

## **PLANNING AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST.** *A CRITICAL REVIEW*

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**ABSTRACT** – From an ethical perspective, the biggest difficulty for planners is to take the best approach in responding to the decision makers and in acting in the public interest because it always becomes subject of pressures arising with the governmental change, on the one hand, and the societal change on the other hand. Even though many debates arise regarding its existence, for planners, as well as for the planning profession, the public interest has always been legitimizing principles as a norm of practice (Alexander, 2002). The paper critically analyses the planning activity in relation to the public interest and highlights the importance of reciprocity between the two. In order to analyse this issue, the article starts with the presentation of different perspectives regarding the public interest, touching upon its conceptual meaning which is followed by a historical review of its origins and transformation. The third section presents its contextual meaning, its representatives, and the change of its content starting from the 19th century until nowadays and discusses the planners' ability to represent it. The final part comprises the conclusions that indicate that the planning activity should serve the public interest and, by that, it would serve also the interest of planning as a profession. It emphasises two important issues of the present days: the definition of the public interest and the rational decision making within the planning process.

**Keywords:** public interest, planning theory, community involvement

### **INTRODUCTION**

At a certain extent, planning is about property development, land use and environmental management, having the role of bringing together and, in the same time, dealing with the economic, social and environmental priorities in a way that serves the public well-being, the community's interest with an extended concern on its characteristic and endemic diversity. Nevertheless, there is a large amount of published studies that investigate, analyse and also argue the existence of public interest as a concept. Therefore, we can state that the perception of public interest does not have an accurate definition but, in order to formulate the public policy, it is important to understand the term. Does it stand for the people's individual, private interests, their needs? Is it realistic to project these onto the public (Rasheed, n.a.)? The common dimension of these previously mentioned sides is at the point where everyone in an individual and also common context desires the best conceivable, "the common well-being". Consequently, the question remains the same: what is the public interest? When did it appear? Who represents it?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used for the review involved theoretical papers, systematic reviews and essays for assessing and synthesising literature in order to identify patterns and assess the important theories based on individual understanding. The paper involves keyword searches using electronic databases, especially journals. The searched terms included "planning theory", "public interest", "advocacy planning", "public participation" and "community involvement". After an objective description and comparison of different opinions and approaches, critical thinking was applied to the

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ideas and gaps were expressed in the form of relevant questions that were not discussed by the presented authors. The review consisted of two phases: first, a review plan was written, which set up the review criteria. This consisted in analysing the concept, the evolution and content of the public interest. The later phase involved the assessment of the retrieved papers according to the previously set criteria. In the end, the analysis of these contexts created a picture which was able to show the identity of the public interest and the different pros and cons of planning activity with regard to this issue.

### **THE CONCEPT OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST, ITS ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION**

According to Moroni (2004), nowadays, the concept and the idea of the public interest is a highly questionable one. Even if several planning theorists and practitioners make great efforts to support and preserve the idea of the public interest, the traditional concept is at risk of disappearing. In planning, it has even become a general tendency to believe that the public interest does not exist, which could be one of the reasons for the various interpretations and unclear differentiation discussed by the planning and political theory (Moroni, 2004). Conversely, according to Grant (2005), the substantive theories truthfully believe in the existence of the idea and they consider that trained planners have the ability to recognize it. Thus, in spite of this uncertainty, much effort has been made to integrate and accommodate the meaning of the public interest within the idea and activity of planning.

As stated by Alexander (2002), the concept of public interest came with the identification of the state originating from the democratic breakthrough in the Roman times having its Latin denomination as 'res publica', with an English meaning of 'the public thing' or 'the public affair'. Flathman (1996), for example, supports the idea of the Platonic sight which reflects upon the need for substantive considerations in order to provide an explanatory meaning to the public interest; within this idea, the concept is used as a tool to appraise the public policies which leads to the thinking that perception must have the ability to accommodate the various concerns through which the diverse policies are assessed.

Throughout the history, the economic conditions, the process of changing political and policy ideas about planning and public interest have gone through wider changes and raised attention to certain environmental aspects. The concept survived even through the Middle Ages, connected to the republican government at first. Then, it changed into popular revolutionary politics surviving through the Renaissance, after which the focus was shifted towards the idea that the public is the representative of the state.

Following the Enlightenment, the public interest had a new meaning which strongly focused on the idea of interest and emerged afterwards in the modernist concept of being the collectivistic representation of private and individual interests (Alexander, 2002); it enabled the evolution of industrialization and liberal political thought (Schibata, 2006).

Between the 17th and the 18th centuries, several public health reforms took place and social policies were developed in order to act in the public interest. However, later on, when the 19th century suffered a significant population increase and considerable growth in towns, problems connected to public health rose, which demanded a new way of government implication. The overcrowded and unsanitary urban areas led to significant economic costs and requested an intervention of the market forces and private property rights (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002) in order to develop a system able to act in the public interest and create social welfare. Therefore, from one perspective, the town and country planning developed from the health and housing policies (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002) and, consequently, in 1909, the first planning act was born, the Housing, Town Planning, etc. Act, 1909.

