

the potential and perils of cross-national planning research



Discussion of the internationalisation of planning practice, education and research is currently very much in vogue.¹ This is often seen against the backdrop of the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation and growing exchanges and interdependence between global regions and peoples.² The characterisation of the 21st century as the 'urban century'³ and the identification of global planning challenges⁴ by many observers and institutions have also contributed to raising the international profile of urban and spatial planning.

International organisations like the UN, regional groupings like the EU, national governments, and region and city networks,⁵ are engaged in international reflection on the planning of cities and urban regions which are sustainable and resilient in the face of challenges to social, environmental, economic and cultural development. International consultancies offer their planning services in many countries across different continents, often expanding from 'mature' markets in the global North and West in search of opportunities for growth.

Educational institutions and professional bodies are increasingly seeking to capitalise on the international demand for education and professional accreditation in planning. Over the past decade UK planning schools have seen their overseas student numbers and applications increase considerably, demonstrating the demand and recognition for RTPI-accredited qualifications abroad, while other countries, like Russia, are seeking to establish more planning and urban-oriented curricula to train practitioners adequately.⁶

Meanwhile, in many countries, including the UK, the highest-quality academic research is considered to be that which is deemed to be 'internationally' recognised/excellent or 'world leading' – although quite how the notion of 'international' is interpreted and used in this context, and the extent of

meaningful internationalism within the planning academy, remain matters of debate.⁷

However, what is undeniable is that across the various domains of planning activity, scholars, practitioners and students are currently being called upon to contemplate the international dimensions of their discipline. When surveying this context, there is perhaps a need to avoid the trap of what historians term 'presentism'.⁸ Planning has, after all, long been characterised by the international 'flow' of ideas, techniques and policy solutions,⁹ in a process given impulse by various mechanisms and bodies, including colonial governments, educational and scientific research institutions, professional associations and journals, and international development agencies and consultancies.⁴

The flow of ideas and practices has also been inspired by a general interest in comparing how planning works and deals with certain issues in different places, and a desire to 'learn from other countries'.¹⁰ As Healey observes:

*'Wherever and whenever elites and activists have been concerned about the qualities of their cities and territories, they have looked about for ideas to help inspire their development programmes. And people have always travelled from place to place, offering suggestions about ways of solving problems or improving conditions in one place based on their experiences in other places.'*¹¹

Similarly, Booth notes that 'Learning from other countries and the desire to make comparisons have been fundamental to research activity in the field of planning'.¹² He also emphasises that comparative planning research is complex and can be prone to pitfalls if the context-specificity and cultural embeddedness of planning are not recognised, and that this can be particularly problematic if the goal of comparison is policy transfer.

Echoing this, UN Habitat concludes that: *'An important lesson from the experience of modern planning is that planning approaches which have been shaped by a particular context should not be considered as models and imposed uncritically on very different contexts. While*

*planning has common purposes, tasks and types of tools throughout the world, the form these take will always be shaped by the social and cultural norms of particular places.*¹⁴

It is also the case that, in making comparisons, a 'little knowledge' can be a dangerous thing and the risk of misunderstandings and lapsing into cliché is ever present.

A recent newspaper article provides an almost 'textbook' example of where comparison can go awry. In it the author argued that 'Paris is formally planned, lacking in cultural diversity and inward looking – no one can become a Parisian' and went on to compare the city with apparently 'gloriously un-plannable' London. Anyone familiar with urban governance and planning in the two cities will immediately detect some confusion here. It is fairly clear, for example, that the author has in mind a relatively small part of metropolitan Paris – the historical core, or 'Paris, *intra muros*' – which has been extensively (although not completely) planned, and replanned at different times, broadly according to the principles of axial planning. These are the parts of the city which largely define its image and that millions of tourists visit every year.

The author's understanding of 'Paris' seems deeply shaped by this area, but is bereft of an appreciation of the spatial/physical, economic, social, cultural and environmental diversity and wider metropolitan reality of the city. This fundamentally undermines the validity of the comparison being proffered – in essence a narrow definition of one place is being compared with a more expansive definition and understanding of another.

A consideration of history, planning culture and institutional geography and context might have helped deliver a more meaningful comparison. Yet here again caution and knowledge of history and context would be crucial – for example, a linguistic *faux ami* (false friend) could be generated by any translation of the notion of *Grand Paris*¹³ into 'Greater Paris' and an assumption of equivalence between what is currently signified by such a term and the extant structures of governance for 'Greater London'.

