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## Chapter 1

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# The Search for Spatial Planning

### Why plan?

The starting point for any book devoted to spatial planning has to be the land. Planning as an activity that attempts to manage spatial change would not exist in any meaningful way if it was not for contention over the future use and development of the land. Spatial planning is owned by everyone who has a vested interest in the land and what happens to it. I am not only talking here about those fortunate enough to own land – and it is one of fortune, literally, in many cases – but those charged with coordinating and managing different uses of the land. Changes to land affect everyone, from the individual to the neighbourhood, to city-dwellers and those who live in a rural area. You do not have to be a landowner to be affected by land-use changes. In fact, just 10 per cent of the population own 90 per cent of the UK's land (Government Office for Science 2010), a startling fact in the twenty-first century when we assume that equality, rights of access, wealth redistribution and opportunity for all have come centre stage politically. Landownership in the UK remains a difficult calculation owing to the fragmented form of data available from differing sources (Home 2009). The UK is also one of the most crowded countries in Europe, with the south-east of England being the most densely populated region, and the south-west the least populated. According to the UK government departments for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and of Communities and Local Government (CLG), the extent of urban land in the UK is put at 14.4 per cent of the total land mass. The land does not only enable us to have homes, shops, hospitals, schools, universities, leisure facilities, transport and places of work. It provides us with water, food, energy, recreation, biodiversity and minerals, and is a site for our waste. Whether it is urban or rural in character, or in an upland or lowland location, at the coast or in a valley, land supplies us with our essential needs and quality of life. But the amount of land we have is just about constant. There is a finite supply of it, and that means as our appetite for more essential services increases and quality of life improves, so does the problem of how to manage how our land is used, in different areas over different time periods.

Would you like to have more houses? That's desirable, but it may have to be at the expense of some fields, or woodland, or the grounds of

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a hospital. Fewer houses mean greater demand, which means higher house prices. Committed to protecting a species' habitat? Very admirable, but that may mean we cannot use that land for any other purpose or we are unable to extract minerals from the ground. Fewer minerals mean that the price of building materials increases or lead to a problem in constructing buildings elsewhere. Do you want to protect old buildings because of their architectural style or historical use? Fine, but that may mean we protect places and make them more expensive for owners or developers to change them into new uses. Places that start to become uneconomic to changes to modern-day requirements could lead to dereliction and decay. And so the problems tend to stack up with land use. How we use the land is rarely a discrete or isolated decision. Deciding on one course of action will probably create further problems in the long run.

When is the best time to make a crucial decision about how best to use land? Building more homes may solve a housing shortage and lead to a lowering of house prices for people looking to get their feet on the rungs of the residential property-market ladder. Demand for housing will be met, but the land used for the development could be close to a river and may be susceptible to flooding if sea levels rise at some uncertain time in the future. Should we take a decision not to build there now, because of a potential threat that may or may not happen in, perhaps, 50 years' time? Or do we press on and allow the development to go ahead, and keep our fingers crossed that a worst-case scenario will not happen? At the other end of the spectrum, more homes will require more drinking water. Where should we allocate a new reservoir to supply the water to the new homes? Water supplies to a town may be appropriate in relation to current usage, but higher usage or the need to supply water to hundreds of more homes will place pressure on that existing water supply. Should we therefore allocate some land somewhere on the edge of the town now for a possible future reservoir in the next 20 to 30 years? And what are the opportunity costs today of taking long-term outlooks?

