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TO PLAN OR NOT TO PLAN? IS THIS THE QUESTION?

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Abstract

Few articles within planning debates have generated both indignation and fascination like the *Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom*. The idea of the *Non-Plan* is to embrace a more experimental approach to spatial planning by observing what would happen if people were free to choose how to transform their living environments. As this paper shows, practitioners and scholars have perceived the utility and applicability of the *Non-Plan* proposals in somewhat ambiguous ways. In their iconoclastic essay, Rayner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price criticise traditional planning schemes while revealing the different ideologies involved in – and enacted by – the quest for designed orders. Current levels of interest and momentum surrounding the proliferation of 'plans for societies' in contemporary discourses make the idea of *Non-Plan* still fascinating and worth considering. The reactions that the *Non-Plan* have sparked may be a warning for mavericks of past, present and future generations.

Keywords

non-plan; freedom; conformism; physical design; planning

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1. Introduction: The provocation of *Non-Plan*

It is customary to think that, in order to achieve successful results, it is necessary to have a *plan*. What is harder to grasp is that planning can at times be unnecessary, or even undesirable. This issue has been addressed most boldly in urban studies by Rayner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price in their provocative article *Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom* (Banham et al., 1969). The central purpose of *Non-Plan* is to invite to reconsider the many (mis)uses of planning. Banham et al. (1969) noted that the desirability of plans (and comprehensive plans in particular) in society was increasingly unquestioned, in both technical and political terms. The authors were sceptical about the ability to effectively discern between the benefits of having a *plan* and those that are instead independent of it. How can we be sure that having a plan is the best of the available alternatives? Is the ever-expanding application of plans in society making any difference or improvement?

For the authors, the merits of planning too often escape the rigorous scrutiny to which all applied sciences should be subject. Moreover, they believe that the 'benefits' of planning are *imposed* on (rather than actually *chosen* by) its users. The authors criticise the fact that the cultural elite mainly examines plans and projects in terms of what they are *intended* to do, rather than what they *actually* do – 'only the users continue to worry about that' (Barker, 1999, p.96). Given this, they ask:

> 'Why not have the courage, where practical, to let people shape their own environment? […] What would happen if there were no plan? What would people prefer to do if their choice were untrammelled? Would matters be any better, or any worse, or much the same?' (Banham et al., 1969, p.435-436).

Note that, arguing to allow people to decide on local transformations is largely invoked by participatory planning theorists, who rarely cite *Non-Plan* – and for understandable reasons. Banham et al. (1969, p.436) openly mocked 'participation' as an example of typical planning jargon. While planners regard participation instrumentally, as a way to let people contribute to new information in rational-comprehensive plans, non-planners conceive participation more substantially: as a means by which to let new information emerge spontaneously. As underscored by Paul Barker (2000, pp.5-6):

> '*Non-Plan* was essentially a very humble idea: that it is very difficult to decide what is best for other people.'

Although

> '*Non-Plan* produced a mixture of deep outrage and stunned silence. [...] all the architects, conservationists and socialists I knew were highly offended by it.'

Whilst some decades ago *Non-Plan* was considered a 'must read' in urban studies (Singh and Pandit, 1988), today the article is relatively unknown and has gradually disappeared from planning manuals and textbooks.[1] Here, one can assume that the relevance of *Non-Plan* has diminished over time; however, a less 'diplomatic' explanation is that there is something about the idea of non-planning that the planning community, as such, cannot but be against. Accepting this relatively straightforward conclusion confirms the 'unquestionability' of planning that the authors denounced, and corroborates the idea of the transformation of spatial planning from a branch of science to a sort of dogma. Perhaps the explanation for the same lies in the broader social phenomena of conformism – or rather, *conformorality* (Lisciandra et al., 2013). Planners do not sit comfortably with the definition of (once called) 'town-and-country planning' by the non-planner Peter Hall (1963: 20):

> 'Planning [is] building a physical environment, in terms of housing and shops and factories and offices and railways and roads and parks and pubs and libraries, which is better to live in and work in than the alternative which would have grown up without a plan'.

This quotation, perhaps more popular in the recent past (Sadler, 1997), may give rise to either goosebumps or

1 For example, in the popular book Town and Country Planning in the UK, the original article of the Non-Plan can be found cited until the 14th edition (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006) but not in the 15th edition (Cullingworth et al., 2015, p.13).

mischievous smiles depending on the reader. The ironic touch of the sentence is clear: there is an overflowing application of planning, once only interested in general design principles, is now also entering into the minutiae of everyday life activities.

Perhaps the 'liberated spirits' of the mid 20th century saw this trend as something unjustified and frustrating; and what about today? The same manuals that set aside *Non-Plan* are the ones that include other essential works by Peter Hall, such as *Great Planning Disasters* (1980) in their 'further readings' sections. What happened? Have emerging practices and planning models made certain criticisms less pertinent or advantageous for the community? Is there evidence to suggest that the principles advocated in the *Non-Plan* article are being actively disregarded in urban planning practice? What lessons can be gleaned from the historical reception of the original article?

Reflecting on these questions, this paper conducts a critical historical literature review mainly on scholarly materials that directly reference the original publication of the *Non-Plan*.[2] As for the structure of the article, first the political and historical debate around *Non-Plan* is introduced. Subsequently, the focus is on the technical and cultural elements encompassed by *Non-Plan*. Thereafter, further discussions deal with the parts of the original idea that remain little understood but are still worth exploring. Final remarks conclude the work.

Before probing the main discussion, it is necessary to remind readers that *Non-Plan* has a very unorthodox and witty language style. At first glance, this aspect may prevent *Non-Plan* from being framed as a proper scholarly essay, although the originality of certain arguments suggests the opposite. For those believing in the 'honourable tradition of Dissent' (Barker, 1999, p.95), reading *Non-Plan* is undoubtedly a valid source of inspiration.

2. The historical and political context of *Non-Plan*

Non-Plan was published during a period of great social and intellectual turmoil. The article embraces many claims of the European post-war society, and draws attention to the benefits of loosening specific social control systems.[3] To a certain extent, *Non-Plan* anticipated many arguments that would inflame planning debates in the following decades such as: the defence of bottom-up urban processes (also brought forward by authors like Richard Sennett and Henri Lefebvre); attention to commercial facilities and emerging technologies; and the complex relationships that exist between ordinary people, spaces, and everyday objects (as later evidenced by Steven Izenour, Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Bruno Latour). There are also some similarities between *Non-Plan* and complexity theories as treated by Jane Jacobs (1961).[4] Nevertheless, as soon as it came out, *Non-Plan* was belittled by fellow intellectuals. As professor P. R. Heywood (1969, p.251) argued in the *Town Planning Review*:

> 'There is already evidence of an acute interest among academic planners that be a prelude to the development of a new fashion as influential in its own way as "Master Planning" and "Comprehensive Planning" were in theirs. It is my contention that this ground swell in favour of "Permissive Planning" owns more to its proponents' felicity of expression, and breadth of thinking, than to any accuracy in their analysis of the nature of planning, or the likely impact of technological change.'

2 The literature analysis focused on academic works directly citing the original article by Banham et al. (1969), for a total of 366 works in Google Scholar and 109 Scopus-indexed publications (by February 2024).

3 For an overview of the debate, see Landau (1985), Hill (2003), Sadler (1997, 1998, 2013), Franks (2000), Borş and Dascălu (2013), Hillier (2017).

4 However, note that Banham et al. (1969) distance themselves from certain Jacobsian debate: 'The irony is that the planners themselves constantly talk – since the appearance of Jane Jacob's Death and Life of Great American Cities – about the need to restore spontaneity and vitality to urban life. They never seem to draw the obvious conclusion – that the monuments of our century that have spontaneity and vitality are found not in the old cities but in the American West.' (Banham et al., 1969, p. 443).

Six months after the publication of *Non-Plan* (March 1969), the editors of the magazine Architectural Review published an article titled 'ManPlan [sic]' (September 1969) to oppose the non-plan idea directly. As Erdem Erten (2008, pp.279-280) writes:

> 'Instead of "*Non-Plan*" they wanted "man to plan". […] While "*Non-Plan*" applauded the freedom of choice that consumer culture brought forward, "Manplan" was highly sceptical of it. As "*Non-Plan*" was enthusiastic about decentralisation and dispersal, "Manplan" argued that the whole 20th-century planning experience was a proof of its failure.'

Some praised the *ManPlan* as a courageous manifesto, whereas others saw *Non-Plan* as a 'Trojan horse' (Allison, 1996).[5] Consider Lincoln Allison's (1971, pp.440-441) observation:

> 'Peter Hall and others […] use many of the familiar arguments of laissez-faire. Imposing 'good taste' through planning is merely a restrictive snobbery, they claim, for many of the most admired features of our environment have come into being as the accidental consequence of some obscure private whim. There are shades of pushpin and poetry here - the quantity of pleasure being equal, fun palaces are as good as forests. Professor Hall, certainly, operates on almost biological concept of pleasure. […] So it would perhaps be too pompous to bring the whole weight of mixed economy objections to bear. But one objection to the market mechanism is clear and special to the case. […] Environmental changes are often irreversible: a landscape once destroyed cannot be re-created. The chances of producing a counter-productive result by exposure to the market forces would therefore seem to be enormous.'

See also Dirk Schubert (2018, p.16):

> 'Current approaches understand planning by non-planning to be the flexibilisation of the planning system. But, non-planning destroys natural resources, as experience has shown in many third-world cities with a lack of planning. We must argue against the neo-liberal polemic of non-planning. The consequences of non-planning can be foreseen more easily and more reliably. We live in a world of globalisation and acceleration, so how not whether to plan must become the perspective.'

At this point, it is necessary to remark that *Non-Plan* never suggests repealing planning as a whole, but only certain overwhelming effects of top-down prescriptions for city design (Loukaithou-Sideris and Mukhija, 2018, p.86).[6] In the original words of the authors:

> 'Simply to demand an end to planning, all planning, would be sentimentalism; it would deny the very basis of economic life in the second half of 20th century. [T]he economies of all advanced industrial countries are planned, whether they call themselves capitalist or communist. […] But what we are arguing that the word planning itself is misused; that it has also been used for the imposition of certain physical arrangements based on value judgements or prejudices; and that it should be scrapped' (Banham et al., 1969, p.442).

As already mentioned, many scholars also shared arguments for loosening certain orthodox planning procedures (Cullingworth, 1993; Allison, 1996; Allmendinger, 2001). However, what distinguished Banham et al. (1969) from the others was their denouncing of spatial planning practice as colluding against the wills of ordinary citizens (Kaminer, 2018, p.38). Perhaps for this reason, Allison (1971, p.448) believed that *Non-Plan* was essentially a form of 'Environmental Trotskyism'.

Ironically, and despite being written by left-to-center authors publishing in a left-leaning magazine (Franks, 2000;

5 As of today, finding Non-plan appreciators in the architectural design culture has been easier than in spatial planning. For the architectural side, see Hill (2003), Frazer (2005), Erten (2008), Stickells (2011), Hagan (2012), Fontenot (2015, 2021), Pak (2016), Walker (2015), and Kelly (2022). In urban studies, see in particular McLoughlin & Webster (1970), Sorensen and Day (1981), Moroni (2010, 2023), Smith (2011), Kornberger (2012), Scott et al. (2013), Mukhija (2015), Pacchi (2018).

6 As also remarked by Robynson & Lloyd (1986), Hebbert (1992), Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones (2000), Gallent & Carmona (2003). See also, by contrast, Williams (2005) and Filip (2022).

Moran, 2005), *Non-Plan* was soon interpreted as a plea for 'hyper-capitalistic models', 'unfettered individualism', and (as oxymoronic as this may this sound) serving 'liberalisation lobbies' (Lloyd, 1985, p.45; Sager, 1999, p.99; Cullingworth, 1993; Allmendinger, 2001). Three main reasons may explain this form of criticism of *Non-Plan*.

First, *Non-Plan* resembles the planning policies adopted from the early 1980s onwards, namely the 'Enterprise Zones' (EZs) initially proposed by Peter Hall (1977), but quite far from the original *Non-Plan* idea. Notably, in EZs the role of planners was far from marginal:

> 'Pure non-plan (no tax, no subsidy, no rules) was never contemplated under the 1980 Act. [The EZs] and the Development Corporation were devices for channelling large-scale public investment' (Hebbert, 1992, p.124).

Second, scholars intended to reject the very idea of *Non-Plan* for purely ideological reasons, seeing the article as the prelude to the 'neoliberal approach' in planning. Typically, it is suggested that neoliberalism resembles both the minimalist view of the State (an idea endorsed by the classical liberal tradition) and the maximalist view of the authoritarian strand (an idea endorsed by illiberal traditions). Fully aware of how antithetical these views may be, many scholars keep the contradictions in tension to emphasise the somewhat 'chimerical' nature of advanced capitalistic systems (Thornley, 1991, p.45). However, as Anderson notes (1990, p.480), the practical applications of *Non-Plan*/EZs were more a 'retreat from liberalism'. And he adds:

> 'Although a "new right flagship", the initial idea of enterprise zones came not from traditional "right-wing" political or economic theorists and politicians, but from erstwhile social democratic supporters of the postwar "mixed economy" consensus who became dissatisfied with it in the late 1960s. […] It seems likely that the genuinely *laissez fa*re elements in the early EZ proposals were beaten back more by the scheme's friends than by its enemies.' (Anderson, 1990, pp.480-482).

See also Taylor (1981, p.437):

> '[T]he point may be made that opposition to the original proposals was not just a matter of engrained collectivism, but, for example in the case of the local authorities, of very real fears that a free-for-all in the EZs would result in irreparable damage to the economy and the environment of surrounding areas.'

Third, *Non-Plan* has been erroneously considered to be a sort of 'postmodern' essay within urban planning debates, but the ideas in the article do not possess cultural affinity or continuity of thoughts with postmodernist convictions. Actually, *Non-Plan* does not romanticise any idea of the chaos, inner conflicts and contradictions that exist in society and spatial planning practices. Rather, Banham and colleagues argued that planning authorities should be more consistent with regards to the claims and proofs of their power over communities. In this sense, the authors winked at anarchic thought without fully endorsing it.[7]

As remarked by Paul Barker (1999, p.108): 'Docklands' role as a postmodern playground' came only later and all the authors repeatedly returned to directly and indirectly defend the original intents of *Non-Plan* (Banham, 1969; Price, 1969; Hall, 1977, 1981, 1988; Barker, 2009).

In sum, it seems that the *Non-Plan* article has been hastily absorbed by a debate that has been neither neutral nor exhaustive.[8] It is striking how one of the clearest points of the matter has been overlooked: the original idea of the *Non-Plan* was obviously not to pave the way for top-down strategies but rather to *stimulate bottom-up processes*.

7 On the proximities between Non-Plan and the ideas of the anarchist author Colin Ward (1973, 1976) see also Barker (1999, 2000) and Hall (1988).

8 As remarked by Barker (1999), and also noted by Sorensen & Day (1981), Taylor (1981), Woodward (2009) and Vaughan et al. (2013). Perhaps what happened at those times in Britain was that scholars were completely absorbed by the critique of the Tatcherite era, which occupied a significant portion of the Western planning debate (see Thornley, 1991; Cullingworth, 1993; Allmendinger, 2001; Moran, 2007); as a consequence, everything was put in the same box. Interestingly, the state-led types of interventions enforced by Thatcher were more likely to be tied with the ideas of the geographer Coleman (1976, 1990), who was closer to the political arena of the time (Green, 2023; see also Rowan Robinson & Lloyd, 1986; Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Franks, 2000). Note that, although sharing similar arguments of the Non-Plan (i.e. Is planning really necessary?), Coleman never mentioned the article in her works nor did she in her official public debates (Balchin et al., 1976).

3. The technical and cultural challenges of *Non-Plan*

Non-Plan is often depicted as a polemical essay by naive provocateurs 'in their economically liberated twenties' (Franks, 2000, p.35).[9] To give an idea, let us consider some opening passages from the article:

> 'The whole concept of planning (the town-and-country kind at least) has gone cockeyed. What we have today represents a whole cumulation of good intentions. And what those good intentions are worth, we have almost no way of knowing. [P]lanning is the only branch of knowledge purporting to be some kind of science which regards a plan as being *fulfilled* when it is merely *completed*; there's seldom any sort of check on whether the plan actually does what it was meant to do and whether, if it does something different, this is for the better or for the worse.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.435).

Sharpening their provocation, the authors pointed out the 'bizarre talk' employed to build consensus on certain interventions, and suggested that these were merely fashionable ideas. An example of the same was the passing off of spaces of high-rise social housing buildings as 'vertical streets' or the 'dull doctrinarism' of the master planners of the British Garden Cities:

> 'It's worth remembering that the garden in this theory was there specifically for growing food: the acreage was carefully measured out with this fodder ratio in mind. […] The layout made public transport almost impossible; the tin and the frozen pack rapidly outdated the vegetable patch. But then the spread of car ownership outdated the mockery: those roads lived to find a justification; the space around the houses could absorb a garage without too much trouble; and the garden […] became an unexceptionable outdoor room and meeting space for children, away from the lethal pressed steel and rubber hurtling around the streets. […] Now it's nice that a plan should turn out to have reasons for succeeding which the planner himself did not foresee. At every stage in the history of planning, we have cause to be grateful for the quirks of time.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.435).

Moreover, the authors highlighted that the most planned cities have historically been the least democratic and that their accompanying architecture has tended to completely neglect everyday housing and building: 'The whole ethos is doctrinaire; and if something good emerges, it remains a bit of bonus' (Banham et al., 1969, p.436). Given this, they proposed conducting some non-plan 'experiments' in a few suitable zones, where people would be allowed to build what they liked, and they would then observe any emerging patterns. Then, only after some years, experts might evaluate whether the results drastically differed (or not) from other planned areas.

> 'The purpose is to ask: why don't we dare trust the choices that would evolve if we let them? […] Even the first waves of information would be valuable; if the experiments ran for five years, ten years, twenty years, more and more use would emerge. […] But what counts here, for once, is now.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.437).

The central sections of the article illustrated what could happen to three country areas in England (i.e. Lawrence, Constable, Montagu) if they were designated as non-plan 'launchpads' as they call them (Banham et al., 1969, p.436). Here, the authors imagine what kinds of developments would emerge without the planning 'rigmarole', leaving 'all options open', and where no land use pattern 'could be regarded as sacrosanct' (Banham et al., 1969, p.438). They elaborated on several empirical arguments, and in so doing laid bare some crucial pressures of their time. An example of the same was the unprecedented scale of social mobility opportunities, and how these bore new locational demand on territories: in this case, non-plan launchpads would develop hundreds of scattered small villages instead of packing people into pre-designed suburbs or large housing estates, whilst avoiding issues associated with conurbations and congestion (which in their view were all related to public comprehensive planning decisions). Another significant pressure was that ordinary people were increasingly interested in (and capable of) spending resources on leisure activities and entertainment. Here, non-plan

9 Compare also with Hebbert (1992), Frazer (2005), Kühn (2007), Moran (2007), Eisenschmidt (2016), Njoo (2021).

launchpads would turn preservation areas into more 'lived-in systems'. The idea was to open certain socio-spatial enclaves, where non-planning would not destroy 'pretty coaching villages' but stimulate a process of 'backfilling and infilling' the areas to accommodate new services and amenities for a greater variety of users. The authors also suggest 'freedom for local authorities to raise money in ways they see fit (a sales tax, a poll tax, a pony tax); [...] the abandonment of a few other rules, like pub hours' (Banham et al., 1969, p.441). As later admitted by Paul Barker (1999, p.96):

> 'Naturally we chose the rural tracts whose apparent despoliation was guaranteed to cause most offence. We were trying to make our point in the most forceful possible way. The wider polemic would then be written around these three case-studies'.

As has been noted, adverse peer reactions focused on the presumed implications of *Non-Plan*, while neglecting the more profound considerations suggested especially in the final section of the article, the one on 'Spontaneity and Space'. The prevalent (political) interpretation of this last section (and the article as a whole) is that it is essentially a plea for anti-interventionism (see Sadler, 1997; Anderson, 1990). However, an alternative, more neutral interpretation suggests that the spontaneity of social processes was also – and more interestingly – connected to wider epistemological debates on the benefits of dispersed knowledge and widespread creativity.[10] In that section, the authors focused on three phenomena which they considered to be totally new – and which further reinforced their main arguments.

The first was the 'cybernetic' revolution, defined as the unprecedented ability to master vast amounts of information. Banham et al. (1969, p.442) believed that '[t]he practical implications are everywhere very large, but nowhere are they greater than in the area we loosely call planning'. They warned that cities develop regardless of the amount of data available to planners, and that top-down design orders become even less valuable in the face of fast-growing technological advancements.[11]

The second revolution was 'rising affluence': the unprecedented pace of social change. Despite the various economic shocks of the time, the authors remarked that an increasing proportion of the population would channel their incomes 'into more diverse and unpredictable outlets' (Banham et al., 1969, p.442). It seems unlikely that large-scale investment schemes and public interventions defined the details and combinations of such processes. In this case, non-plan launchpads would accommodate without guiding them.

The third revolution was that of 'pop culture', which, unlike other cultural movements, replaced 'class barriers' with an 'age barrier' (without the impetus of a constant conflictual social mobilisation). The authors argued that the consumerism which accompanied this frenzying and immediate type of culture made products quickly obsolete, thereby not allowing a precise elitist culture much time to become grounded/established.

> 'All these characteristics could not be more opposed to the traditional judgments of the physical planner – which, in essence, are the values of the old bourgeois culture.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.442).

The criticism of 'design dogmas' and 'taste establishments' (Barker, 1999) of *Non-Plan* is particularly vivid.

> 'To impose rigid controls, in order to frustrate people in achieving the space standards they require, represents simply the received personal or class judgement of the people who are making the decision. Worst of all: they are judgements about how they think other people – not of their acquaintance or class – should live.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.442).

10 Missing this point further evidences the biased interpretation of the article. Some scholars see proximities between the Non-Plan and certain works particularly critical of interventionist ideology, especially Hayek (1944) – see Sager (1999), Allmendinger (2001), Easterling (2013). More rarely, scholars notice similarities with other works, again by Hayek (1948, 1960, 1982) – see Sorensen & Day (1981), Thornley (1991), Franks (2000). According to Fontenot (2021) also Rand (1957), Jacobs (1969), Mises (1980) should be mentioned. Other less studied texts of those times could be brought more into the discussion, such as Polanyi (1951, 1958), and Popper (1945).

11 As already sketched by Banham (1960/1980). See also McLoughlin and Webster (1970), Pak (2016).

In the conclusions, the authors discussed what they outlined as the monuments of the 20th century; for example, Piccadilly Circus at night:

> '[I]s apparently so successful [that] it needs to be preserved, God help us. Why preserve it? Why not simply allow other efflorescence of fluoresces in other places?' (Banham et al., 1969, p.443).

Another example is the allure of Las Vegas, to which the authors admitted advancing a value judgement that, as such, could not be supported by facts. Given this, they stressed that

> 'physical planners have no right to set their value judgments up against your, nor indeed anyone else's. If the *Non-Plan* experiment works really well, people should be allowed to build what they like.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.443).

4. Discussion: The (still) radical idea of *Non-Plan*

Considering the historical and political debates surrounding *Non-Plan*, it is evident that the temporary cessation of military wars in Europe neither prevented nor stopped the affirmation of ideological battles. The (re)organisation of the built environment was a recurrent concern in fostering societal regeneration models (Hill, 2003).[12] Consider the words of Thomas Sharp (1940, p.143):

> 'It is no overstatement to say that the simple choice between planning and non-planning, between order and disorder, is a test-choice for English democracy. In the long run even the worst democratic muddle is preferable to a dictator's dream bought at the price of liberty and decency. *But* the English muddle is nevertheless a matter for shame. We shall never get rid of its shamefulness unless we plan our activities. And plan we must – not for the sake of our physical environment only, but to save and fulfil democracy itself.' (emphasis added).

The overly partisan and dichotomising political claims of the late 1960s (contrasting for example neo-left and neo-right coalitions, and more or less interventionist approaches) led many scholars to put *Non-Plan* in a hyper-capitalist and anti-collectivist box.[13] The widespread accusations of *Non-Plan* as conducive to a sort of 'tragedy of the commons' seem merely instrumental in preferring certain interpretations of *Non-Plan* while excluding others. The controversy around *Non-Plan* can also be seen to be a result of the (notoriously insufficient) theories used to explain, for example, the emergence of knowledge and market phenomena (Sorensen and Day, 1981; Easterling, 2013; Fontenot, 2021).

It is no coincidence that *Non-Plan* pays particular attention to the 'pop culture' and emerging consumerism. This curiosity testifies to the absolute novelty of societies that were increasingly capable of choosing for themselves what to have and what to do. The flashing neon lights of commercial areas, private cars, and petrol stations, as well as amusement areas to go to with family and friends were ridiculed by fellow academics (see Alison, 1971), but for non-planners, these elements were crucial evidence of social change. This argument does not focus much on the fact that market mechanisms are 'superior' to planning systems (as suggested by Allison, 1971; Lloyd, 1985; Cullingworth, 1993), but rather that planning interventions do not need to be activated 'by default' and be appropriately justified.

Even when posing the problem of 'deregulation' (Rowan Robinson and Lloyd, 1986; Hebbert, 1992; Moran, 2005; Kornberger, 2012), *Non-Plan* suggests downsizing certain spheres of competence of top-down planning. This is not advocating for the total elimination of statutory rules (e.g. in favour of contractual rules), but a call for reconsidering certain orthodoxies of planning rules and tools (Moroni, 2020, 2023; see also Cozzolino et al., 2017). This point is made clear by the image of a board game (Banham et al., 1969: 441), when the authors invite

12 Consider also how Le Corbusier became an influential technical advocate of Taylorism in the post-WWI era. Throughout history, and still today, various modern architects (and collectives) continue to revisit the idea of how to refound society from different perspectives. On this topic, see also Gorringe (2011), Mallgrave (2013, p. 1-18), and Castillo (2018, p. 316-317). See also Thornley (1991/2018), Curtis (2000), Moran (2007).

13 As more or less directly suggested by Allison (1971), Lloyd (1985), Anderson (1990), Allmendinger (2001), Schubert (2018).

'land users' to play and freely decide how to move and what to build. This can be seen as a direct parody of traditional maps of 'land uses' that directly set and decide how other people invest their resources. Consider, by contrast, this observation by Jack Meltzer (1984, p.25):

> 'The challenge in government is to affirm political jurisdiction and assert horizontal capacity; the challenge to professional and bureaucratic power is to affirm their functional supremacy and to assert vertical integration. In the case of governance, the question is citizenship; in the case of functional organisation, the question is consumerism. The tension between these forces captures the essential conflict posed by government and management control'

Non-Plan enables a less dramatic understanding of consumerism, as it can be a proxy for socio-material improvements (rather than their demise).[14] For Banham et al. (1969) the prerequisites for transforming built environments were perceived as imposed and usurping, but, differently from other ideas of their time, *Non-Plan* does not push for any 'total revolution' (Sadler, 2013). More simply, 'succumbing to the pressures' may be a form of respect for the expressions of citizens' *wills*, while also being an opportunity to better understand the epochal changes they were witnessing (Banham et al.,1969, p.437).

At this point, *Non-Plan* detractors may resort to the repetitive and stale slogan that use *Non-Plan* as the emblem – and explanation – of unappealing spatial outcomes (e.g. aesthetic dishomogeneity, physical fragmentation, and 'non-places'). Here, one may note that the authors did not support a de-territorialisation of values (a central concern of the political elite) nor an amorphisation of physical results (since consumption habits determine winning ideas).

Some critics may continue to view *Non-Plan* as a mere vision of 'awkward mavericks' (Barker, 2000), a rather unpolished defence of a 'second-order utopia' (or 'subtopia'), that suggests that true spontaneity cannot exist in the material transformation that occurs under (neo)liberal capitalistic logics.[15] This perspective regards any social agent as a 'homunculus': blind to her/his actual needs, devoid of genuine desires, genuine preferences or 'virtuous' aspirations. Such explanations stem – then as now – from the popular bias that market processes (rather than planning processes) are mastered by 'hidden persuaders'.[16] *Non-Plan* makes bold statements based on relatively simple aspirations: let us assume that people know firsthand what they need, let them express and pursue their desires and then evaluate what did or did not work. The underlying idea is that, without experimentation, new empirical possibilities cannot be disclosed.

The *Non-Plan* defence of spontaneity stresses how much global human knowledge also depends on the degree of freedom people have to intervene in the outside world, especially in their immediate physical settings – perhaps, it is not a case that there are more affinities with informal urbanism research.[17]

Nevertheless, it is true that Banham et al. (1969) could have presented in further detail how non-plan launchpads would have worked, for instance in cases of nuisances or land use compensations. On this issue, all they said was that:

> 'legally, it would not be too difficult to get up. It only requires the will to do it – and the desire to *know* instead of *impose*. […] At the very least, *Non-Plan* would provide accurate information to

14 Being the authors interested in the rising 'consumeristic society' was enough to suggest closeness between Non-Plan and 'free market' advocates critical of social planning. Even acknowledging such proximities, it is not always clear why market mechanisms are dangerous in themselves (De Franco, 2023). No supporter of capitalism would argue that the success of any enterprise does not also, if not primarily, stem from the responsibilities that producers owe to final users. Moreover, in every liberal approach to economies, the role of rights and 'the rule of law' remain central and constitutive.

15 See, among others, Moran (2005, 2007), Erten (2008), Taylor (1981), Stedman Jones (2014), Williams (2018), Gunder et al. (2023). See also Nairn (1955).

16 Hidden Persuaders is the title of a best-seller of their times (Packard, 1957), that Banham (1996, p.67) placed in his list of influential but 'alarmist" literature. Thoughts on pernicious and conformist effects of markets can also be traced in the influential works of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972).

17 See for instance Stickells (2011), Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija (2016, 2018), Kaminer (2018), Finn and Douglas (2019), and Kelly (2022).

> fit into a "community investment plan". The balance of costs and benefits to the individual is not the same as to the community. If there are social costs, the people who are responsible pay them. If low density development is expensive to the community, the reaction should be to make it proportionately expensive to those who live in it; not to stop it.' (Banham et al., 1969, p.437).

While the epistemic argument is clear, the authors may have underestimated the normative challenges connected to their ideas. As already mentioned, the necessity to loosen social and economic planning was part of the natural transition from 'warfare' to a 'pacified' government, and was also cherished by the social-welfarist tradition of the time (Cullingworth et al., 2015). Simply, for Banham et al. (1969), traditional planning mechanisms mainly reflected what authorities (elected and not-elected ones) *believed* other people *needed*, but people were increasingly capable of choosing directly by themselves what they *wanted*.[18] Allowing people to shape their environments does not require determining either a precise consensus or goals, and this situation of uncertainty may give rise to problems for spatial planners. The more susceptible that processes are to individual experiences, personal preferences and ambitions, the more uncontrollable the outcomes (Cozzolino, 2020; De Franco and Moroni, 2023). It is unclear what norm should apply to the reading and mastering of the events taking place in a non-plan regime. Perhaps, this was also the fortune of the *Non-Plan* article: 'thought-provoking' and 'light-hearted' enough to stay relevant and fresh many decades after its publication.

5. Conclusions

Non-Plan points out how planning, as any expression of designed order, includes some *possibilities* while excluding others. In this play, the authors contended that many uses of planning reflect flawed ideas of social realities. On the one hand, proponents of 'designed orders' believe that formal institutions (e.g. governmental agencies) should direct socio-economic processes to solve problems better and achieve common desirable goals. On the other, proponents of 'undesigned orders' assert that socio-economic processes are already implementable via social institutions (e.g. culture, market), needing no particular top-down direction. Planning is central in the former case, whereas in the second, planning is simply one – and not necessarily the best – of the many alternative approaches that can be used to make certain things happen. By revealing the shortcomings of conventional approaches, *Non-Plan* advocates for changing the way we think about plans formulated in response to emerging societal pressures. It is not merely about embracing the self-assertion of community *needs* but fully and radically accepting individuals' *wills*. The harsh criticisms of *Non-Plan* have exploited the deliberately light tone of the article, which puts forward arguments perhaps more profound than the authors envisaged. For this reason, *Non-Plan* remains a tremendously necessary read for studying and practising spatial planning – and much more.

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18 This topic, which some might refer to as a matter of 'spatial justice,' raises deeper questions: how do we want institutions to view and treat people? (Moroni & De Franco, 2024). Some authors have judged the position of Banham et al. (1969) as a form of egalitarianism (Franks, 2000), but it all depends on how one understands this term (Sen, 1992).

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