
cognitive frames, shared values and formal and informal rules. He proposes four ways
of looking at the interplay of planning and culture which is the basis for the discussion
in the next paragraph of this paper. Tennekes, Harbers, and Buitelaar (2015) investigate the morphological outcome of different planning institutions by comparing three European regions. Finally Tasan-Kok (2015) interprets ‘cultures as institutional and organizational processes’ (pp. 2-3) and employs a path-dependency perspective to analyse urban development in Istanbul.

The overview in this paragraph shows the publication history on comparative planning studies to date in a chronological fashion. While there is disagreement between the authors of the right way to approach comparative work, they all share an interest in promoting a wider array of comparative planning studies with room for cultural influences. In this regard the literature can already be said to be successful. In the space of fifteen years the scope of planning studies has been greatly widened. Cultural comparative planning studies then provide interesting perspectives to study the interrelationships of spatial activity and culture, but the question remains how to resolve the different perspectives. This will be discussed in the next paragraph.

3. Two approaches and their fundamental views

The review in the previous paragraph shows how from a dissatisfaction with the legal and administrative character of comparative planning studies in the twentieth century, a planning cultures perspective was proposed that understands planning as a cultural activity in itself. The work produced in this context focuses on accounts of planning, including those aspects that can be termed cultural, that become more explicit and gain more structure with the introduction of the culturised planning model. In response to the planning cultures perspective a number of authors propose institutional perspectives and a division can be observed between the two approaches. The institutional perspectives provide more specific and systematic expositions of the interplay of a great many aspects of the planning process. In this paragraph these two strands in cultural comparative planning studies are discussed.

De Vries points out that the debate on planning cultures lacks coherence due to the ‘different types of studies with dissimilar research methods and approaches.’ (2015, p. 3) In order to create clarity he distinguishes between four understandings of planning
and culture and discusses their respective emphases and motivations. This is a useful framework to structure the contributions discussed above. In figure 2 they are projected along the lines laid out by De Vries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspectives on planning and culture</th>
<th>Culturised planning model</th>
<th>Institutional approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Planning as a cultural phenomenon</td>
<td>Basis of the CPM, including planning artefacts as cultural artefacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Planning as a sub-culture</td>
<td>Represented in level of planning environment</td>
<td>Domain of institutional theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Planning as a function of government</td>
<td>Represented in level of societal environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Societal culture and planning</td>
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Figure 2. Positioning of planning culture approaches. (Adapted from De Vries (2015, p. 6)).

The culturised planning model spans all understandings, but least specifically understanding 3, which is deemed the way comparative planning studies was performed in the past. The institutional approaches on the other hand start from the third understanding, recognize its limits, and therefore branch out, mostly into the second subcultures-perspective. Planning as a cultural phenomenon and as one factor in the relationship of space and society do not connect well with an institutional approach.

3.1 Planning cultures and the culturised planning model

The initial literature on planning cultures in English as presented by Sanyal (2005) and Friedmann (2005) views planning as a fundamentally cultural activity. Friedmann, for instance, defines planning cultures as ‘the ways both formal and informal, that spatial planning in a given multi-national region, country or city is conceived, institutionalized, and enacted’ and notes that it is deeply embedded in national or local political cultures (2005, p. 184) Sanyal’s definition (see 2.1) is even broader and comprises most
everything to do with spatial planning, allowing the contributing authors to suggest a great variety of elements all brought together under the heading of ‘culture’.

This understanding is both a strength and a weakness since culture is one of the most polymorphous concepts in existence. Its meanings span such diverse ideas as a ‘general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development’, through ‘particular ways of life’ to concrete ‘works and practices’. (Williams, 1976, pp. 76-82) Culture is a volatile term, subject to permanent change. It may shed light on all kinds of formal and informal human activity but if not handled carefully, loses all explanatory power. In recent decades the use of the term culture has become even more fluid and impermanent. Recognition has grown that there are not simply different cultures, but that culture is one way of expressing difference. Therefore Bennett et. al. identify a deep tension between the analytical value of the word and its value as a comprehensive category. A tension that is also visible in the strands of cultural comparative planning studies discussed in this paper. (Bennett, Grossberg, & Meaghan, 2005, pp. 63-69; Smith & Riley, 2008)

Othengrafen (2012) notes that the previous interpretations of planning cultures vary and its elaborations remain fairly unstructured, making synthesis of comparative planning studies under one theoretical framework difficult. The interpretation culture in the culturised planning model is indeed more deeply reflected and theoretically informed than that of its predecessors. The model is mainly constructed out of Gullestrup’s cultural theory as well as the levels of culture by psychologist Schein. (Levin-Keitel & Sondermann, 2015; Othengrafen, 2010, 2012) From the former the distinction between manifest and non-manifest culture is taken while the latter informs the three cultural levels that range from material artefacts to the immaterial societal beliefs, values and assumptions. Both are holistic cultural definitions, indeed while building his cultural model Gullestrup notes that there are ‘(…) a multitude of different ways of co-existing and co-acting to fulfil fundamental needs in cultural contexts.’ (Gullestrup, 2009, p. 5) This is elaborated into a complex systemic model of cultural activity that consists of six layers and eight segments of culture.