All these contentions are difficult in themselves but are an aside from the even more tricky issue – in whose interest should we decide on the use of land? The landowner, the developer, the community, the county or even the nation? Building a new airport or railway line may be beneficial to the nation, economically or socially, but it is bound to have a detrimental effect to those individuals who live near the site of the project. What may seem like an improvement for all becomes a nightmare for some, a hotly contested battle between quality of life, rights, responsibilities, freedom and, of course, land. It is little wonder that land, and land use, tend to occupy politicians' time continuously, since they are often called on to mediate between competing uses of

the land locally or become embroiled in local versus national land-use disputes. And the politicians themselves seldom like to get involved. After all, they know only too well that for every winner there is a loser in the great land-use debate. What we are talking about here, of course, is scarcity, urban–rural differences and political choice. The issue of competing uses of the land tends to exercise both landowners and non-landowners alike in the UK. There appears to be a strong sense of attachment and identity to the land and to landscape, especially in rural areas, with an almost inherent anti-development perspective (Swanwick 2009). This is not new: literary writers have bemoaned the loss of the countryside to building for well over a hundred years and have viewed the urban as threatening the rural and rural ways of life (Tewdwr-Jones 2011b).

And there is another dimension to managing land-use change and utilizing spatial planning that adds to the complexity: the territorial governing frame within which planning resides. Planning is an activity of both the public and private sectors, but the different aspects of planning occur at different geographical scales and are formulated, regulated or implemented by different governance actors. Planning has long been an activity of the state in its various guises and has been determined, for most of its life, by statute, by the conferment of legal rights and responsibilities, and by their application to defined, geographically fixed administrative or government units. This has been regarded as necessary to pin down space, to fix it, in order to understand change, but also to deal with it politically to enable intervention, a process long contested by geographers (Massey 2005). What started as an activity of the central state in the early twentieth century soon became an activity of multiple levels of government, shared between the central and local state. As the decades passed, so the governing framework of planning changed and adapted to suit political ideological preferences. The UK has flirted with these changing scales and forms of government (and therefore with planning) throughout the last hundred years, as different governments prioritized different scales of policy- and decision-making. Since 1945, Britain, like nation-states across the globe, has relied upon and sometimes experimented with centralization, localization, regionalization, city-regionalization, decentralization, Europeanization, spatialization and devolution, not in a linear way but often moving forward then doubling back to previous older forms and recognizable governing structures, depending on global economic changes, which political party was in office and the needs of nations and regions (Brenner 2004). Since the late 1990s the UK has also, to a greater extent, relied upon the market and the neo-liberalization of public services and government, with the private sector playing as dominant a role in planning as the public sector. So what sometimes might be regarded as a national plan-

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ning issue or a matter of national and regional significance has been clouded by successive reforms of the governing framework around planning, with historical roles of some governing scales retaining a legacy for newly emerging forms of planning tiers. The provision of new infrastructure, such as high-speed railway lines, energy installations or airport expansion, are what might be regarded as classic examples of politically contentious land-use developments that often unleash conflicts between and across different scales of government. Since the late 1990s this picture has been clouded by the emergence of governance, alongside government, initiating policies and taking decisions on issues and in areas that perhaps had been formally occupied in some way by the state. The architecture of planning has become enmeshed in both a governmental and governance web of relations. The following questions are then often posed: Can spatial change be fixed in such a standard way? Who has the responsibility for dealing with planning matters? Who benefits from policies and decisions? Which tier of government has legitimacy to act, if at all, in matters of resolving land-use expectations and conflicts (cf. Castells 1996)?

If all these difficulties and potential uncertainties with how the land is used are causing you to think twice about land, then I am starting to engage you in the theme of this book. Spatial planning has been the process charged with managing these contentions and short- to medium-term perspectives legislatively and professionally for well over a hundred years in the UK. It has been known by many different titles over the decades, ranging from town planning, town and country planning and civic design, to urban and regional planning and urban development management. But it essentially comes down to the same thing: a professional and highly politically contentious process attempting to make sense of the drivers of change that have land-use effects geographically, against short-, medium- and long-term trends, within changing and changeable governing structures, and individual and collective expectations that have social, economic and environmental implications that change over time. It is partly a regulatory process, partly a strategic assessment, partly a governing framework, and partly a futures project. Managing land use through the planning process comprises several different forms. The regulatory element – the statutory requirement for individuals to apply for planning permission before developing land – is the part of the planning system most members of the public have come into contact with, either as an applicant or as a consultee on development proposals. But the planning system is actually much more than this, but is often working behind the scenes, strategically away from direct public gaze.

The best analogy I can use to describe what it is like to manage the land and land-use conflicts is spinning plates – a stage entertainer attempting

constantly to spin a dozen or so plates as they balance precariously on top of poles. All the plates represent a different demand on the land, going at different speeds, and require you to keep an eye on each one and on the whole ensemble simultaneously. It is not so much a trick, but rather a skill.

Professional planners have been present in the UK since 1914. They are a separate professional family to architects, surveyors and civil engineers, but are closely related. The architect produces individual building designs that are intended as symbolic and iconic statements in the built environment. The surveyor measures and values the land's physical features and assets, and works on property development projects. The civil engineer designs, constructs and maintains the physical environment, including bridges, roads and other forms of infrastructure. The planner, by contrast, attempts to order and regulate the land to avoid land-use conflicts and considers alternative courses of action and short- and long-term needs in an integrated and strategic way. Frequently, land-use proposals and contentions on the ground give rise to conflicts between the different professional families who work for different clients, constituencies and interests. This is only to be expected when the future of the land and the uses to which it is put are managed by four different sets of professionals who work in both the public and private sectors. And given that land is a finite resource, and development opportunities are often limited, the rewards and penalties of different choices of action on the land and its future can be contested in a politically and economically charged atmosphere (Owens and Cowell 2010). It remains a curiosity, perhaps, to consider that landownership does not guarantee any development rights in itself. Land acquisition is a separate process to the requirement to gain planning approval prior to building. Conversely, landownership is not a prerequisite to gain planning permission; anyone can apply for planning permission for any land, even land not in the applicant's ownership. The degree to which approved schemes can be implemented will then be determined through land purchasing (see Reade 1987).

There is no greater illustration of the costs associated with this contention than to reveal the value of land itself. Land value is determined by its location and physical manifestation and by its proximity to other locations, infrastructure and services (Bateman 2009). But the value of land changes dramatically if it has been designated for development purposes or has planning permission for a particular type of land use. As a general rule of thumb, land with planning permission is worth eight to ten times the value of land for sale without planning. One-third of the value of land with a residential housing use derives from the land itself. Agricultural land may not be valued so highly, but if it is close to existing built-up areas its value may incorporate a 'hope value' – a sum over and

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above the basic agricultural value – in the belief that that land may be developed at some point in the future.

For decades, planning has been an enduring feature of most nations' attempts to manage land-use changes, the growth and contraction of cities, the renewal of infrastructure and the use of resources, balanced against individual and societal preferences within a democratic arena. But it has not been a static entity. It has been subject to change itself, from diverse socioeconomic and environmental conditions, the responsibilities of governments and decision makers, and from division of rights between the state, individuals and businesses. Planning is therefore an extremely fluid activity, prone to changing political preferences and structural factors, as well as the desire for physical improvement and renewal. So before we consider the nature of spatial planning, the pressures put upon it, and the form it takes territorially and governmentally, it is worth briefly stepping back in history to look at how we have planned previously and the reasons why planning has always been subject to so much alteration. We may then begin to understand the logic of planning reform, but also the expectations politically for planning to deliver quite diverse and seemingly contradictory results.

### **A little light history**

Planning has been around for much longer than a hundred years, of course. Different civilizations over time have employed forms of ordering land in the most efficient way to solve land-use conflicts (Cherry 1974). Remains of urban planning designs in settlements have been discovered from Mesopotamian, Harrapan and Egyptian times. The Greeks and Romans also employed city planning to create street patterns of central services, rectilinear grids, squares and vistas, often close to watercourses, not only in celebration of civic pride but also for strategic and militaristic purposes. Medieval and Baroque street patterns in some towns in Europe followed these early forms, with wide avenues, grand projects and designs, and often walled for defence purposes. Some were built – the consequence of feudal lords' and landowners' desires for order and rationality in the city form – but others floundered. Christopher Wren's grand plans for a rebuilt city of London after the Great Fire of 1666 did not materialize, and the city was reconstructed using the medieval street pattern that had existed before the fire. Urban planning was also employed in the redesigns of towns and cities in Britain and Ireland in Georgian times after about 1720; Bath, Brighton, Dublin, Edinburgh, Limerick and London being some of the most well known. All these periods and styles represent a type of urban planning, but it is really from the early Victorian era that we begin to see the form of urban

planning we have today start to take hold. The distinction is that in the UK from the nineteenth century, planning was no longer a militaristic exercise of the state or a vanity project of the aristocracy. Rather, planning became a broader, social and political project intended to deal with the externalities of rapid urbanization and ameliorate the social and health consequences of population overcrowding and poor public health (Hall and Tewdwr-Jones 2011). It was only in 1909 in Britain that planning was enshrined in an Act of Parliament for the first time.

The transformation of planning from a proactive defence and design activity of the elite into a reactive strategic and coordinating activity of the state was not straightforward. It came about as a reaction to the conditions of the nineteenth century not only in the UK, but also in other parts of Western Europe, the United States and Canada, Japan and Australia, countries that were all experiencing the fall-out of the industrial revolution and rapid economic growth. Urbanization and the rise of the industrial city transformed previously small towns into large metropolises, as migrants and population increases outgrew the physical extent of housing and services, creating dense living conditions, a lack of sanitation and sunlight, disease and squalor, and poorly and rapidly constructed hovels. The industrial city was largely controlled by businesses and the elite. Parliament cared little about the welfare of the citizens and working classes and was reluctant to intervene; Parliament in the UK in the shape of the House of Lords and the House of Commons comprised representatives of the elite themselves – aristocrats, landowners and successful industrialists. The Great Reform Act of 1832 had extended voting rights to adult males who rented propertied land of a certain value, but this still only represented about one in seven UK males. The 1867 Reform Act franchised all males within urban areas to vote and this was extended to rural areas in 1884. It was only in the Representation of the People Act of 1918 that women were allowed to vote for the first time, but full equality was only reached between men and women in 1928.

The point here is that the nineteenth century witnessed one of the most rapid changes to the landscape and the rise of urban populations who produced the output of Britain's industrial dominance. They lived, for the most part, in dire social circumstances and remained disenfranchised from the democratic process. What little opportunity existed for these urban dwellers to change the circumstances within which they lived rested entirely on the philanthropy and goodwill of those selective industrialists and landowners who were prepared to fund and design better-quality housing and services for their use. For most of the nineteenth century, there was no free health service, no welfare system, no subsidized housing, and no free education for children. Property development was the preserve of the landowner alone and there was no

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**Figure 1.1** *Westminster, where planning legislation for England is debated.*

Planning as an activity is only legitimized by the will of the state, and Parliament defines the development rights and sets parameters for possible land-use changes.



control over the wider affects of urban change or urban sprawl into the countryside, or the long-term effects of incremental change. The urban conditions were reported widely throughout the 1800s, by journalists and authors, social reformers and parliamentary campaigners, but it took the best part of 70 years for government to respond officially and recognize the need for intervention (Hall 2007). The barriers were as much ideological as moralistic. A Victorian belief that the poor should help themselves and a view that the working classes were the undeserving poor, coupled with the lack of political representation in Parliament and a voice in the democratic process, held back possible action. The land question also figured prominently in debates – the idea that the state should interfere in the liberty of individuals and their property interests on behalf of the wider citizenry was bound to agitate some. The question concerning the right for public regulation over private land interests has been an ongoing theme for well over a century. The public–private land-rights issue has served to continually question ideologically the role of a state planning process and land-use regulatory system for wider strategic purposes other than to maximize the economic potential of land and development opportunity.

