

# Vain foresight: Against the idea of implementation in planning

Planning Theory

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/plt](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/plt)**Nikhil Kaza**

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

**Abstract**

Why are many plans not implemented? Common explanations are planners have little power, they fail to account for political or environmental uncertainty in the plans or they failed to include enough voices during the planning process. The theoretical frameworks on which we base our understanding of plans focus on implementation as a key evaluative mechanism. I challenge the premise that plans realise their potential only when they are implemented. Monitoring implementation of plans presupposes that we know what plans there are to monitor. Such monitoring privileges published plans and ignores all the other plans that guide urban development. It assumes that the decision situations in which plans are used are observable. By jettisoning implementation as a key criterion by which to evaluate the effectiveness of plans, we can begin to focus on the myriad ways in which plan makers and others use plans. We can instead ask, ‘How are these plans used? Who uses them? When are they useful? How to make useful plans?’ With these questions, we can create different evaluative frameworks for different types of plans. Some unimplementable plans are worth making.

**Keywords**

conformance, evaluation, implementation, performance, plan use

*But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,  
In proving foresight may be vain:  
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men  
Gang aft agley,  
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promis'd joy!*

*Robert Burns (1759–1796)***Corresponding author:**

Nikhil Kaza, Department of City and Regional Planning, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Campus Box 3140, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3140, USA.

Email: [nkaza@unc.edu](mailto:nkaza@unc.edu)

## Introduction

Why make plans if you can't implement them? This question underlies the existential angst of planning as a profession. Buffeted by critiques of Altshuler (1965), who argued that planners have no legitimacy because they have no political and institutional support, and of Davidoff (1965), who argued that plans should function as advocacy tools that marshal arguments to support partisan positions, planners (especially in the public sector) have been 'reduced to the role of umpire or a schoolyard monitor' (Campanella, 2011). I examine the claims that the planning profession is on its way to obsolescence due to its abdication of technical expertise, its commitments to vague generalities and its production of unimplementable products that are sullied through political processes beyond its control. In this article, I defend the thesis that implementation is a poor criterion by which we can and should judge plans. Different plans have different purposes, and evaluations should therefore consider their stated and unstated purposes. Implementation is largely incidental to many plans and the insistence on implementability limits considering many kinds of plans that are useful.

Ryan (2006) provides an example of how judging individual plans solely by the implementation obscures the uses and usefulness of plans. He finds that during the downtown redevelopment processes in Providence, Rhode Island, since the late 1950s, 20 plans have been made. These plans include physical plans, economic development plans, university area plans and historic preservation plans. They were made, adopted and championed by a variety of public and private agencies. He finds that, not surprisingly, only a few of the actions and designs proposed by any of these plans were implemented by mid-2000s. If we were to evaluate a plan from the 1960s in the following decade based on whether it was implemented or not, the plan would be judged as a failure. So, why did the organisations keep making them? It is instructive to look at how these plans worked. Later plans sometimes repackaged ideas proposed by earlier plans, and some of those repackaged ideas did get incrementally implemented over time. If so, which of the plans were implemented? Neither the 'original' plan that fixed the idea, nor the plan that is temporally proximate to the realisation of the idea deserve credit for implementation. However, each of these plans created conditions for subsequent plans to frame the debates and to direct decisions, and therefore making such plans was still useful.

Even such expanded timescales for evaluating implementation rely on particular ideas about what a plan should be and how the plan relates to outcomes on the ground. Conformance evaluation approaches, such as Ryan (2006), insist that outcomes conform to the blueprints set forth in the plan and assume that these plans are causally linked to outcomes. However, actors, including but not limited to public sector, use plans as a-but not sole-justification to act. However, they act in ways that are not envisioned by the plan. The causal links between plans and the outcomes are too tenuous to establish in complex multi-organisational and overlapping jurisdictional environments, even when the plans are used.

In response to these critiques, performance approaches to plan evaluation were developed (see Alexander and Faludi, 1989; Connerly and Muller, 1993; Mastop and Faludi, 1997). In these approaches, plans are judged by their use in ex-post decision-making, irrespective of the conformance of the outcomes to the plans. Though, these approaches

have strong theoretical appeal, they still fall short. Performance evaluations presuppose a unitary decision-maker, a clearly observable planning and decision process and a clear separation of pre-plan and post-plan eras. I argue that such separation is an artefact of implementation research rather than how plans are used: in a multi-organisational environment, many actors make many overlapping plans with intersecting scopes. These plans are amended over time, in many cases, outside the formal procedures. Organisations plan and decide publicly or privately and in different coalitions in a dynamic fashion (Kaza and Hopkins, 2009). Such plan-making and plan-using make observing which plans were consulted in the decision-making process and by whom difficult.

While conformance approaches rely on observable outcomes conforming to a single observable plan, performance approaches rely on single observable decision process that follow the adoption of the plan. They ignore the complexities of plan-making and decision-making processes; when plans and decisions interact; decisions and actions are informed by plans; plans are amended, discarded, reimagined and reinvigorated while acting; organisations join, withdraw, consent and obstruct during and beyond the plan-making processes; and organisations decide privately, outside the joint decision-making frameworks using others' plans. In many of these cases, plans are not merely implemented, they are used strategically.