Through these theoretical foundations three weaknesses of the model can be explained that are often critized in the institutional strand of comparative planning research. First the extreme breadth of the approach. The culturised planning model leads
to a wide range of cultural manifestations to be researched including: attitudes, habits, traditions, emotions, meanings, and practices, relations between individuals, social norms, and social-economic status as well as material expressions of all of the above. These are partly overlapping entities that vary in degree of formalization making it hard to know where to start and to identify the most relevant elements.

Secondly, using the model it is unclear how to account for some manifestations of culture. This can be illustrated by contrasting the model to the understandings of planning and cultures identified by De Vries. The culturised planning model spans all its levels, ‘folding’ the third – governmental – level mostly into that of planning as a subculture. Using the model some variables that could be termed endemic to institutional analysis, such as the rules and procedures of an organisation, can be recognized both as part of the planning environment as well as material artefacts of the planning process. While the model’s authors will rightly argue that the latter are an expression of the former, the fact that the same object of analysis can belong to different levels of the model shows how the fundamental assumption of planning as cultural activity, while widening the scope of cultural aspects of planning practice on one hand, obfuscates some objects of analysis on the other.

The third point is closely connected to this and regards the causality between the levels in the model. Both Gullestrup and Schein postulate links between the cultural levels that lead to the one causal link in the culturised planning model: that the manifest elements of planning culture may be expressions of underlying values and assumptions, conscious or not. Yet the indeterminate character of these links impedes their analytical value. These points stand in the way of operationalising the culturised planning model into a concrete research design that can lead to truly systematic comparative planning research.

A more recent addition by Othengrafen (2014) adds a focus to the model on the role of individual judgements through the concept of cognitive frames. Levin-Keitel & Sondermann (2015) add a layer dedicated to the planning system that accounts for institutional structures and regulations both formal and informal. These contributions further specify the model and address some of the larger criticisms it received. The additions also bring the model closer to the various institutional or policy-approaches, yet cannot change the fact that at the outset the model views planning as an expression
of cultural activity. By departing from culture as a comprehensive category this strand of cultural comparative planning studies provides many starting points for a cultural analysis of planning but at the cost of analytical power.

3.2 Institutional approaches

The institutional approaches as proposed by (Ernste, 2012); Janin Rivolin (2012); Reimer and Blotevogel (2012); Reimer et al. (2014); Servillo and Van Den Broeck (2012); Taylor (2013) offer integrated analytical systems that address a wide array of elements of planning practice. Their authors share the initial critique that comparative planning studies have been focused too narrowly on systemic comparison but aim to move beyond the perspective formulated by the planning cultures literature. Indeed, Janin Rivolin proposes an institutional approach as a way to ‘(...) overcome the persisting (and misleading) conceptual separation between “planning systems”, as the configuration of formal and informal institutions (laws and rules) which guide spatial planning practice, and “planning cultures”, as referred to the concrete practices and mechanisms which determine the ways of planning.’ (2012, p. 64)

De Vries (2015, p. 4) assigns institutional approaches to the second level of his model, however when considering the individual contributions more closely variations can be distinguished so that the comprehensive institutional approaches offered in the comparative planning studies can actually be seen to span levels 2-4. The approaches formulated by Janin Rivolin and Taylor lean more towards the category ‘planning as a function of government’ with reference to elements of societal culture and planning. Those by Ernste and Reimer & Blotevogel can be situated in the category of ‘planning as a sub-culture’ though also with references to the other levels. The approach proposed by Servillo & Van Den Broeck spans both levels evenly by providing an account of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic coalitions where temporarily united actor-groups (micro and meso-level) realise new dominant views in planning and thereby drive the transformation of planning systems (macro-level).

As with the culturised planning model these variations can be traced back to theoretical foundations of the approaches. The action-theoretical approaches of Ernste and Reimer & Blotevogel refer back to an actor-centred institutionalism that reflects the authors’ focus on the micro level and their use of frame analysis. Servillo & Van Den
Broeck’s broad account is inspired by sociological institutionalism focusing on the relationship between the planning system and society, and Taylor defends the merits of a historical institutionalist approach. Janin Rivolin subscribes to the notion of institutional technologies that can be used to explain the ‘evolutionary processes of innovation’ in abstract terms. Each of the approaches rests on a number of assumptions about the interplay of various elements, for instance the relationships between planning traditions, framing processes, adaptation and learning processes and power structures (Reimer & Blotevogel). The institutional approaches also include ways of accounting for the linkages between policy levels.