Comparative studies are thus complex and require a good level of knowledge and appreciation of context-specificity if they are to be meaningfully undertaken. Yet there is no need to be overly pessimistic about their feasibility and value. Experience shows that the urge to compare is irresistible, as is the desire to learn from abroad and transfer practice from country to country. Comparison and cross-national lesson-drawing and

policy transfer will not cease because of the potential for misinterpretation and inappropriate transnational 'borrowing' of planning ideas and approaches.

Similarly, even if comparative research is difficult, and certain hoped-for outcomes such as effective policy transfer may be uncertain, it also potentially has great benefits. There are many examples of successful and inspiring comparative studies which have made a real contribution to planning thought and practice and can be truly seen as 'international planning research'.¹⁴ The remainder of this article considers an initiative which has sought to foster comparative and collaborative study of planning in the national contexts of Britain and France, and reflects on its outcomes and ongoing development.

The French and British Planning Studies Group

The French and British Planning Studies Group (FBPSG) was founded in 1998 by British academics who had undertaken research in France. The co-founders of the group were Philip Booth (of the University of Sheffield) and Charles Fraser (of South Bank University). The main aim of the group has been to provide a forum of discussion, and more specifically to address three objectives:

- To create a dialogue at the interface between the Anglophone and Francophone worlds in the domain of urban planning and urban studies.
- To provide comparative reflections on how national research can feed into the broader Anglophone and Francophone academic world.
- To comparatively explore approaches to urban problems in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds in a manner that is intellectually rigorous and promotes the development of comparative methodology, assessments and outcomes relevant for academics and practitioners.

The planning and urban policy systems in France and England, and the fundamental similarities and differences between these two countries that are such near neighbours and yet have developed very different modes of planning in terms of structure, practical application and underlying philosophies, have provided a rich field of enquiry since the FBPSG's foundation. The Group currently gathers more than 50 members, both researchers and planning professionals, mostly from Britain and France but also from other countries. Since 2005 it has been formally constituted as a sub-group of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP).¹⁵ This has enabled it to tap into a larger European audience and have a presence at the annual AESOP congresses.

FBPSG working method and philosophy

Very soon after its foundation the FBPSG developed into a dialogue between French and British academics undertaking research in the other country, which allowed in-depth discussion based on the extensive knowledge and experience of its members. In the first instance it had no other objective than to provide a meeting point for the exchange of ideas. It operated in a way that was informal, open and dictated by the interests and wishes of its members. A pattern of two meetings per year, alternating between France and the UK, was established. In France, the meetings have often been in Lille, but also in Paris, Bordeaux and Grenoble. In the UK, meetings have been held in London, Bristol, Liverpool and Sheffield.

A feature of a number of these meetings has been the participation of planning practitioners from the hosting city, region or country. Often the programme has complemented discussions in the lecture theatre and seminar room with site visits to view particular planning, regeneration and environmental projects 'on the ground', or '*sur le terrain*'.

Membership of the FBPSG is defined only by an interest in, and a willingness to discuss, the differences between spatial planning and urban policy in France and Britain. Themes to be studied in the French and British contexts are selected for each year, and papers are invited from members and from outside experts in the chosen theme. Presentations and participant interventions may be made in either French or English, as individuals prefer, reflecting a commitment to intercultural dialogue and exchange and the insights of recent academic work which problematises the ostensible internationalisation of planning research¹⁶ and emphasises that 'a profound understanding of the way language is used' is an 'inescapable part of the comparative research process'.¹²

The FBPSG's activities can also be seen against the backdrop of writing that emphasises the importance of different 'planning cultures' in conditioning the nature of planning practices and the perceptions of the issues it is called upon to address in different societies.¹⁷

Since its foundation a range of topics have been discussed by the FBPSG (see Box 1). The Group's activities have also resulted in a number of publications arising from collaborations between FBPSG members, write-ups of individual contributions to Group events, and collective efforts between members. The FBPSG has produced two books and two special editions of *Town Planning Review*:

- *Démocraties métropolitaines: transformations de l'Etat et politiques urbaines au Canada, en France*

*et au Royaume-Uni*¹⁸ was an outcome of the seminar on 'Acting together in urban regeneration' ('La concertation et renouvellement urbain') held in Sheffield in 2002. An English language version also appeared as *Metropolitan Democracies: Transformations of the State and Urban Policy in Canada, France and Great Britain*.¹⁹

The book took the general analysis of partnership in Britain and France presented at the seminar and extended it with case studies from both countries, as well as introducing material from Canada. It looked at partnership at both the metropolitan and local levels. The cases covered included Lille, London, Montréal, Sheffield, Toronto and Villeurbanne. The conclusion considered in particular the contrast between deliberative and participatory democracy and traditional forms of democratic accountability in the local state and the role of partnership as an adaptive mechanism in the face of globalisation.