Some have argued that in complex multi-organisational, multi-stakeholder environments, the purpose of planning is to engender better deliberative practices (e.g. Innes, 1995), to build institutional capacity (e.g. Healey, 1998), or to create political spaces for conflict (e.g. Pløger, 2004). Creating plans is incidental in these frameworks, while the key questions are largely about the process of planning itself. Since plans do not figure centrally, implementing plans is moot.

However, plans are key to the enterprise of planning (Neuman, 1998). Unlike Neuman, I do not restrict my definition of plans to 'maps with lines that mark boundaries' (p. 215). They are not blueprints that symbolise the future state of the place or an organisation and should be expected to be carried out *in toto*. The plans are not binding documents, mostly because these binds are routinely ignored in practices (see Alexander et al., 1983; Tian and Shen, 2011). Instead, plans are about inter-related sets of decisions facing one or many actors, irrespective of whether they have police power. Plans work because they are *partial commitments* under natural and strategic uncertainty; they are signals infused with noise (Alexander, 1981; Hoch, 2007; Hopkins and Knaap, 2016). In such a framework, implementation is at the periphery of plans' usefulness, even when plans are central to managing change. Plans are a way to influence actions rather than to direct and coordinate them (Boyer and Hopkins, 2018). *The influence of plans in shaping one's own actions as well as others, while important, is indirect and therefore causal attribution is difficult.*

I am not limiting my critique and analysis to spatial plans as contrasted with strategic plans (Salet and Faludi, 2000). The traditional distinctions argue that the focus of the strategic plans is on institutional (e.g. rules, rights, practices, taboos, sanctions and organisations) reconfiguration, while the focus of spatial plans is the configuration of actions and outcomes in space with particular attention to interdependencies (Albrechts and Balducci, 2013). Faludi (2006) argues that strategic planning occurs in a multi-organisational environment that is laden with uncertainty and while these features might occur at the local level, they are more prominent at a regional or national level. In these

interpretations, strategic plans are amenable to 'application' criterion while regulative local plans are amenable to 'implementation' criterion (Rivolin, 2008).

While the level of detail, mode of planning and emphasis of spatial and strategic plans are different, implementation is no more problematic for spatial plans than is for strategic plans and these distinctions are not tenable. Local plans are also not regulative in many contexts (see, for example, Norton, Secretary of the Interior et al. v. Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance et al., 2004), nor is the uncertainty more prominent at larger spatial and jurisdictional scales than smaller ones. University campus master plans as well as the city's future land use maps, quintessential spatial plans, have similar purposes and both result in inter and intra organisational politicking after adoption. Strategic plans of universities that influence resources and attention of the organisation (say, for example, in hiring decisions) is fraught with similar issues. Strategic plans such as economic development plans that focus on industrial recruitment and skill development are no more 'applied' and no less 'implemented' than spatial plans such as long-range transit plans.

In the rest of the critique, I elaborate on how our conventional ideas of implementation presuppose a particular type of plan and used in particular ways. They assume a single plan fixed in time, a single decision process and clear delineation of pre-plan and post-plan eras. These plans have stable features such as precise and neatly articulated outcomes, goals, actions and values. Empirically, we observe many formal plans (and many more unarticulated ones) rather than one. We also observe that urban development outcomes are results of myriad decision processes and are affected by different public and private organisations and collectives. If we expect that these organisations are trying to influence decisions of themselves and others, we should expect them to make salient plans by informally and formally amending, discarding, joining, contesting and resurrecting other plans. Making useful plans is fundamentally about creating credible signals in a multi-organisational environment.

More important than realising these goals/outcomes is their function as lodestars. They also act as signals to others about the plan-makers' commitments. This also leads us to differentiate the maker of the plan from its users. Because plans are used by others, they could be used in ways that are not envisioned by the plan-maker and in ways that are inimical to the intent of the plan. If we acknowledge such uses of plans are quite common, then we can be charitable to plans that are imprecise and vague. Some types of plans are meant to be useful even when they cannot be/are not implemented. These are different types of contingent plans, policies for repeated situations and deliberate inactions. It is useful to make these types of plans even if we cannot carry them out in a conventional sense. Organisations make these kinds of plans to focus their own as well as others' attention. In other cases, organisations make plans simply out of organisational inertia or because of institutional isomorphism. These types of plans have little to do with the decision-situations they are trying to influence but with other organisational prerogatives such as securing funding and accreditation.

None of these arguments imply that no plan is implemented or implementable. Some are. Nor am I arguing that we should not bother with implementing plans. My main point is that plans are useful in ways beyond carrying them out and many types of plans should not be judged by the conventional implementation standard. Understanding what kinds of plans can and should be judged by the implementation standard helps us to distinguish

between the uses and usefulness of different types of plans. Elaborating the ways in which plans are useful can help us make better plans and appreciate the myriad ways in which plans work and are used.

## **Characterising implementation in planning: implementing what?**

How do we observe implementation? The standard definition of implementation is carrying out actions in line with decisions that have already been taken in support of stated goals. One way to observe implementation is to measure if the goals have been achieved or if the outcome conforms to the stated goals. Another is to see if the means specified *a priori* to achieve the goals have been followed, irrespective of whether the goals have been achieved. In either case, theories of implementation rely on proper and complete specification of ends and means in the programmes policies and plans. In seminal work on implementation, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) analyse a federal economic development programme in California and locate the failure of the programme to create employment opportunities for minorities in the inadequate causal theory between actions and goals as well as the organisational and inter-organisational slippages in coordination and the complexity of joint action. The separation of ‘creating the programme’ from ‘implementing the programme’ is the linchpin of large body of implementation research that Pressman and Wildavsky spawned (Hill and Hupe, 2009).

Conventional analytical frameworks that are used to evaluate implementation separate policy and design formulation (plan-making) from implementation process (Winter, 2011). The implementation processes include (inter)organisational behaviours, management and the modes of operations of street-level bureaucrats. Much of the analysis of implementation in public administration focuses on the implementation processes, whereas the planning field focuses on the policy formulation processes. For public policy analysts, organisational mechanisms, incentives, sanctions, frictions and slippages explain the implementation failures (e.g. Lipsky, 2010). For planners, the substantive and procedural lacunae in plans and policies explain the failure of implementation of plans (e.g. Alexander and Faludi, 1989; Berke et al., 2006).

Planners and policy analysts typically use a linear and legible temporal sequence to understand implementation: deliberate-predict-plan/formulate-implement-evaluate. Revisiting a classic planning example helps illustrate the problem of legibility. Suchman (1987), in her opening statement, discusses two traditions of navigation as metaphors for types of purposeful action as they relate to planning: European and Trukese. The European navigator sets a course *a priori* and the major part of the rest of the effort is to correct any deviation from this course. The European navigator’s plan is a detailed set of actions, complete with reckonings, bearings and lines of position, as well as policies to correct course when the vessel goes off-course, a set of designs and policies. On the other hand, the Trukese navigator only sets a goal and responds to uncertain situations in an *ad hoc* fashion without losing sight of the goal. The plan is merely a goal and a loosely defined set of policies in anticipated situations (based on previous experience and learning) and improvisation in unanticipated situations (also, a learnt skill). Both

navigators have plans but monitoring implementation means different things in these different situations. The plan and actions of the European navigator can be evaluated based on the conventional implementation metric. We can observe if the European navigator reaches the destination (conformance), or if she follows the laid-out course and the policies for correcting the course (performance). Observing implementation of the Trukese navigator's plan is more problematic because it is unarticulated and adapted. The relevant plan for Trukese navigator is constantly being tailored in response to changing goals, currents and wind. There is little separation of plan-making and implementation phases in this instance.

Even the case for monitoring the implementation of the European navigator's plan is not as straightforward as it would first appear. If she reaches the desired destination by a route not specified in the predefined course, the plan is not considered implemented, yet the outcome envisaged in the plan is achieved. Plans are considered fully implemented, in a naïve conformance framework, only when both the destination is reached and the course is followed: conformance of both ends and means. If on the other hand, the course is followed to some extent but abandoned due to changing circumstances (e.g. wind, currents or goals), plans are (partially) implemented in both performance and conformance frameworks. In the performance framework, which allows the plan to be advisory rather than a firm commitment, the plan is useful when it informs the decisions that follow changing circumstances. If changes in the weather necessitate abandoning the course, the plan is still useful because of the persistence and usefulness of the goal. If, on the other hand, the destination changes mid-course, most of the plan is not useful.

To overcome these critiques, evaluations typically focus on what are presumed to be relatively stable features of plans: desired goals (outcomes), accepted values specified in the plans (reasons) or actions within the jurisdiction of the plan-user. Talen (1996), for example, assesses the implementation success of the park plans by the City of Pueblo by the accessibility and coverage of the parks (outcomes) measured, at the end of the study period, against the goals of the plans. She argues that evaluating the patterns of park distribution rather than the conformance of the exact locations of the park is a right approach for measuring the implementation, recognising that strict conformance of outcomes is futile. Similarly, Berke et al. (2006) found that Low Impact Development principles<sup>1</sup> (values) specified by the plans are not found in the permit applications; they conclude that plans are not adequately implemented. Laurian et al. (2004) argue that conformance of the development permits issued by city to the adopted plans represents the measure of implementation. While outcomes are not fully under the control of the city, permitting is within the jurisdiction of the city. Plans represent the commitments of the city; not following through on the commitments through its actions represents the lack of implementation, irrespective of outcomes.

Yet the presumption of stability is misplaced. The nature of uncertainty and its relationship to plan-making has been well studied (e.g. Abbot, 2005; Chakraborty et al., 2011). Abbot describes the causal uncertainty, organisational uncertainty, value uncertainty and external uncertainty that bedevil the plan-making process. These different uncertainties require different planning responses, including bargaining, negotiating and learning among various parties involved in the plan-making process. What is understudied, however, is how uncertainty affects decision-making processes after the plan is

made or the programme is formulated. In multi-organisational and multi-actor environments, programmes are subverted from within through games such as token approval, deflection of goals, territorial markings and coordination problems. Policy monopolies and misaligned incentives of different actors increase the value uncertainty as well as organisational uncertainty even after the plans and programmes have been putatively agreed upon (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). We only need to recall the cases of Fordlandia and Songdo,<sup>2</sup> among many others, to see how the best laid plans have been rendered null due to changing economic, social and political conditions (external uncertainty). The object of inquiry, the plan, morphs to make implementation a useful criterion to evaluate it with.

## Many plans over time

One of the key but unstated assumptions in implementation research is that the plan/policy/programme adoption cleanly demarcates the before and after states of the world. Also implicit is that the 'planning monitor' (Alterman and Hill, 1978) has access to all the relevant plans. Such access presupposes that there are a limited number of plans (ideally one) that the authority to implement them rests with the planner and that non-conformance is a matter of renegeing on firm commitments. Furthermore, the presumption is that there are no disagreements within the elements of the plan or among various plans that pertain to the specific situation. We pay scant attention to other plans and policies that are complementary, competing for attention and resources or downright contradictory. More often than not, all of this is a matter of evaluative convenience.

In a study about planning in McHenry County, a single county in the United States, Finn et al. (2007) found 43 plans, still operational, made by various planning agencies, local governments and advocacy organisations. Some of these plans deliberately disagreed with one another with regard to expansions/constructions of new roads and creation of new highway interchanges. And, this study does not even acknowledge informal plans that are not published as documents. The issue is not the vertical or horizontal consistency of these plans but that these plans are made by coalitions of different but overlapping set of actors and agencies with different purposes. Evaluating the implementation of a single plan misses the crucial interactions among these plans and plan-makers (Bruce and Newman, 1978).

Much has been written about post-Katrina planning and rebuilding in New Orleans, Louisiana (see, for example, Olshansky and Johnson, 2010). The three prominent recovery planning efforts right after the hurricane resulted in three plans with very different orientations: the Bring New Orleans Back Commission's plan, which included consolidation of city with specific neighbourhoods targeted for development; the City Council's New Orleans Neighbourhoods Rebuilding Plan, which proposed rebuilding all the neighbourhoods while addressing pre-Katrina concerns of abandoned properties; and the Unified New Orleans Plan, which proposed a vaguely defined clustering of neighbourhoods accounting for flood risk. Both the city council and the Louisiana Recovery Authority<sup>3</sup> adopted all three plans without reconciling them even though they contradicted one another (Ehrenfeucht and Nelson, 2013). The three plans cannot be implemented simultaneously. The choice of which plan to evaluate conditions our conclusions

about the efficacy of plans and planning processes. *What is missed by using a single plan as a unit of analysis is the crucial interaction among these different plans.*

A plan does not represent a clear disjuncture point in the urban development process. Ryan (2006), in a study of downtown redevelopment plans over a period of 4 decades in Providence, RI, writes,

Providence's fertile downtown planning context encouraged both the issuance and implementation of plans during the study period. The persistent issuance and implementation of subsequent plans revealed a process of incremental downtown plan implementation. Incremental implementation occurred in Providence when incomplete plan implementation was followed by the implementation of later plans that proposed similar ideas. Incomplete downtown plan implementation permitted incremental implementation in two ways. First, incomplete implementation permitted elements of a plan vision to be realized. However, because it was incomplete, it also provided both a rationale and physical space for the proposition and implementation of later plans. (p. 58)

This interpretation is not dissimilar to the garbage can model of decision-making, where solutions are advocated independent of the problem and repeatedly over time until they get adopted by the decision-makers and adoption is a matter of chance rather than through deliberate rational choice (Cohen et al., 1972; Lai, 2006). In such instances, the persistence of the idea is more important for realisation than its inherent superiority/optimality. If we accept that *there are many plans, made by many actors in different coalitions over a long period time, and they interact with one another, jockeying for influence over decision-making of different actors*, then we can begin to appreciate the nuances of the use of plans by many different actors in their decisions, advocacy and actions.

## **Types of plans and (in)adequacies of measures of implementation**

Certain kinds of plans are implemented, and more importantly, the implementation can be observed and measured. But these measurements are laden with assumptions about utility and feasibility. For example, the implementation of a Transportation Improvement Programme (TIP) – a list of agreed upon transportation projects in a metropolitan area – can be measured by monitoring budgetary spending and percentage of project completions. Burby (2003) uses the ratio of actions that are completed relative to actions that are not to measure implementation. Conformance frameworks are useful for these kinds of project plans (Faludi and van der Valk, 1994).

However, in these frameworks, construction of a bike path included in a TIP is considered implemented even when the timeline specified in the TIP or the route specified in a detailed design plan does not come to fruition. This measurement of completion as implementation is important for variety of organisational purposes, including designing incentive structures, resource prioritisation, organisational learning and oversight. Agreement about what constitutes fidelity of the outcome to the plan element, the atomicity and coherence of an action, are important for such measurement.

Similarly, a plan that is an enumeration of goals can also be evaluated for implementation. Such measurement, like the evaluation of the Trukese navigator's plan, requires



observing whether or not goals have been achieved within the prescribed time frame, without resorting to observing all the actions of the agent who adopts the plan. For example, many local climate change action plans, especially mitigation plans, are short on prescriptive actions (unlike a TIP) but long on targets for emission reductions (Reckien et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2010). There is an implicit causal connection between the plan and the outcomes without assigning responsibility or committing to particular courses of action. Often, these targets are rarely met, so these plans fail the implementation criterion. Nonetheless, the goals are useful because *the unobserved counterfactual of not having them might result in a worse outcome*.