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## **The twentieth-century experience of planning**

At a casual glance, it is easy to believe that ‘the planning system’ has been a relatively static and enduring force in the British polity and land debate for a hundred years. But the reality is far more complex, political, contradictory and less linear. It underwent change in each decade of the twentieth century and all the signs are that planning reform will be a continual process through the twenty-first century as well (see Box 1.1). Principles of planning in the early 1900s remain present in the early 2010s but they have been checked, or rather compromised, by additional expectations politically in the intervening years. Those expectations relate directly to changing social, economic and environmental conditions and are only to be expected in a process that by its very nature is supposed to be about managing change and strategically thinking about the future of land use. But the changes are also a symptom of political preference, both ideological and institutional, concerning responsibilities allocated between and across different tiers of government, of individual politicians, and the needs of the market (Rydin 2003). We can identify different phases in the maturing of planning from the early 1900s to the present day; even within particular phases there are differences in substance, style and political commitment towards planning.

It is useful as a context to a book devoted to the changing ebbs and flows of planning to delve into a little history. This is not meant to be a rigorous historical assessment of planning or an examination of the effects and impacts of planning on land use; that can be found elsewhere. For a review of the history of twentieth-century planning, see Ashworth (1954), Keeble (1961) Bruton (1974), Thornley (1991) and Hall and Tewdwr-Jones (2011). Rather, it provides an overview of some of the changing features and phases of planning through an intensely political age. The intention here is to show how planning over time is not a linear process, but one subject to lurches between agendas and ideas, political ideologies and reactions. These shifts in planning have been discussed elsewhere in the planning literature, notably by Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (2006) and Allmendinger and Haughton (2007). As time marches on, some ideas brought to bear in planning are new, whereas others have sometimes been tried before but are recycled in new times, in new guises and given new labels. The fact that ‘the planning system’ has endured through all these changes is a remarkable testament to its resilience. An alternative perspective is that maybe planning is a useful political tool because it has become sufficiently adaptable to take on new agendas and preferences. Let us start a hundred years ago.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the first elements of an organized process of urban planning for improved housing and con-

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ditions had commenced. The Garden City movement and the City Beautiful movement were born, promoting a new design ethic that combined the best features of towns and countryside while promoting socially mixed communities. This was the first phase of the modern planning process in the UK. In the spirit of Greek, Roman and Georgian town planning, Garden Cities were idealized forms of the future city, with wide boulevards, tree-lined avenues, plenty of public gardens and allotments, clustered central services such as shops and amenities, and a range of housing types, ameliorating in the process those high densities, overcrowding, lack of sunlight and public open space associated with the nineteenth-century industrial city.

Some garden cities were constructed, in places like Letchworth and Welwyn, but progress was slow, notwithstanding the degree to which it is difficult for a single landowner to plan and construct a town from scratch. But even the provision of improved housing in existing towns and cities proved to be problematic. Prime Minister David Lloyd George's promise in 1918 to provide 'homes fit for heroes', hailing those soldiers fortunate enough to have returned from the trenches in World War I, was followed by a decade of divergent political views on the need for public housing, subsidized rents and finding sufficient amount of land for new house building, but new housing was developed rapidly in the interwar years. Modern planning's intention was to transform the old urban centres where the worst social problems existed. But the implementation of planning occurred as the outward expansion of urban areas through suburban growth. It was much easier to build outside the built-up area, where landownership posed less of a problem and where land was relatively cheap. Railway companies and speculative builders saw an opportunity to buy cheap land for housing adjacent to roads and railways, and so suburban housing was developed along major transport corridors into and out of cities, a practice that became known as 'ribbon development'.

From the 1920s and 1930s, planning's reputation started to become tarnished, for generating urban sprawl and for despoiling the countryside. In reality, these processes were less the result of state planning and more market and landowner opportunism. As the reaction against urban encroachment on the countryside intensified in these decades, championed by countryside groups, so parliament reacted by changing planning laws to protect amenity and agricultural land. The proactive role for planning – creating better places for people in the interests of better housing, improved public health and community well-being – was shadowed by a reactive role intended to control, stop or regulate development interests in the name of rural protection (Hall et al. 1973). Planning from the 1930s therefore had to undertake both roles simultaneously. In the UK, town planning became 'town and country planning', two proc-

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