Endemic to these institutional views is a predisposition for policy analysis which might resonate well with typical projects requested by funding institutions, yet does not lay bare all dimensions of planning practice. Descriptions in these studies are often made in function of selected planning elements such as particular plans and laws and are thereby more likely to remain within the boundaries of describing planning along the lines of organisational or policy-science perspectives. This creates a potential blind spot for those elements which do not ‘naturally’ find a way into the domain of these sciences. Especially those at the truly micro-level (habits within one particular planning department) or the most macro-level (the ‘societal values’ or ‘shared structures of meaning’) possibly remain outside the scope of these approaches.

Macro-level variables enter in much of the current comparative research in the shape of characteristics of the welfare state. There is no doubt that planning systems are part of the welfare state model and Stead and Nadin (2009) position planning cultures as sitting in between the two. They point out the validity of using ‘legal families and administrative structures’ as the basis for typologies as they ‘provide strong frameworks for the operation of planning systems’. (p. 289) Grasping planning culture is that much more complicated because culture cannot provide such a strong framework but this is due to the fact that culture is much more than the fairly readily observable characteristics of public organization. Furthermore, planning institutions are ultimately ‘deep (cultural) structures’. (Ernste, 2012, p. 87) De Vries underlines this too: ‘(...) culture and institutions are overlapping concepts that both refer to the durable and stable conditions shared by a community, which structures the behaviour of individuals and the actions of the collective actors within it.’ (2015, p. 3) The true distinction
between the two strands of comparative planning studies that were recognized above is not whether or not they “truly” focus on culture, but the degree of systematization of their analytical models.

The tension between using culture as a comprehensive category and its analytical value can be then recognized in the institutional strands of cultural comparative planning studies as an inverse of the criticism levelled at the planning cultures perspective. The increased focus and explanatory power of the institutional approaches comes at the price of a more narrow point of departure which allows for more systematic analyses. While the institutional approaches discussed in this paper all look beyond straightforward characteristics of planning systems and offer frameworks for detailed accounts of planning practice, a risk exists that they remain locked up within their own framework of institutional analysis.

4. Moving forward comparative planning studies

The aim of this paper was to provide an review of recent work in what for the occasion has been termed the cultural comparative planning studies. It has identified two strands in the literature, the planning cultures perspective and the institutional approaches to comparative study. Using the model by De Vries it was shown that the foundations of the approaches differ and the strengths and weaknesses ensuing from this difference were discussed. Now the question that remains is: how to move forward with cultural comparative planning studies? This concluding paragraph will formulate a possible way of doing so.

The concept of planning cultures seems to be extremely valuable for its evocative function: it has succeeded in arguing that there is need for a systematic account of planning processes that goes beyond cataloguing administrative and legal frameworks. Planning, as so much else, is a social activity taking place in a social context on whichever scale it is performed. The accounts of culture throughout the body of work concerning planning cultures and the culturised planning model include a range of interpretations and expressions of culture as potential research subjects. However by employing such an inclusive perspective the analytical capability of planning cultures as an approach for cultural comparative planning studies suffers. Therefore it needs to be
combined with other perspectives as a middle range theories in order to operationalize it and lead to more concrete results.

One such way of dealing with the abstract character of culture – albeit in a different research domain - is proposed by Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010). They caution that ‘culture’ possibly obfuscates more than it can explain because of the term’s wide array of meanings. The authors’ advice is to work pragmatically and use pre-defined, tried and true concepts to obtain a grip on culture. This pragmatic way forward is a tempting one as it solves many problems, yet this would not prove satisfactory for on comparative planning studies where only an integral systematic comparison approach can produce truly valuable results.

Systematicity is offered by the various institutional approaches proposed in context of cultural comparative planning studies. Instead of starting with a holistic notion of ‘culture’ of which spatial planning in all of its forms are instances, these theories start out from institutions as more delineated concepts. Consequently, the approaches seem to be a more fruitful way to advance as they offer concrete approaches to delve into the wealth of planning experience. Yet the institutional perspectives do not completely eclipse the culturised planning model. While they are more integrative and offer a clearer approach to analysing planning practices, institutional approaches lack the comprehensiveness of the broad notion of culture and run the risk of staying locked up in a systemic and policy perspective.