Another type of plan that can be implemented in a conventional sense is design, a collection of tightly coupled actions. Designs specify fully worked out relationships among actions and/or states of the world. They usually evoke a spatial image, but are not necessarily that restrictive. An annual budget of an organisation, where funds are allocated to various tasks, is a design because of the tight coupling among allocation to one task and another; changes in one allocation affects the entire budget, if there is little slack. Similarly, a schedule in a syllabus for a course is a design; the topics are arranged in a sequential order to facilitate learning. Functional relationships are important in organisational restructuring plans. Local energy plans are usually about the various interdependencies of mineral rights, land rights and access rights and institutional changes that are required to redefine them in the context of these interdependencies. The spatial relationships are incidental in these designs (Kaza and Hopkins, 2012).

The European navigator's plan is a design much like a site plan or a future land use map. To monitor the implementation of design, we need to monitor if the configuration of outcomes and actions followed the specified plan. In a site plan, spatial and perhaps temporal relationships (e.g. phasing) among building footprints, footpaths, parking, drainage facilities, sanitary sewer lines and landscaping elements are enumerated. In a future land use map, locations of public facilities and infrastructure are specified in relation to future development and land uses: a site plan at a different scale with a different set of activities. A long-range transportation plan (LRTP) usually contains designs that specify the spatial and sequencing relationships among various transportation projects and their justifications. A deviation from the stated configuration is a severe non-conformity (Type C) that Loh (2011) cautioned against. Deviations can be monitored, and the abundance of the deviations essentially undermines the signalling potential of the plans.

However, fidelity of outcome is largely beside the point for these designs. If during construction, one encounters unexpected issues (e.g. soil drainage), the site plan is used as a starting point that informs the adaptive decision-making that accounts for both the relationships identified in the plan as well as the new information that was unavailable during the plan-making process (Lessard, 1998; Rauws, 2017). The site plan may never be formally modified to account for this information and the ultimate outcome might be different from the design that is specified in the site plan. If one were to evaluate the outcomes as they relate to the 'adopted' site plan, the plan is not implemented. However, the site plan played a crucial part in the outcome. Similar adaptive decision-making can be observed in spending budgets, delivering courses and organisational restructuring. *The designs are quite useful even without the fidelity of outcomes or actions.*

It is in these adaptive decision-making contexts that performance evaluation approaches shine. Even in those project plans whose function is regulative of one's own activities (let alone other's actions), observing how plans inform subsequent decisions and actions is important. However, to observe this decision-making, we need to observe *not only how the formal decision-making processes are constrained, informed and influenced by the plans but also their use in the non-formal processes occurring on the outside*. In the downtown redevelopment efforts in Providence, we need to not only consider the effect of the various plans on the decisions of the city but also the effect of these plans in the non-coordinated decisions of various businesses, the developers and the university. Such decision processes are rarely observed, and performance evaluations undervalue the pervasive importance of plans. Thus, to observe the influence of plans we need to use deep ethnographic methods to understand the decisions of various actors affecting urban development processes, and the plans they use, rather than focus on a single and well-defined decision process.

## Utility beyond implementation

Until now, I have discussed plans that are lists of goals (desired outcomes), actions and designs (encapsulated collections of related actions). I have argued that these could be judged using implementation criteria, but there are other purposes for them and they might still be useful even when they are not achieved/realised/carried out. These are, but a few of the kinds of plans that exist (Hopkins, 2001). There are many other types of plans – deliberate inactions, contingency plans, strategies, policies and so on that implementation is not even a useful standard.

Far too often, we think of plans as deliberate changes to the status quo. However, some plans are about preservation of status quo, deferral of decision or even active inaction. For example, Capozza and Helsley (1990) argue that volatility in land prices requires that parcels contiguous to urban boundaries should be left undeveloped in anticipation of denser development at a later time due to irreversibility concerns. Many energy plans recommend that particular renewable energy projects cannot be pursued due to the high degree of regulatory and financial uncertainty (Brookshire and Kaza, 2013). Intentional planning is required to ascertain that wait-and-see approach is more appropriate compared to deliberate changes to the status quo. To evaluate whether or not such no-action plans are implemented is a much harder task than evaluating if actions have been undertaken, because observing inaction requires us to observe continuously all actions undertaken by the organisation and decide if the inaction recommendation has been followed. We are more likely to observe implementation failure (e.g. failure not to act). To be sure, certain kinds of status quo are easy to monitor; states of the world (e.g. undeveloped land at the city's edge) are easy to monitor. However, it is usually unclear whether the continuation of status quo is an effect of the plan or simply organisational inertia. Since the counterfactual is not usually available, monitoring implementation of the plan requires that all deliberate actions and inactions of organisation be monitored, and this is cumbersome. Nevertheless, this kind of plan is useful to make *because it focuses the priorities of the organisations* on where resources are not directed even if we cannot easily observe its implementation.

Another type of plan that is useful but not exclusively when it is implemented, is a contingency recovery plan in the context of disasters. This plan is a result of particular type of scenario planning process and would be structurally similar to any other type of plan. However, implementation of such a plan could only be observed in a high-impact, low-probability event and could proceed along the lines of whether outcomes were achieved or actions were undertaken or if it had been consulted. The utility of a contingency plan, however, is not necessarily in execution of the plan itself, but in focusing the attention of the organisation on radical departures from commonly predicted or desired futures.

Another type of contingency planning has to do with planning for situations that the plan-maker has little control over but wishes to influence. Suppose an element of a comprehensive plan in a municipality is to 'Impose minimum residential density in compact neighbourhood tier after the sewer trunk is upgraded in the neighbourhood'. The municipality may not have any authority to upgrade the trunk line as that authority might rest with the Water and Sewer District, a separate regulatory but spatially overlapping jurisdiction. While the authority to modify the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), a set of regulations that govern urban development including zoning, design and subdivision regulations, that specifies the density restriction may rest with the municipality, the plan only specifies action in the event of upgrading, which may again be contingent upon other situations such as bond referendums. To evaluate whether or not such a plan is implemented, it is not enough to monitor if the UDO is modified. We need also to monitor if a capital improvement project (sewer upgrading) is implemented. In the event that such upgrading does not happen, the continuation of status quo in the UDO is not a result of unimplemented plan. However, the municipality may have influence on the Water District's actions. By explicitly signalling priorities in development patterns, the town influences the investment decisions of the Water District. Furthermore, such a plan also orients the lobbying priorities of the town in decisions about infrastructure upgrading. Modifying the regulation is secondary to these other uses of the plan. These kinds of *contingent plans are useful to make because they provide triggers to orient actions of organisations.*

A more complex version of a contingent plan is a strategy, where decisions by the plan maker may result in multiple futures and might require different responses. A strategy is a decision tree with multiple levels, multiple futures and multiple potential sequences of actions. Chakraborty et al. (2011) present a case considering the impact on congestion levels on different roads under different trajectories of fuel prices in the Baltimore-Washington region. They then go on to model the effect of various transportation investments or non-investments in these different futures and conclude that different complementary actions need to be taken in various combinations of external futures and internal choices. These complementary actions along with various investments (and inactions) form a strategy that various actors in the region can adopt. Because strategies are about contingency planning, they deliberately acknowledge and plan for futures that may not come to fruition while also planning for those that do. Thus, parts of the strategy are never implemented, even though the strategy is useful as a whole. In other words, *strategies are at best partially implemented but are useful only as a whole.*

There are other types of contingent plans that are useful in repeated situations. These are policies, decision rules that are expected to help city in making consistent decisions

in repeated situations (Kerr, 1976). Consider a subsidised housing policy adopted by Durham, NC, in 2012,

[The proposed Subsidised Housing projects] are evaluated to ensure that there is not a concentration of either poverty or Subsidized Housing in the Census-designated block group where the development is proposed to be located.

The policy goes on to specify how the concentration is measured and to provide information on existing subsidised housing sites. Up to 2018, no proposals for low income or special needs housing projects have reached the site selection stage for this policy to be applicable. Is this policy implemented? Neither the performance nor the conformance approaches have particularly useful suggestions in this situation. Measuring the deliberate non-conformity of outcomes (Type C in Loh, 2011) would mean identifying the location of new subsidised housing projects in concentrated poverty areas. Since there are no new such projects, the plan could be considered implemented, yet such a conclusion is unsatisfactory. From a performance stand point, the policy is not yet used by the regulators in rezoning approvals or in the financial commitments made by the city. The programme implementation literature also has little guidance. The question of whether or not multiple agencies involved followed the policy, the street level bureaucrats' actions and the incentive structures of various actors in the decision making are not at issue.

A better question is how might this policy be useful, to whom and in what ways? Affordable housing developers in the area might consider this policy of the city and pass on projects that are less likely to win County approvals, thereby rendering the plan moot. The County can implicitly or explicitly consider this policy when approving or providing grants, loans or tax credits unrelated to the siting of subsidised housing. Affordable housing advocates might use the information in the policy to press the County to create a complementary programme to increase affordable housing in addition to the deconcentration policy. The policy's role is to provide an *information signal to various parties and is useful to a number of different actors*, and we should recognise it as such. Because the framing of various decision situations by different actors does not explicitly acknowledge the information in this plan, even performance evaluation frameworks do not recognise their salience.

*Thus, the utility of a plan lies in the way it is used by various actors.* These actors do not always participate in the plan-making process, nor do they take the plan as a firm commitment that directs their action. They treat it as signal that has some information about intentions and aspirations of the actor who adopted the plan. Interdependencies of other decisions with these plans allow for different users to consider the plans in their own decision-making processes. For example, transit expansion investments specified by the LRTP might spur the developers to purchase call options on parcels next to train stations. At the same time, the developers might use their political capital within and outside the planning process to realise the transit expansion in order to benefit from exercising the option. A neighbourhood group might resist rezoning efforts to increase density, while the affordable housing interest groups might want to redouble their efforts to get an inclusionary zoning ordinance passed. The use of the LRTP by the transit agency, the plan maker, to direct its own capital budget allocation and construction schedules is but a small portion of the myriad uses of the plan.

## If not implement, why make plans?

If plans are not implemented in a conventional sense, we should examine why organisations often make plans. Strategic planners in a firm are supposed to construct forecasts with a 20-year planning horizon with some degree of accuracy. These forecasts then determine the plans and are approved by the board and adopted by the firm (Chandler, 1990). It is remarkable that these ideas still form the core of planning processes in cities. For example, in climate mitigation planning, cities are expected to conduct analyses of trends which then determine projections for greenhouse gases (GHG), to deliberate and agree upon targets for GHG reduction, and then to match particular actions and coalitions of actors to achieve these targets (Tang et al., 2010). Analogies to this planning within an organisation include assigning responsibility to managers, addressing cognitive biases, streamlining resource allocation procedures and aligning incentive structures (Schwenk, 1986; Stonich, 1980).

In a study of hundreds of nascent firms, the existence or lack thereof of a business plan was shown to have no discernible impact on the survival or profitability of the firm (Honig and Samuelsson, 2012). In a devastating critique of the strategic planning field, Ackoff (1981) writes,

Most corporate planning is like a ritual rain dance: it has no effect on the weather that follows, but it makes those who engage in it feel that they are in control. Most discussions of the role of models in planning are directed at improving the dancing, not the weather. (p. 359)

Ackoff is writing about the logic of planning for its own sake rather than plans as a causal reason for the performance of the firm. So why do firms make these plans? Honig et al. find that business plans were written by those firms that are coerced to write them (by governments, venture capital firms, financial institutions etc.) or when they mimic other firms in the same industry that has a plan-making culture. Analogies to local planning are apparent. In sectors such as transportation, LRTP and TIP are necessary precursors to accessing federal funding and they are more frequently written and are more frequently updated. In sectors such as climate change, many cities mimic the plans of their peers. We observe these kinds of plans more frequently now, not necessarily because of increasing salience, but because of increasing propensity to frame traditional issues of sustainability and equity in these novel frameworks. If increasing salience is the real reason, we should observe lot more climate change adaptation plans, which usually get a short shrift. Thus, it stands to reason that *organisations make different kinds of plans with different scopes and are motivated by different reasons than simply trying to regulate their own future actions in an uncertain environment.*

If we think of an organisation, not as a monolith, but as a collection of interest groups, jurisdictions and competencies, much like a city, then plans and planning processes might have internal purpose; to help with the intra-organisational commitments and negotiation. Different bureaucratic structures might point to different reasons for making these plans. In a firm that has a professional bureaucracy (e.g. a university or a hospital), the role of a strategic planning could be to solicit external and internal information about values, preferences and visions and to negotiate among various departments that are interested in protecting their own turf (Langley, 1988). By contrast, strategic planning in

an adhocracy (e.g. an orchestra or a neighbourhood organisation) might be externally imposed (e.g. requirements by funders) to coordinate the marshalling of resources (see Baer, 1997 for application to public plans). In such settings, implementation of the plan is largely incidental to the plan-making process.

Porter (2008) argued that an organisation should plan to look beyond thinking about responses to an unchangeable yet uncertain environment (markets, regulatory environments, supply chains etc.) and should create plans to explicitly account for modifying these environments to arrive at better outcomes. In particular, he argues that strategic planning should be judged not only on performance of the firm at a given time but on creation of competitive positions for the firm, over time. This is a normative position on the value of planning for the organisation. The organisation should engage in *making plans not only to direct future actions and align the goals of various sub-entities within the hierarchy but also to explicitly change the structures within and outside the organisation*. One way these changes happen is through narratives that plans are part of.

In a response to Mintzberg's critique of the formalisation fallacy of planning, scholars have turned their attention to the social practice of plan-making (e.g. Johnson et al., 2007). In particular, they see an organisation not as a hierarchy of roles and authorities but as communicatively constituted through narratives. *Plans are part of those narrative structures that allow for coherence of the organisation*. Similarly, horizontal organisations like collectives use plans and planning processes to constitute and reconstitute collective identity, to shape the intentions of the constituents who are participating and to elicit information from others about their commitments. It is through these types of planning practices that norm building and rule formulation occurs (Healey, 1998).

The participatory turn in planning practice focuses on the question of whether the planning process was useful to the participants. Very few studies ask the question of whether the outcomes of those processes resulted in the implementation of the consensus decision (Kinzer, 2016). Kinzer argues that it is quite hard to measure the direct link between outcomes and process because processes are continuous and are adaptive to changing circumstances; therefore, the results are susceptible to the time period of analysis. For example, the Atlanta visioning process outlined by Helling (1998) involved more than 1000 participants, whose opportunity cost is calculated at US\$4.4 million. Helling concludes that the visioning process did little to change status quo. However, a subsequent study found that the creation of Georgia Regional Transportation Authority was partly a result of the coalitions forged during the visioning process (Henderson, 2004). The creation of that agency was not envisioned in the plan nor discussed in the planning process. The Atlanta Vision plan was not implemented in both performance and conformance approaches, yet it was useful. The planning processes should then be judged by *the opportunities that they create for individual and collective action*, rather than result in a concrete outcome.

To evaluate whether or not such participatory planning processes resulted in implementation, such process needs to be immutable either by conclusion or by continuance with the same form, with the same participants whose motives and capacities are stable. However, planning does not end when the planning process is concluded and plans are adopted. Consider the case of the landfill location on the reservation of Campo Band of Mission Indians (McGovern, 1995). In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the General Council

of the Campo Band proposed to allow a landfill on their reservation. In a rare instance of direct democracy at work for a land use planning case, the consensus decision was reached after extensive deliberation within the Council. This participatory plan in a sovereign nation was thwarted by an opposing coalition of neighbouring residents that included ranchers, environmentalists and other Native American tribes who used political and legal action to subvert the plan to override the consensus. The landfill was never built. The plans of the Campo Band allowed for crystallisation of response by neighbours, and used venue shopping to prevent the landfill from being built (Kaza, 2013). *The plans might be used to create counter-plans and subvert the intent of the plan.* Such uses of plans are more common than acknowledged. The adoption of plan does not signal the end of the process, but merely a marker in the urban process. Plans might create conditions to make other plans, even when they are not complementary.

## Conclusion

Planning is not only about thinking before acting but also thinking while acting (Bratman, 2014). If plans are blueprints, then they are decisions that are fully formed and made. Implementing such plans is simply about effectively carrying them out in a particular institutional and organisational environment or about using them in particular decision processes they are supposed inform. I have argued in this article that plans have more uses than that, and we should evaluate them pragmatically (Hoch, 2002).

Many laments about the efficacy of planning have focused on the lack of power of planners to implement their plans or on whether the planning process has been sufficiently collaborative to identify and co-opt the hurdles and objections that may come after making the plan. In this article, I argued that in situations even when power is concentrated, planning does not automatically lead to desirable outcomes. Bottom up planning practices also do not improve the efficacy of planning with respect to implementation. The problem lies within our expectations about plans.

If a plan is an enumeration of precise goals, then we can at least observe if the outcomes conform to the goals even when we cannot attribute causality. If a plan is an enumeration of actions or projects with responsible actors specified, we can observe their implementation processes. If plans are designs or programmes, they can also be carried out. These types of plans are boundary markers, in Neuman's terms. They are firm commitments on the part of the planner. Whatever intra- and inter-organisational processes and incentives help or hinder the implementation of the plans, whether the commitments are met or not, can be monitored because we can potentially observe the actions, outcomes and decisions that come after the commitments are made. This monitoring may be instrumentally useful to an organisation for variety of purposes including resource redirection and focusing attention.

If plans are firm commitments, then they are useful in only limited settings, because they do not account for structural breaks, contingent events and strategic responses by other actors. We must recognise that plans are more useful when they are partial commitments that change and adapt to circumstances. These kinds of plans are adapted, without being formally revised, under changing environments and values. They are mostly useful as guideposts to keep track of relationships among states, outcomes and responsibilities. In

such situations, the plan user uses, adapts or contests the plan long after it is made, and the outcomes of such use may no longer mirror the outcome envisioned in the design or the goal. Furthermore, plan users are far more numerous and different than the plan-makers.

Many plans are also ill-defined programmes, vague goals, assertions of values, imprecise designs, policies for repeated situations and strategies to deal with uncertainties. Plans are useful because they are imprecise commitments. They are used in planning and political processes long after the plan is made. They are used by others, in addition to the plan-maker, even perhaps to subvert the intent of the plan. These modifications, subversions and adaptations are core to using plans. When plans are modified over time repeatedly, programme evaluation frameworks have little guidance to offer for evaluating plan implementation.

In any given setting, there are a multitude of interacting plans jockeying for influence on decision-making by number of government and non-governmental actors. Implementation research that focuses on published plans or the decision situations of the local government misses out on a number of other plans and planning activities. This may partly explain why we do not observe the world conforming to plans, because we do not observe the plans that are directing the actions of organisations. Plans are never finished, nor does a single plan control the future by directing actions. Plans morph into one another. They make some ideas salient and others irrelevant over time and influence one another. Such transformation makes monitoring implementation of plans difficult but rewarding. Such transformation also makes plans worth making.

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### **Notes**

1. These principles include, but are not limited to, protection of wetlands, controlling of flood-plain development, controlling the velocity of dissipation of runoff and mitigation of erosion.
2. Fordlandia was established by Henry Ford in the late 1920s in the Brazilian Amazon as a pre-fab city to house rubber plantation and manufacturing for automobile industry. The city was effectively abandoned by mid 1930s, due to development of synthetic rubber and decline of demand for natural rubber. Songdo, on the other hand, was built on the reclaimed land on the Incheon peninsula in South Korea in mid-2000s and billed as the low-carbon, high-tech smart city. It has since acquired a reputation of a futuristic ghost town.
3. Bring New Orleans Back Commission was established by the mayor of New Orleans and primarily comprised of business elite in New Orleans. Louisiana Recovery Authority is an ad hoc organisation established by the governor of Louisiana to coordinate across jurisdictions, to create plans and programmes for short-term recovery and to administer federal funds to the tune of US\$10.4 billion.



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### Author biography

Nikhil Kaza is an associate professor of city and regional planning at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is interested in the issues of justification for planning in multi-organisational settings. His research is at the intersection of energy, environment, equity and urbanisation patterns.