Reflections on the AESOP/ACSP Congress and Implications for Research and Practice

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This congress has been interesting for the light it has shown on what resilience means, in the context of cities and regions, to different constituencies, as well as for the tensions it has exposed between different theoretical frameworks.

While resilience and complexity, along with sustainability, are elusive notions in some discourses, they come into sharp focus with perfectly crisp definitions as properties of networks. (See in particular, Ulanowicz et al, 2009)   The conceptual clarity that network science provides is most welcome as we endeavor to sort out causal relationships in our 'networked society.'   (See Barabasi, 2002)

Our first keynote speaker, Thomas Elmqvist, reminded us that network theoretic and systems theoretic notions of resilience and complexity have not only been well defined, and have been part of the scholarly literature of planning for many years, but also continue to be useful. What is perhaps qualitatively different now is the fact that we are dealing with *systems of systems* in which global interdependencies—through, e.g., far-flung supply chains and global circulation patterns—are defining features. Now the ecological and economic footprints of cities and regions are global and, conversely, each city and region is susceptible to behavior of others half a world away. If, as John Friedmann has suggested, regional planning has to do with the management of change in territorially organized systems, it now involves simultaneously *multiple territories at multiple spatial and temporal scales*.

We find ourselves at a historical crossroads at which fundamental changes in lifestyles and supporting infrastructures systems *must* be made if societies are to be both sustainable (able to reproduce themselves materially and socially) and resilient (able to withstand crises of various natures). The sub-field of transition studies, as exemplified by the TURAS program at University College Dublin, is therefore becoming increasingly relevant and the questions it addresses are increasingly urgent.

Our second keynote speaker, Susan Fainstein, reminded us of the ethical dimension of community resilience, especially as it concerns the most vulnerable community members. Not only do the materially advantaged have ethical obligations to the materially disadvantaged, but important research by James Galbraith (2012) and Joseph Stiglitz (2012) starkly shows the strong structural relationship between economic inequality and social and economic instability. Greater concentrations of wealth threaten both sustainability and resilience. Michael Batty's keynote presentation reminded us, moreover, of how well-intentioned spatial planning policy at the municipal scale can reinforce existing competitive advantages and disadvantages.

In the final keynote address, Peter Clinch provided a comprehensive examination of the question of whether or not the economies of nations in an economic and monetary union,

which had periphery status upon joining the union, could ever anticipate true and enduring convergence in performance with the economies of core nations. He noted in particular how path dependence plays a role in an economy's status. It is important in considering arguments about this question to be mindful of how regional policies in the European Union (EU), especially those involving structural finds, have served to exacerbate regional inequalities within peripheral economies even as they have reduced inequalities between national economies in the EU.

Turning to implications for research, we need to study issues of resilience closely using modeling frameworks in which the properties in question can arise. (For help here, see Yannis Ioannides's recent book, *From Neighborhoods to Nations: The Economics of Social Interactions*, and Lempert's (2002) suggestions on modeling complexity to support decision making and planning.) We need to cultivate new sensibilities with respect to how signature features of complexity – e.g., emergent phenomena, path dependence, and power laws—can arise and what they imply. We also need to focus on transition paths and how what Lew Hopkins calls 'failures in dynamics' can occur. We must pursue research in applied ethics as well as social science. In a globalized world we need to develop and apply suitably cosmopolitan notions of justice and wellbeing that adequately reflect the world in which we now live and plan, our capabilities and limitations, and our obligations.

As regards practical implications, we—planning professionals and academics alike—need to act on the basis of what we understand but be cautious about what we don't understand. (Takeaways from Michael Batty's and Peter Clinch's addresses are lessons on how misguided planning interventions can go awry.) The precautionary principle is probably still a wise one to adopt—avoid pushing systems into states beyond their historical variability. We need to educate planners about the evolving stylized facts of systemic resilience and complexity and where they can go to learn more. We need as a profession to devote considerable resources to educating the public about viable transition paths if we expect them to go down those paths, while retaining an appropriate level of humility in these turbulent times. As Jurgen Habermas admonished us almost forty years ago, in a process of enlightenment—in which we attempt to free ourselves of strictures that we have been complicit in forging and that prevent us from bringing about a better society—there are only participants.

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Is Resilience Planning's Holy Grail?

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The sustainability flavor of the moment, resilience, was wisely chosen by the conference organizers as the theme. Given that it is an inherent property of nature, both of beings and ecosystems as well as their processes, one finds little to argue. Other than many human processes and organizations are not resilient, in part a result of our modern enlightenment heritage. Invoking the theme of resilience as an object of practice, research, and teaching thus makes perfect sense. Resilience is a nearly unquestioned mantra, an admonishment of what we should strive for in our work.

Who is to argue this sensibility? What better to deal with the 'wrecking ball' (thanks to Bruce Springsteen) that is our society hell-bent on progress, profit, and growth; all things good we were led to believe. The sustainability movement, like the environmental and conservation movements before it, placed those aspirations and guiding principles into question.

This questioning was manifest as a feature of this AESOP-ACSP congress. There have been higher than normal levels of critical reflection and questioning about what we do, and how we can really affect positive change in communities and cities. It is not a sign of the times, where multiple crises deepen, and the past indicators and motivators of hope dim somewhat? The magnitude of the problems, the accelerating pace at which change occurs, and the increasing complexity of virtually everything has made the planner's task of identifying and more importantly designing and implementing actions to meaningfully and lastingly improve our collective and individual conditions more challenging than ever.

All this seems to me to aggregate into a new collective stance of skepticism regarding what we have always presumed we could attain through good planning – a better, brighter future. Our predicaments call that fundamental premise of the planning enterprise into question. This is true in spite of the fact that in many places, spatial planning as a profession and an activity that permeates our institutional practices is bigger, better, and stronger than before. We have affected positive change, yet on aggregate and in the face of the big driving forces of our societies, these changes have been on the margins. So, while we have made many advances and contributions, big and small, across our planet; their impacts have not stemmed the tides of poverty, sprawl, injustice, inequity, climate change, and so on. While I am not alone in recognizing this, I still am, like many of us, an advocate if not an imperialist for planning.

We should seek some comfort in our history. Urban planning, like Europe itself, was forged in crisis. By this I mean planning's modern origins as a response to the human impacts of rapid urbanization due to the industrial revolution in 19th century Europe and the United States. Our future, as Europe's, will be based on our collective response to the current crises. Therein lies our continued hope in two measures. First, our history of instituting positive change. Second, in that in crisis lies opportunity. It has always and everywhere been thus, exemplified by the Chinese character *wei ji*, in which *wei* means 'danger' and *ji* signifies 'opportunity'.

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However, given the inability of planning to solve the bigger problems that led to our current crises, and its inability to make cities demonstrably more just and more sustainable, as national and worldwide data in aggregate show; that even in spite of past success (never a guarantee of future success) and current hope, this leads to the questioning of resilience.

Why is this? The concept of resilience ought to have at least one troubling aspect for planning and governance at this particular juncture in history, despite being in fashion because of the urgency of sustainability. It is ironic precisely at this juncture when politics, institutions, the global economy, and our impacts on numerous ecosystems are revealed to be not sustainable, that a new metaphor of and method to achieve sustainability – resilience – is what may in fact *hinder* society's efforts to be more sustainable. We can observe this by reflecting on one typical definition of resilience, "the amount of change a system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure, or still be in the same state [or shape]" (Innes and Booher 2010, 205, paraphrase of Berkes, et al. 2003).

However, our current systems of governance, markets, and politics are themselves not sustainable. As guiding institutions, they have led our societies into unsustainable states. Moreover, our current systems of markets, governance, and politics, in which planning is inextricably embedded, continue to lead us further away from sustainability, at faster rates. Given this, is it wise to maintain these systems in the same states and shapes as they are now and as they have been for the last decades? That is, is it wise to espouse resilience for current, path-determined institutions and practices under the new and radically different conditions of the crisis society?