- *Spatial Planning Systems of Britain and France – A Comparative Analysis* was published simultaneously in English and French, and each chapter was co-authored by French and British members of the FBPSG.²⁰ It offered a comparative investigation of the basic contexts for planning in both countries, including their administrative, economic, financial and legal implications, and then considered substantive themes such as urban policy and transport planning through detailed analysis and case studies.
- In 2011, a special issue of *Town Planning Review* on 'European cities and Capitals of Culture'²¹ examined the relationships between culture and urban strategies in the French and British contexts. This arose from two seminars held during 2008 in two former European Capitals of Culture (ECoCs), Lille (2004) and Liverpool (2008), exploring the experiences of past and forthcoming ECoCs in France and Britain and other cities that have pursued cultural initiatives as part of their wider urban development strategies. More specifically, it provided insights into comparative research focusing on the importance of appreciating the influence of 'path dependence',²² and looking specifically at how conditions, approaches and outcomes of cultural policy could be researched and compared between places in different national contexts.

The cases of the ECoC cities of Lille, Liverpool and Marseille were discussed, as well as the role of culture in the redevelopment of secondary cities like Roubaix. A critical assessment of the use of 'branded' museums in Lens, Liverpool and Bilbao, as flagship projects, was also

Box 1 French and British Planning Studies Group - timeline of activities

Date	Programme or theme of meeting	Venue
May 1998	French Planning Study Group: inaugural meeting	University of Sheffield
October 1998	Second meeting of the French Planning Studies Group First Participation of French colleagues	South Bank University Technopark, London
March 1999	Planning Research Conference: 'Future's Planning: Planning Futures'. Group workshop on themes in French planning	University of Sheffield
May 1999	Lille study visit	Lille
December 1999	Group meeting	University of Westminster
September 2002	Acting together in urban regeneration Sponsored by the French Embassy and the Institut Français	University of Sheffield
May 2003	Comparative essays in French and British planning (1)	Université Lille-2
September 2003	Comparative essays in French and British planning (2)	University of the West of England
May 2004	Local planning policy and its implementation Sponsored by GRALE	Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne
July 2004	AESOP Congress 2004, Grenoble. Round Table: 'Shaping planning systems: challenges, opportunities and constraints in French and British planning'	Université de Grenoble
September-October 2004	<i>Lille-Metropole</i> Agence du développement et de l'urbanisme de Lille	Lille
January 2005	Public transport in a comparative context	University of Nottingham
June 2005	<i>Colloque IFRESI: Logiques métropolitaines: modèles, acteurs et processus</i>	IFRESI, Lille
January 2006	Study theme for 2006: Spatial planning and the reforms in the UK and France	
June 2006	First Seminar: 'The move towards 'spatial planning' in the UK: scales and issues' Second Seminar: 'Spatial planning in France: future outlook'	University of Westminster Université de Bordeaux IV
2007	The meetings of the Group in 2007 were devoted the launch of <i>The Spatial Planning Systems of Britain and France: A Comparative Analysis</i>	Paris
February 2008	European cities and Capitals of Culture: a comparative approach (1)	Liverpool
June 2008	European cities and Capitals of Culture: a comparative approach (2)	Lille
September 2011	UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference: 'Potentials and challenges of temporary land uses'	Birmingham
2012	Knowledge economy and higher education	Lille
May 2012	Urban Rails 2012 (1) – Rail and urban development Supported by financial and in-kind aid from the University of Paris I – Panthéon Sorbonne; CRIA; the University of Liverpool; <i>Town Planning Review</i> ; Réseau Ferré de France	Université de Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne
November 2012	Urban Rails 2012 (2) – Rail and urban development Supported by financial and in-kind aid from the University of Liverpool; the University of Paris I – Panthéon Sorbonne; <i>Town Planning Review</i> ; the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP); Réseau Ferré de France; Merseytravel; Merseyrail; Network Rail; the Franco-British Council; Sharethecity.org; and Cass Associates	University of Liverpool

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provided, stressing the development of competitiveness strategies rather than distinctiveness.

- In 2012 FBPSG members from the University of Liverpool and the University of Paris 1 – Sorbonne hosted two seminars exploring the relationships between rail and urban development. These brought together academics and practitioners and incorporated site visits to rail investments in Liverpool and Paris. Papers presented explored the challenges of sustainable urban development, along with preoccupations about energy costs, which are leading developers and urban planners to place rail transport at the centre of their concerns.

The Paris seminar in May 2012 considered light rail development in Europe, with a particular focus on the situation in the UK and France. It also raised some interesting issues about bilateral comparison of certain planning matters, as it transpired that the comparative reference points on public transport issues in France were typically German and continental rather than drawn from UK experience. The Liverpool seminar took place in November 2012 and considered heavy rail as a means of serving and stimulating urban development in metropolitan areas.

The events resulted in two articles in *Town & Country Planning* and a special issue of *Town Planning Review* on 'Linking rail and urban development: French and British experience'.²³ The latter brought together a selection of papers from authors based in the UK and France and considered the challenges of the development, or redevelopment, of heavy- and light-rail-based networks in French and British metropolitan districts, focusing in particular on objectives, players and processes, and the links between these projects and territorial development.

The theme to be explored in 2015 is 'European green cities: building urban resilience and sustainability in an era of austerity', with a first meeting on 13-14 May in Bristol, 'European Green Capital, 2015', and a proposed follow-up event in Nantes (previously 'European Green Capital' in 2013).²⁴

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most enriching features of comparative research is the challenge it can offer to the 'assumptions we make about planning'.¹² In other words, it is valuable not only for what it might reveal to us about how others conceptualise and practice planning, but also for the opportunity to reconsider our own taken-for-granted assumptions

on questions such as what is planning, what should it be aiming to achieve, how does it work, and is it effective?¹²

Given that a consideration of such issues might engage planning practitioners, scholars and students, the FBPSG is keen to maintain its tradition of not only including and bringing together academics from both sides of the Channel, but also fostering interactions between planning research, practice and education within and between each country.

It is encouraging that the FBPSG continues to receive enquiries from French and British practitioners interested in finding out about planning issues and practices in both countries. From an academic perspective, one challenge of sustaining such an initiative is identifying topics which have comparative potential and also appeal to a sufficiently large number of members and a potential wider audience. Academic life is increasingly structured to encourage and reward the specialist rather than the generalist, and devoting time to attending an event which does not directly address a substantive individual research interest (with the prospect of a concrete output such as a new publication) may for some be viewed as an opportunity-cost rather than an opportunity.

Yet comparison as a method and component of the planning researcher's 'craft'²⁵ not only has the potential to explore substantive issues: it can also contribute to a generally enhanced understanding of the nature of planning, an awareness of different planning cultures, and general knowledge and cultural awareness. It is therefore probably best not to view it in purely instrumental terms, as being, for example, necessarily targeted at policy transfer, or generating conventional research outputs. This is not to say that potential for successful policy transfer or publications should be overlooked, or downplayed. Rather, comparative work has intrinsic wider benefits which may include fostering a wider appreciation of differing planning cultures, developing an understanding of why certain policy approaches have emerged in different places, considering how an approach might be likely to fare if transferred to another planning setting and culture, and facilitating thematic comparison around fundamental concerns which planning addresses.

The particular contribution of FBPSG has been to explore such issues with the depth of knowledge and rigour that bilateral exchanges can bring. They are still being explored by the Group in relation to French and British planning after a decade and a half of 'Channel hopping'.

