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Urban planning: an ‘undisciplined’ discipline?

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Abstract

The need for cross disciplinary boundaries appeared in scientific research at least twenty years ago. Since its foundation, at the beginning of the 20th Century, urban planning has been claiming the assets of multidisciplinary. It is particularly concerned with transgressing disciplinary boundaries. However, multidisciplinary may weaken urban planning as a discipline, because it is a recent knowledge domain that has borrowed without questioning from the knowledge acquired in both the social and engineering sciences. Urban planning may forget to formulate an inventory and to build its own theoretical and practical assets. This article argues that it is only when a discipline has acquired its own identity that it can implement a fertile transdisciplinary contribution.

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1. Introduction: Urban planning is a “multidisciplinary discipline”

Transgressing disciplinary boundaries in research appeared, not less than about twenty years ago, as a blatant requirement of modern science. However, this approach has a long history as illustrated by Thomas Kuhn by the incursion of the physician Dalton into chemistry at the beginning of 20th Century [1]. This approach was considered as an intolerable audacity until recent decades.

As far as urban planning is concerned, the shift of all sorts of problems towards urban issues by the human and social sciences increasingly associates both practising urban planners and researchers, with the specialists of other knowledge. Thus today, it is very difficult for urban planners to ignore the numerous approaches developed by other disciplines. In general, urban planners and researchers are open

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mind to interdisciplinarity, even though they usually graduated in a precise discipline. Those that have crossed disciplinary boundaries, have frequently been integrated in a multidisciplinary team. Therefore, their initial academic training contributes to urban planning practices, and it also nourishes theoretical debate. A double friction, within the multidisciplinary team often occurs. On the one hand, by the exchange with other disciplines dealing with urban issues; on the other hand, urban planners are required to better define the foundations and the originality of their domain. This preoccupation should concern those teaching and researching within this discipline.

If this work is not realised, then urban planning, (which is not recognised as an autonomous discipline despite the pretensions of its founders) could disappear as quickly as it appeared. Therefore, it would be reduced to the surreptitious emergence of an intellectual and professional lobby that tried unsuccessfully, during the 20th century, to give itself a scientific foundation just as the exact sciences realised in their domain.

It would be regrettable if urban planning followed too closely other mature sciences, because it would then only refer to the theoretical and methodological frames of these well established disciplines. If team work constitutes an excellent occasion to learn from these disciplines, it is also a unique opportunity for urban planning to emancipate itself, so that it can further the construction of its own identity.

These subjects are discussed in this article. First, the article considers the explicit multidisciplinary position which characterises urban planning since it was founded at the end of 19th Century. Then the article will discuss the difficulty of being a “multidisciplinary discipline”. Indeed, this viewpoint implies a double requirement during collaboration with other domains of knowledge. First, it requires an accurate appropriation of what is discovered in other fields; second, it requires an up-to-date identification of what constitutes the city. In essence, the city is the core of urban planning and what makes urban planning original in its perspective and its contribution to knowledge production.

2. Overcoming contradictions: Towards a “multidisciplinary discipline”

Modern urban planning has been characterised by interdisciplinarity since it was founded at the end of 19th Century. Since then, academic and professional disciplines have established and split themselves into two groups: the phenomenon sciences, on the one side, and the spiritual (*numen*) sciences, on the other. With Kant’s benediction, this distinction separated science and non-science in a world in which human knowledge had been mixed [2]. Consequently, architecture and urban planning split from engineering following tensions during a conflict with civil engineers. Then, urban planning differentiated itself from architecture by admitting social inquiry influenced by Le Play and his heirs of the Social Museum in France, and by Patrick Geddes in Britain.

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