

Planning, Pragmatism and Societal Change

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There are now already more than a couple of decades throughout which I have been trying to combine critical thinking about the nature and purpose of planning with the actual development of planning practice - mainly geared towards, the design and the deployment of spatial strategic frameworks. The paper is based, essentially, on a particularly enjoyable and fruitful learning experience which took place in the late 1990s and early years of the current decade, when myself and other colleagues at the University of Aveiro were responsible for the preparation of three municipal (spatial) strategic plans. In the second half of the 1990s, many Portuguese municipalities were starting to prepare (non-statutory) strategic plans. Although the rhetoric was changing, stimulated by a national programme (PROSIURB), the approach to (spatial) plan making, however, was still largely reflecting the traditional planning perspective and methodology. In this context, we thought the planning school could (and should) make a contribution through the preparation of municipal strategic plans "by the book", going against the prevailing traditions and literally attempting to translate the emerging theoretical perspectives into guidelines for planning practice. This experience revealed a most interesting paradox, that in order to be effective (pragmatic), development planning needs to actively promote institutional (societal) change. Such conclusion further underlines the inevitability and urgency of an open minded debate on the nature and purpose of spatial planning in contemporary (Portuguese) society.

Keywords: planning practice; strategic plans; development planning; institutional change.