Contrasted like this, the question in the end seems to become a choice for the researcher. Does one aim to look at spatial planning composed of institutions or as an expression of culture, as point of departure for further studies? This author would like to suggest that perhaps a choice between the two is not necessary and the true value for comparative studies lies in a combination of the two perspectives. As was shown above, the culturised planning model approaches spatial planning fundamentally as cultural activity while institutions are an expression of ‘deep cultural structures.’ This insight makes it possible to position the culturised planning model as an overarching framework, yet fashion a concrete and systematic research strategy along the lines of the more precise elements of one of the institutional approaches mentioned or, depending on the concrete research topic, still others.
In this author’s ongoing research into the transformation of the Dutch and Flemish planning cultures, a theoretical framework is constructed consisting of the culturised planning model operationalised through the Policy Arrangement Approach. The latter provides a flexible model for tracing the transformation of policy processes over time. (Arts & Leroy, 2006; Liefferink, 2006) Because of its approach to culture as a comprehensive category leading to a host of suggestions of cultural manifestations of planning, the culturised planning model functions as a heuristic device that informs the research at all steps. In describing the transformation of specific policy arrangements in Dutch and Flemish spatial planning the research will be operationalized to manageable proportions and concepts that allow for greater systematic analysis. The approach informs the research with four key elements of policy arrangements: actors, resources/power, discourses and rules of the game. Employing the culturised planning model as an overarching perspective guarantees that cultural expressions of planning are not solely ‘found’ in the category of discourse – or any category in any institutional approach to which ‘cultural’ variables have been assigned. These variables may comprise societal values that are widely subscribed to and that can be discovered through international value research, they may include conceptions of space grown over time found in historical accounts of planning, or they may be particularities to the ways planning is practiced in one of the departments under investigation. The culturised planning model draws attention to such diverse cultural factors relevant for planning which can then be pursued in a more systematic manner integrating the various dimensions of planning such as policies, legal structures, financial flows that clear the way for comparison.

Finally, this paper will close with listing three points of attention for further cultural comparative planning studies. First is the lack of systematic attention to metacultural characteristics in all of the approaches discussed. These values, widely shared in societies are notoriously hard to obtain with any claim to validity which undoubtedly explains the relative lack of their use so far. Yet in much existing comparative work the operationalization of these elements can be improved upon, potentially by constructing ideal types based on historical, value and cultural sociological research. These dimensions should also not merely be addressed in function of the actual plans under consideration. Valuable groundwork could be
performed by producing well documented accounts of relations of society and space on a macro-level for countries and regions as currently these descriptions are few and far in between and those that do exist are often fragmented and of variable scope and quality. These descriptions of the societal environment, including cultural traits, have to be handled with extreme care though, lest accounts fall prey to the trap of reproducing commonplaces. As Chilla and Schulz caution: ‘(...) there is a risk to essentialize socio-cultural particularities by according them a too high performativity.’ (2014, p. 16)

Secondly, more attention should also be focused on the transformative dimension of planning culture. This is a methodologically complex point as transformation can only be reconstructed by the researcher and never (again) be observed first-hand. Retrospective interviews, document analysis (including more ‘informal’ documents such as meeting minutes and promotional brochures) and focus groups with those practitioners involved are proposed as methods to approach as best an account of transformation as possible.

Finally, apart from the theoretical expositions with the aim of improve the research on cultural comparative planning there is need for more empirical work. Preferably in a larger project with one consistently applied theoretical and methodological perspective such as CULTPLAN or the European Research Group that produced the volume by Reimer et al. (2014). With few individual papers the cultural comparative planning studies remain a small sub discipline. There are of course the contributions to the three edited volumes and the two journal special-issues, however existing research is sometimes cast too loosely into the mould of a paper on planning cultures, especially in the earlier publications.

The cultural comparative planning studies discussed in this paper provide evocative new perspectives for research by stressing that there is need for an integrated account of planning that moves beyond attention to administrative and legal structures. However there is irony in the fact that thus far the perspective has failed to produce a consistent body of work that really enables comparative analysis because of the idiosyncratic character of contributions. By suggesting a fusing of the two main strands in the literature as well as listing three further points of attention this paper has sought to enable research to keep an open view of interfaces of space and culture that might not
be immediately found by employing one particular perspective.

References


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1 Planning cultures are termed a perspective in this paper, rather than concept or theory because of the diversity and multiplicity of interpretations of the term throughout the literature.

2 This is not quite all the literature on the topic but it is a great majority of the publications.

3 In 2007-2009 a discussion on planning cultures appeared in the journal Planung-Neu-Denken, based at RWTH Aachen University. A number of contributions reflected on a survey held in 2007/2008 among readers of the journal asking after the meaning and the potential for research. (Altrock et al., 2009) – Additionally it should be noted that this paper mainly focuses on the career of cultural comparative planning studies in English-language literature. Further steps should be – and are – taken to integrate the perspectives of the literature in both the English and German languages as they are sure to provide each other with valuable insights.

4 These layers and segments are not translated in the culturised planning model, nor is it this authors’ opinion that they should be. While the model might benefit from possessing more structure, that level of detail would quickly render the it meaningless.

5 Though it is unfortunate that the authors do not offer a schematization of the interplay of these elements, nor do they in their 2014 edited volume, which could have increased the abstraction of their conclusions.

6 They discuss: values, frames, institutions, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital.