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Regional design

A transformative approach to planning

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Regional design: a transformative approach to planning

Spatial design in the context of emerging modes of regional spatial planning

Spatial planning approaches have changed since the 1990s. Major shifts in the institutional architecture of planning schemes have occurred: plan-led planning approaches – characterized by fixed administrative boundaries, statutory frameworks, and paternalistic forms of government – have turned into development-led approaches, in which soft planning follows and facilitates development proposals by market actors and the civil society. Dilemmas that are triggered by an accumulation of competing spatial claims – often due to highly urgent climate mitigation and adaptation measures – and a coupling of structural social, economic and political change have resulted in a greater appreciation of soft, adaptive, and flexible spatial planning approaches. Such approaches involve knowledge about particular areas, draw on place-based community-led initiatives and tailored temporary governance arrangements. They employ more transformative perceptions of natural, metabolic and evolutionary spatial change. In a context of uncertainty, contentiousness and complexity, they aim at unlocking more immediate and effective societal responses to problems in the built environment while maintaining robust, long-term planning rationales at the same time (Van Buuren *et al.*, 2013; Nadin *et al.*, 2021).

Observations of these emerging softer, more adaptive and flexible modes of spatial planning indicate that they give an important role to spatial visioning and spatial design. The changes described above seem to have inspired iterative and reflexive decision-making processes that are characterized by normative and persuasive agenda-setting approaches, often involving a variety of knowledge repertoires and many actors. Foresight methodology, co-design approaches, the imagination of spatial metaphors and the ‘art’ of making spatial representations have emerged as respected tools in capacity and consensus building in the deliberative, interactive multi-actor settings that flexible planning modes imply.

In various countries, like The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland, these engaged design-led approaches became more intimately related to supra-local regional and macro-regional spatial planning. Regional design – defined here as spatial design practice responding to problems that are at the attention of planning at high levels – emerged as a distinctive discipline. Multiple expectations concerning their performances occurred: they were thought to contribute to uncovering the mechanisms of regional spatial development, mediating the divisions and conflicting rationales that are caused by mismatches between spatial ranges and administrative boundaries, and encouraging local action while also supporting the coordination of such action across multiple and multi-scalar territories. They were also expected to contribute to the quality of democratic decision-making through for instance, enhancing the legitimacy and accountability of planning decisions in the context of complex relational

geographies and intricate multi-level actor networks. However, while expectations on the performance of design-led approaches remain high, their role in planning remains under-defined and much of their performance lacks empirical evidence and theoretical grounding.

Roles and performances of regional design

This Planning Practice & Research special issue is dedicated to a deeper understanding of how regional design impacts planning decision-making in a context of emerging contemporary soft, adaptive and flexible modes of spatial planning. The issue originated from the conference ‘Regional Design: A Transformative Approach to Planning’, which was initiated by the AESOP Thematic Group Regional Design as part of its Shaping Regional Futures Conference Series, and held on 2 October 2020 in an online setting. The conference committee – also editors of this special issue and including Agnes Förster, Cristina Cavaco, Valeria Lingua, and Verena Elisabeth Balz – asked attendees to submit extended abstracts of articles concerning empirical research and theoretical reflections that correspond to the knowledge gap introduced above. To provide guidance to authors, a series of more detailed issues for discussion were set out. The conference invited the submission of abstracts that concern one or several of these issues: (1) reconceptualisations of ‘soft’, ‘adaptive’ and ‘flexible’ modes of regional planning; (2) theoretically founded and/or empirically observed relations between design-led practices and such planning approaches; (3) evidence of the impact of design-led approaches, expressed in for instance new allocations of resources, actor constellations, frames of reference, and/or fields of action; (4) new tools and instruments in regional spatial analysis and design (for instance using big data, and real-time modelling; new visualisation and communication techniques; and new ways to involve spatial design in planning processes, such as design studios, international exhibitions, and design competitions); and (5) elaborations of transdisciplinary educational formats that involve learning about regional design and spatial planning.

The organizing committee received 27 abstracts from 52 authors. As a result of a following selection process 10 invitation for full article publication were extended. Of the 10 papers that were submitted to Planning Practice & Research, seven are published in this issue. Before introducing the articles, we present a few editorial notes to enhance the understanding of and reflection on the scholarly writing.

Editorial notes on contemporary regional design

Editors of this issue have invited investigations into the performances of regional design-led approaches in a context of contemporary soft, adaptive and flexible modes of spatial planning. The call generated not only a variety of perspectives on these performances, but also different perspectives on and definitions of the concept of ‘regional design’ itself. The issue may therefore arise as to the question if regional design is sufficiently well-framed and thus a productive theoretical concept.

In responding to this question, it is important to note that regional design is an emerging concept. In the Netherlands, arguably the country where the practice is most

institutionalized today, the term first came into use when planning underwent a process of regionalization from the 1980s onward. Among the novel decision-making approaches adopted for regional planning during that time was an array that continued a rich tradition of using spatial design for planning purposes in the country. These approaches, which in the following decades received the label ‘regional design,’ were diverse and ambiguously defined. They were positioned at the boundaries between science, craft, and art, spanning the professional fields of architectural design, landscape architecture, spatial planning, and infrastructure planning. As professional practices, they became instrumental in different settings; regional designs contributed to policy recommendations at various government levels, business cases, and public campaigns, for example. Commonalities and differences between these practices are subject to continuing debate in both Dutch planning research and practice. When reflecting upon this question, it is also worthwhile to consider reviews of other recently published collections of scholarly writing on regional design. A non-exhaustive list includes a handbook on regional design (Neuman & Zonneveld, 2021), a book dedicated to investigating the role of regional design in governance rescaling (Lingua & Balz, 2020), and a book focused on regional design practice in the Netherlands (Colombo *et al.*, 2022). As Dutch researchers and practitioners, reviewers of these compilations observe a comprehensive understanding of the concept regional design and note an overlap with issues and ideas in many neighbouring fields (such as regional development, regional growth, regional resilience, regional competitiveness, and regional geographies). Collectively, they agree that regional design is more of a practice in search of a theory than a theory suited to providing guidance for a deep understanding of practices.

The editors of this special issue also align with this perspective and consequently emphasize that this issue should be seen as part of an ongoing exploration of practices that share commonalities, including shared high hopes and expectations regarding their performances in the field of spatial planning. The goal is to contribute to theory formation and the establishment of propositions that can guide more in-depth analyses and generate detailed and exhaustive evidence. Having stated this, the editors would also like to underscore that there is already a shared acknowledgment of a series of basic characteristics of regional design practices as variables influencing the performances of practices in the realms of spatial planning and governance.

These characteristics are typically defined in architecture and urban design theory, while expected performances are often conceptualised by planning scholars. Collectively, they lead to the following propositions: (1) regional design is a normative practice that utilizes imagination and anticipation to build arguments and capacity for change; (2) regional design is a practice that enables the agency of space and place within multi-actor settings; (3) regional design engages with holistic wholes and interdependencies between parts, thereby stimulating plurality in the constitution of knowledge and processes of knowledge co-production; and (4) – most centrally, in the view of the author of this editorial note – regional design is a reflective practice, which not only generates novel planning solutions but also provides new accounts of the intricate multi-actor and multi-level institutional context within which these solutions are expected to perform.

The points on this list, portraying regional design practices as instruments in contemporary soft, adaptive, and flexible modes of spatial planning, are elaborated in slightly more detail below. These brief elaborations can be viewed as prompts for an increased

understanding of the articles in this special issue, as well as other recent scholarly writing on regional design.

Instrument for imagination and anticipation

Among spatial design scholars, there is a broad consensus that design is an argumentative practice, utilizing simulation and imagination of alternative futures to construct arguments for enhancing the built environment (Hillier & Leaman, 1974; Schön, 1983; Rittel, 1987). Planning scholars have embraced such endeavours, particularly with a focus on the institutional dimension of utilizing imagination. In their editorial note for a compilation of writings on the role of spatial imaginaries in influencing spatial relations and planning practices, Davoudi *et al.* (2018, p. 101) highlight the essence of these explorations by noting that these imaginaries are ‘tacit, taken-for-granted understandings of spatiality that give sense to, enable, and legitimize collective spatial practices.’

In contemporary modes of spatial planning, not only imagination but also anticipation is frequently described as an indispensable skill in building capacity for change, often from the bottom up and through citizen participation. For instance, foresight methodology is defined as a systematic, participatory, future-intelligence-gathering, and medium-to-long-term vision-building process (UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, 2018). Scholars who have investigated such methodology note that the anticipation of alternative future scenarios enables present-day decisions, mobilizes joint action, and facilitates reflection on new values in politics and policymaking. Dabson *et al.* (2012, p. 4) explain, for another instance, that in meeting the complex planning challenges of environmental disasters, communities rely on increased resilience and adaptive capacity. This capacity depends, among other factors, on communities’ ability to ‘anticipate threats, reduce the impact of these threats by taking pre-emptive action, (and) respond appropriately when these threats materialize’ (Dabson *et al.*, 2012, p. 6). Miller (2018), who researches the theory and practice of anticipation, argues for ‘futures literacy’, which is ‘the skill that allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, ability to prepare, recover, and invent as changes occur’ (UNESCO, 2021). When studying regional design as an imaginative planning instrument, scholars have emphasised the importance of guiding large-scale and long-term visions, persuasive narratives and framing concepts in a regional planning context, which is usually devoid of robust and mature institutions (see for instance Neuman, 1996, 2000; Hajer *et al.*, 2010). When reflecting on the performance of regional design in contemporary modes of spatial planning, scholars hypothesize that regional design is well suited to amplify anticipation through imagination and vice versa (for a detailing of this proposition, see Van Dijk, 2011). In a context of uncertainty, combinations of long-term and short-term forecasting and back-casting, considering trends and path dependencies, utopian ideas as well as the dreams, hopes and expectations of communities, may indeed be indispensable to ‘co-constitute what is, and thus influence what will be’ (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 124).

Instrument enabling the agency of space and place

Spatial design, including regional design, shares conceptual foundations and aspirations with methodology from the field of future studies (such as foresight methodology) but emphasizes the culturally produced social constructions of space, place, and territory. Scholars in design-led approaches, when engaging with spatial planning, governance, and participation, highlight the ‘agency’ of these constructs in interactive settings. The core proposition is that they are not just passive backdrops for human activities but actively shape and influence behaviours, social interactions, and cultural practices. In this context, spatial design can be broadly understood as a practice introducing notions of space, place, and territory into spatial planning decision-making (and sectoral policymaking more broadly).

Numerous propositions explain how such an account interacts with planning, governance, and participation. In the context of emerging soft, adaptive, and flexible modes of regional spatial planning and governance, a particular proposition stands out: there is an expectation that the expanse of space and place is related to the territorial scope of government. The concept of ‘place-based approaches,’ for instance, links the particular development potential of localities to the territorial boundaries of jurisdictions, administrations, or soft governance arrangements (Purkarthofer, 2018; Havlík, 2023). Scholars in multi-level governance similarly predict that a match between the location of development potential and the boundaries of governing is an ideal precondition for not only the economic efficiency and effectiveness of governance but also sociality and community (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, 2016). The post-functionalist theory of multilevel governance maintains ‘that governance arrangements at the subnational level need to be understood as the interplay of functional logic and social identity rather than via functionalism alone’ (Morgan, 2018, p. 42). Political science scholars, studying interrelations between regional governance and spatial planning, introduce the concept of ‘territorial synchrony’ to describe a desirable match between autonomous spatial development processes and the scales and scopes of territorial governing. Hajer (2003) notes that such synchrony requires not just effective and efficient politico-administrative structures but also institutions that hold a deeper knowledge and cultural understanding of regions. Salet (2021, p. 438) argues for interaction between ‘the institutional side (the changing set of public norms) and the pragmatic side of public action (the public intentions, purposes and experiments of action)’ in the context of contemporary radical transitions. Regional design may be assigned a particular task in this context; one that is specialized in using a layered multi-level and multi-scalar approach for exploring the ‘critical variables that matter’ in matching evolving norms and action – as Salet argues – and the matches and mismatches between ideas about space, place and territory which are held by different actors, as is argued by others.

Instruments for local knowledge, plurality in the constitution of knowledge, and knowledge co-production

Design theorists have characterized spatial design practice as an attempt to understand the built environment as a whole, framing the design process as an exploration that considers complex dependencies among the constituent parts (Hillier *et al.*, 1972; Cross,

1990; Caliskan, 2012). When reflecting on the performances of design-led practices in the domain of spatial planning, scholars often link this tendency towards system-thinking with comprehensive and integral planning approaches.

In the context of the contemporary modes of spatial planning, governance, and participation outlined above, the systematic engagement with wholes also recognizes the importance of plurality in the constitution of knowledge, the value of local knowledge, and a consequent need for knowledge co-production. In this context, design practice is a part of a 'consolidated shift towards a more communicative and collaborative approach' to policymaking (Kleinhans *et al.*, 2022, p. 771), one that 'asserts that meaning and understandings emerge from the interactions between people, i.e. neither objectively nor subjectively, but inter-subjectively' (Fuller & Loogma, 2009, p. 3).

Related co-design approaches are found in various disciplinary fields. The approach of 'participatory foresight,' for instance, breaks away from practices dependent on technical experts and instead encourages citizens to shape decisions about their future (UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, 2018). According to experts on the approach, foresight should recognize that in uncertain and complex environments, such as in sustainability transitions, relevant knowledge is dispersed, and the constitution of knowledge as a base for decision-making depends on the participation of diverse cognitive perspectives. By involving non-traditional actors, participatory foresight should expand the democratic basis and legitimacy of knowledge production and policymaking. Regional design scholars recognize the importance of plurality in planning decision-making and knowledge production too. Because of their concern about high levels and large scales, they emphasize that regional design is an interactive governance practice which seeks to reveal and balance the multiple interests and perspectives that exist in the often fragmented regional multi-actor settings (see for instance Kempenaar *et al.*, 2016; Kampenaar, 2017; Lingua, 2019). When used for knowledge production in a contemporary setting of uncertainty, contentiousness and complexity, regional design may also assume a more basic role in fact-checking and speaking truth to power, drawing on its skills in comprehensive regional spatial analysis and visualisation (for an elaboration of regional design as a scientific approach, see Klaasen, 2007).

Instrument in the production of context

A last fundamental characteristic of design practice identified by design theorists is the reflexivity of the practice concerning its context. Spatial design theory emphasizes an explorative, conjecture-and-refutation logic in the production of arguments for change (Schön, 1983). Schön (1988) compares design processes to legal rule-building procedures, where rules are derived from reflecting on the performances of types of solutions in types of environments. He elaborates on this process, noting that, to argue for change, the designer imagines design solutions while simultaneously envisioning the world around him or her. This envisioning of context is a process of abstraction that leads to the recognition of types: simplifications of real, material settings, situated between highly general, abstract categories and highly specific ones (Hillier & Leaman, 1974; Schön, 1988; Caliskan, 2012). Such simplification is instrumental in design: 'By invoking a type, a designer can see how a possible design move might be matched or mismatched to a situation' (Schön,

1988, p. 183). Conclusions drawn during iterative design processes can be twofold: the testing of solutions against abstract perceptions of real-world settings – the ‘design world,’ as Schön (Schön, 1992, p. 2) calls these perceptions – may lead to the modification of a design solution or a changing appreciation of this ‘design world’.

A series of theories and concepts underpin the need for such reflexive feedback in contemporary modes of spatial planning and governance. The theory of experimentalist governance, for instance, emphasizes a need for a reflexive consideration of policy options at various levels of government and local discretion in processes of rule-building. Morgan (2018), referring to Sabel and Zeitlin (2012, p. 169), defines this form of governance as ‘a recursive process of provisional goal setting based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts.’ The author stresses that experimentalist governance, also called democratic experimentalism, requires decision-making processes that are open, verifiable, experimental, and inclusive. In other fields studying the use of futures in decision-making, reflexivity is also a central aspect. Foresight methodology emphasizes time in processes of reflection, involving gathering future intelligence and mobilizing joint action through a systematic, participatory vision-building process. Insights generated through the description and production of differences between envisioned futures and current situations are used to construct meaning during an interpreted feedback process (Fuller & Loogma, 2009).

Scholars in regional design have engaged with this reflexivity, for example, investigating the performance of regional design in ‘governance rescaling’ (Lingua & Balz, 2020) and discretionary rule-building processes (Balz, 2018). In conjunction, these investigations have underlined the important notion of ‘context’ in any attempt for understanding the performances of regional design in spatial planning, governance and participation. The notion hints at where regional design theory may be formed in the future. In design theory, design practice appears to be ‘a relatively simple set of operations carried out on highly complex structures, which are themselves simplified by “theories” and modes of representation,’ as Hillier and Leaman (1974, p. 4) note. These scholars argue that, to improve a design method, a sophisticated understanding of these theories and modes of representation is more important than an understanding of the practices themselves. Similarly, a deeper understanding of the performances of regional design practice may occur when this goes hand in hand with a simultaneous deeper understanding of what one could call – in analogy of the ‘design world’ mentioned above – the contextual ‘planning world’. Contemporary forms of planning emerge in a context of uncertainty, contentiousness and complexity. Contemporary regional design will be a product of this situation too.

The articles

The above editorial notes suggest that performances of regional design in the realms of spatial planning, governance, and participation can be associated with the instrumental role of regional design in stimulating imagination and anticipation, enabling the agency of space and place, facilitating plurality in knowledge co-production, and encouraging reflexivity and learning in planning, governance and participation. The articles, which are bundled in this special issue, touch upon one or more of these propositions. Below the

articles are introduced through brief summaries as well as editorial comments concerning an estimated wider concern in the light of the propositions above.

The article ‘Regional Design for Post-Mining Transformation: Insights from Implementation in Lusatia’ reports on an attempt to implement regional design in the context of the decarbonization transition in Lusatia, one of the three remaining German lignite regions (Matern *et al.*, 2022). The examination sheds light on the challenges and opportunities that arise when experimenting with design in a politically charged situation. In the conclusions, the authors state: ‘The Planning Lab became a microcosm of structural transformation in Lusatia as a whole. The same factors that hinder an integrated, long-term, spatial development strategy could be observed in the Planning Lab (. . .) (Matern *et al.*, 2022, p. 14).’ Despite hopes that the experiment would offer a unique space for innovative thinking, its performances were shaped by existing power structures and dynamics. Workshops unveiled a lack of openness to innovation among state authorities. Moreover, they revealed that ecological sustainability goals were marginalized, considered secondary to socio-economic challenges. Scepticism toward a long-term strategy and coordination across federal states became apparent. The authors close their article with a rather pessimistic note on regional design: They continue to hope for performances of the design exercise in the longer term but argue that this hope offers little comfort given the substantial scale of the necessary structural transformation and the need for immediate and decisive regional governance responses to it. From a more distant editorial perspective, it can be argued that the article sketches a revealing power of regional design, though one that emphasises the reflexivity of regional design.

The article ‘The Impact of Regional Design on River Agreements: The Case of the Ombrone River in Tuscany’ assumes that regional design is a planning approach employed to build robust argumentative structures and visions that can guide decisions over the long term (Pisano & Lingua, 2021). The article investigates the practice in the context of a River Agreement in Italy, tracing the path of iterative research and action. This path led the local community of Buonconvento, a small Tuscan town, to activate networks of social capital for the building of such an agreement for the Ombrone River. The study evaluates the performance of regional design in four key areas, notably perception, networks, frameworks, and local action. The research demonstrates that regional design can effectively transform how a river basin is perceived, enhance regional soft governance networks, offer planning frameworks for regional development, and drive the implementation of local projects. This research underscores the value of regional design in regions with fragmented planning landscapes. It highlights how the approach can contribute to shaping the discourse and decisions in large-scale territorial and governance processes, offering a viable methodology to guide Regional Agreement initiatives. Although taking a comprehensive perspective on the performances of regional design, iteration and reflexivity stand out as the central feature of the tested regional design methodology.

Drawing on expert interviews with practitioners who participated in educational regional design studios at the Technical University of Munich, the article ‘Disseminating Regional Design: Potentials and Barriers in Existing Spatial Planning and Governance’ investigates how these practitioners assess the potential of regional design for improving their real-world spatial planning and governance practices (Weinig *et al.*, 2023). The article begins with the assumption that regional design thrives by

revealing context, actors, and interdependencies between spatial scales. The findings present a generally positive outlook for the dissemination of regional design. While practitioners may debate some detailed aspects of the methodology, they recognize and appreciate its anticipated impact on, for instance, inter-municipal collaboration and the engagement of different stakeholders in discussions about future development. Frequently mentioned barriers to implementation include challenges within municipal administration and interaction with political representatives. In concluding remarks, the study suggests how the implementation of regional design can be enhanced, and recommends further research. From an above sketched editorial perspective also this paper engages with the proposition that regional design not only generates novel planning solutions but also provides new accounts of the intricate multi-actor and multi-level institutional context within which these solutions are expected to perform. It is worthwhile to note that such reflection is accomplished in an education setting, which seems very appropriate for the purpose.

To prepare for the impacts of climate change, many Asian cities are aiming to become climate-resilient. The article ‘Water as Leverage: Design-led Planning for Urban Climate Resilience’ reports on an exploration of the ‘Water as Leverage’ (WaL) program initiated by the Dutch government. This program aims to stimulate investment in sustainable water management, using a design-led approach to identify innovative urban climate resilience proposals, including in Semarang, Indonesia (Kempenaar *et al.*, 2022). Results of the analysis suggest that the WaL approach has contributed to a transformation towards urban climate resilience. However, the analysis also highlights some of the approach’s limitations. For instance, it has struggled to unlock financial resources in an international context and to garner commitment from local, regional, and national governments. The study further emphasizes the need for continuous presence of programs like WaL on the ground. In conclusion, the article calls for greater attention to design-led planning initiatives in both research and practice. As editors of this special issue, it encourages further evaluation of similar approaches to understand their true potential, limitations, and contributions to the transformative change needed for climate-resilient urban regions worldwide.

The article ‘Mobilization, Assembling, and Translation of Integrated Urban Development Policy in Ukraine: Revealing Strategies, Actors, and Labors’ employs the ‘assembling urbanism framework’ to analyze the mobilization of the IUD approach in Ukrainian cities (Tyminskyi, 2022). The period it focuses on starts in the late 2000s and ends in 2014 when the IUD approach was scaled up to the national level. Using the three-part analytical model of mobilization, assembling, and translation, the author tracks the dynamic process of urban policy development that turned the IUD approach into a dominant heterogeneous policy assemblage in the country. The research yields several theoretical and practical implications for planning. First, it helps identify the origins and stages of IUD policy development in the context of post-Soviet and post-Maidan Ukraine. Second, it highlights the roles and power dynamics among diverse actors in the process. Third, it underscores the significance of the desire for change in IUD policy mobilization. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the evolution of urban planning paradigms and policy development in Ukraine. Its relevance for the discussion on regional design stems from an account of the interwoven spatial scales, governance levels, and time frames that form the context of regional design practice.