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Notes

- 1 See an interview with the current RTPI President Janet Askew in 'Expanding horizons'. *The Planner*, 2015, Jan., 18-21, and 'Speech of Janet Askew for the Inauguration of President of the Royal Town Planning Institute', delivered on 14 Jan. 2015. www.rtpi.org.uk/briefing-room/news-releases/2015/january/new-rtpi-president-janet-askew-speech-in-full/
- 2 B. Sanyal (Ed.): *Comparative Planning Cultures*. Routledge, 2005
- 3 See, for example, www.bu.edu/pardee/research/the-urban-century/
- 4 *Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements 2009*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Earthscan, 2009. <http://mirror.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=2831>
- 5 Such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) – see www.uclg.org/en
- 6 See, for example, the Internationalising Higher Education: Urban Development in Russia project, funded by the British Council (2010-11) at the University of Birmingham
- 7 Is it not possible, for example, for work to be excellent in terms of its rigour and the value of its insights while not being internationally recognised, or 'world leading'? Conversely, if something is internationally recognised (published in an 'international', often English language, journal, for example) does this guarantee its excellence? Such issues are particularly challenging for planning given the diversity of planning cultures and the need for academic work to communicate with practitioners in different social, political, cultural, geographical and (crucially) linguistic settings. For further discussion, see: K. Kunzmann: 'Unconditional surrender: the gradual demise of European diversity in planning'. Keynote Paper, 18th AESOP Congress, Grenoble, 3 Jul. 2004; O. Yiftachel: 'Re-engaging planning theory? Towards 'South-Eastern' perspectives'. *Planning Theory*, 2006, Vol. 5 (3), 211-22; B. Stiftel and C. Mukhopadhyay: 'Thoughts on Anglo-American hegemony in planning scholarship: do we read each other's work?'. *Town Planning Review*, 2007, Vol. 78 (5), 545-72; and O. Sykes, A. Lord and U. Jha-Thakur: 'Planning in a 'world container'?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2010, Vol. 79, Jan., 47-51
- 8 In the sense of over-emphasising the significance of current or recent events, or seeking to interpret historical events in light of contemporary values and ideas
- 9 P. Healey: 'Circuits of knowledge and techniques: the transnational flow of planning ideas and practices'. *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, 2013, Vol. 37 (5), 1510-26
- 10 I. Masser and R. Williams: *Learning From Other Countries*, Geo Books, 1986
- 11 P. Healey: 'Introduction: the transnational flow of knowledge and expertise in the planning field'. In P. Healey and R. Upton (Eds): *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices*. Routledge, 2010
- 12 P. Booth: 'What can we learn from France? Some reflections on the methodologies of cross-national research'. In E.A. Silva, P. Healey and N. Harris (Eds): *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods*. Routledge, 2015, pp.84-96
- 13 A term used to describe the initiative launched under the Sarkozy presidency to develop a new metropolitan strategy and major infrastructure projects for the Paris metropolitan region – see www.societedugrandparis.fr/projet
- 14 P. Hall, with contributions from N. Falk: *Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism*. Routledge, 2014
- 15 See the FBPSG webpage on the AESOP website, at www.aesop-planning.eu/blogs/en_GB/french-and-british-planning-studies
- 16 See 'Unconditional surrender', 'Re-engaging planning theory?', and 'Thoughts on Anglo-American hegemony in planning scholarship' (all note 7)
- 17 See J. Knieling and F. Othengrafen (Eds): *Planning Cultures in Europe – Decoding Cultural Phenomena in Urban and Regional Planning*. Ashgate, 2009; *Comparative Planning Cultures* (see note 2); and *Crossing Borders*: (see note 11)
- 18 P. Booth and B. Jouve (Eds): *Démocraties métropolitaines: transformations de l'Etat et politiques urbaines au Canada, en France et au Royaume-Uni*. Presses Universitaires du Québec, Montréal, 2004
- 19 P. Booth and B. Jouve (Eds): *Metropolitan Democracies: Transformations of the State and Urban Policy in Canada, France and Great Britain*. Ashgate, 2005
- 20 P. Booth, M. Breuiliard, C. Fraser and D. Paris (Eds): *The Planning Systems of Britain and France: A Comparative Analysis*. Routledge, 2007; and P. Booth, M. Breuiliard, C. Fraser and D. Paris (Eds): *Aménagement et urbanisme en Grande-Bretagne et en France: Etude comparative*. L'Harmattan, Paris, 2007
- 21 O. Sykes (Ed.): 'European cities and Capitals of Culture – a comparative approach'. Special Issue. *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 82 (1)
- 22 P. Booth: 'Culture, place and path dependence: some reflections on the problems of comparison'. *Town Planning Review*, 2011, Vol. 82(1), 39-54
- 23 I. Wray: 'Rails, revivals... and shopkeepers'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2012, Vol. 81, Jun., 302-3; J. Brown, O. Sykes and I. Wray: 'Pulling the right levers?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2013, Vol.82, Feb., 106-11; and X. Desjardins, J. Maulat and O. Sykes (Eds): 'Linking rail and urban development: French and British experience'. Special Issue. *Town Planning Review*, 2014, Vol. 85(2)
- 24 To join the FBPSG, contact Dr Lauren Andres (e: L.Andres@bham.ac.uk) or Dr Olivier Sykes (e: olivier.sykes@liv.ac.uk). To register for the Bristol event in May 2015, contact Stephen Hall (e: Stephen3.Hall@uwe.ac.uk)
- 25 See 'Part 2 – The craft of research'. In *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods* (see note 12)