While the articles summarised so far engage with the proposition that regional design is an instrument for reflection and the production of context, two articles in this special issue are mainly concerned with other propositions. One of these engages with regional design as an instrument in enabling the agency of space as well as knowledge co-production. Territorial capital is a policy concept that emphasizes the endogenous development and regional competitiveness of particular places. The article ‘From Territorial Capital to Regional Design: A Multidimensional Model for Territorial Analysis and Scenario Evaluation’ introduces a multi-criteria assessment model that combines territorial capital indicators for a comprehensive consideration of space and place in both spatial planning and regional development policymaking (Orsi *et al.*, 2022). Taking the Portuguese region of Sintra as a case study, it is demonstrated that the model has the potential to enhance regional design approaches in various ways: it supports a dynamic perspective on territorial systems; the consideration of development on multiple geographical scales; a direct connection between territorial analysis and scenario-building; constructive dialogue with stakeholders through visualization; and feedback during iterative processes. Overall, it is argued that the model promotes the reframing of the region by offering the possibility to weigh a variety of perspectives on the development of territorial capital against each other. The authors state that to prevent regional design from becoming arbitrary, it is crucial to base it on a solid information foundation that aids informed decisions in complex contexts.

Finally, one article in this special issue elaborates on regional design as an instrument in imagination and anticipation. The article ‘Rehabilitating Utopias: The Importance of Imagination in Confronting Our Spatial Challenges’ seeks a renewed appreciation of utopian designs in spatial planning (Koning & van Dijk, 2022). Drawing on the observation that utopian ideas have been dismissed as unrealistic and fantastical in modern planning, the authors aim to rekindle a discussion on their significance. They argue that utopian ideas, seen as the products of unlimited imagination, are well-suited to influence and be influenced by people, and that the pressing sustainability challenges call for such powerful ideas. To demonstrate the validity of their argument, they examine the use of imagined futures in 12 Dutch regional and local transformation strategies. The case studies explore how the production of the imaginations evolved, their characteristics, and their potential to drive change. In their conclusions, the authors stress the importance of representing future possibilities in planning decision-making. These representations serve sense-making and persuasion and allow for the framing of actions without dictating them entirely. In particular, they argue that utopian thinking in planning processes is needed to broaden the debate and find innovative solutions to wicked and complex twenty-first-century issues. Finally, the authors point to a need for more research, specifically into ways of embedding utopian thinking in formal planning approaches.

To conclude this editorial, we return to the earlier presented notes on contemporary regional design. The seven contributions summarised above were originally conceived for the conference ‘Regional Design: A Transformative Approach to Planning’. The conference aimed to deepen our understanding of the roles and performances of regional design within an emerging landscape of soft, adaptive, and flexible spatial planning modes. The editorial notes assert that regional design theory is not yet fully formed but that spatial design theory can be used to identify a series of shared basic characteristics of regional design practices and predict the roles and performances of these practices in

planning on these grounds for the time being. Characteristics define regional design as an argumentative, imaginative and reflexive approach; one in which plural knowledge on spaces, places, and territories is iteratively used for comparison, the recognition of difference, the weighting of options, and the deliberation on alternative spatial futures. More fundamentally, the characterisation of regional design as an ordinary design practice stresses the importance of context in both the conduction and analysis of regional design. When emphasising regional design as an instrument in the production of context, it becomes part of an experimentalist governance approach, where representations of the contemporary multi-level and multi-scale landscape of top-down and bottom-up spatial planning modes explains intermediate designs and vice versa. We encourage readers of this special issue to use this lens as a prompt for additional reflection during the reading of the articles and the compilation as a whole.

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