In the 1940's, as a result of a movement, the Barlow report, new significant recommendations were made in order to subordinate the private interests to the public ones. The context of World War II gave a large motivation to extend the regional planning into the field of industrial location, which created the opportunity for a large scale planning in rebuilding the destroyed areas. This marked the beginning of the modern welfare state and, with regard to its concept, acted in the public interest. In addition, the 1947 Town Planning Act provided a large development control by giving planning a

regulative function (Cullinworth and Nadin, 2002) and greater role for the public in planning, though the concept of the public interest remained a questionable issue.

Campbell and Marshall (2002) mention the idea of Reade (1987, 1997) who argued that it is a concealment which excludes the real assessment of planning system in practice. Within the theoretical discussions, some of the postmodernist critiques presented the public interest as a universalizing concept as being a problematic notion in a diverse world (Campbell and Marshall, 2002). Although many philosophers and political theorists debated its existence, for planners and the planning profession, it has always had a manifestation as a justifiable principle and a norm for practice (Alexander, 2002). According to Howe (1992), a major indicator of planners' way of thinking about their relationship to the decision makers and to the public mainly depends on their definition of the term.

Alexander (1992) talks about public interest as a foundation of the rational planning approach and as the traditional model of comprehensive planning. Additionally, Moroni (2004) claims that it can be recognized during the planning process and it serves as a condition in the appraisal of alternative planning proposals. Moreover, the planning process should be built up and practiced with consideration to the divergence of public interest (Davidoff, 1965). Although planning in the public interest should be a constructive exercise especially in the democratic societies, it seems that, frequently, the democratic openness and practice result in the critical assessment having streams which serve interests that are totally different than those they actually had to (Stein and Harper, 2003). This drives us to a very interesting and fundamental matter, the notion of trust, which in the works of several theorists and researchers is argued and questioned. On the other hand, it is a topic which has been absent from many debates. Trust is an essential factor not only in the community and social sphere but also within the political relations (Stein and Harper, 2003). It plays a crucial role in understanding planning as a profession and planning as a practice not only in an individual manner but also in a broader context, through the credibility of the planning systems (Swain and Tait, 2007) and through the nature of planning demands with consideration to the public trust. Even though planning as a profession and its activity is classified as an action which functions in the public interest (Campbell and Marshall, 2002), in many situations it faces strains in dealing with the various interests and in "making everyone happy". Therefore, it leads to difficulties in building the confidence of the public about the idea that the planning system truthfully works in the public interest (Swain and Tait, 2007). As it can be seen frequently, there is an increasing number of aspirations and efforts made in order to raise the accountability of the professionals, public servants and politicians. Nevertheless, is this the right way of facing and treating the "crises of trust"? (O'Neill, 2002). For planners, there is another vocabulary that has a vast significance in guiding them to understand and create institutions, to follow decision processes which articulate, sustain and improve the normative liberal democratic principles. This is the vocabulary of trust. "[...] trust is essential to the work of planners. Without trust all will collapse" (Stein and Harper, 2003, p. 137). Consequently, there is a need to build environments where it is possible to create trust and to sustain it in a long term. Public interest is in close relationship with general social, cultural issues and in some writings even with gender, class difference, race (Sandercock, 1998), property right, power, influence, diverse ideologies and of, course, powerful and diverse political ideas. For that reason, as illustrated above, it is hard to establish a precise meaning of the concept. Then the next question arises: how is it articulated in practice? Who represents it?

### **REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST**

Several opinions were born which argue not only the representation of the public interest but also the ability of planning as a profession in being able to act in the public interest.

As the concept has numerous definitions, the answers for these questions are built up by different approximations and options.

As a first example, the Burk's objective concept of virtual representation can be mentioned, where the Members of Parliament represented the public interest mainly because the people would not be able to know what is important for them. He has seen public interest as a unitary concept which

represents all the objective interests of the nation that were determined through rational consideration (Campbell and Marshall, 2002). On the other hand, the same article mentioned the Madisonian concept of liberalism appeared in the United States, the dialogical concept (Alexander, 2002), which sees public interest as being plural and subjective. It supports the idea that individuals know their own interest best. Instead of placing the political system in the position of arbitrator, the 20th century's majoritarian liberalism created a picture of the government as an active force in constructing improved life conditions for the citizens (Ingersoll and Matthews, 1991).

The pluralist political system has various groups which represent the public interest and fight for and accommodate diverse interests which conflict with each other and persist on their ability of tackling and acting with regard to the public interest. On the other hand, the main difficulty in determining whether interest groups destabilize the public interest depends or not on what the public interest comprises with regard to a particular matter. Until this remains unclarified, each group will claim to promote the public interest (Rasheed, n.a.).

The utilitarian tradition serves as a third example. It has been developed in the United Kingdom also as a subjective view of interest, but in a different way than the one in the United States. Utilitarianism is based on the idea that every citizen, individually, knows his/her interests best and the only way to assess the consequences of certain actions is to feel the pleasure or the pain experienced by the individuals (Campbell and Marshall, 2002). Nevertheless, this does not exclude other approaches such as the acceptance that the government can act above its responsibility regarding issues like human rights or international development. However, the biggest dilemma from this perspective is that, in the end, several public representatives might take to the front various actions or even laws that recognize public interest even if several interest groups do not agree with them (Methot, 2003). Consequently, we can say that the success for defining public interest most likely relies in the way that the principle is articulated, the methods that are used for achieving compromises and the way that the process is performed. As discussed above, the concept changed gradually throughout the years, its articulation has been seen from different perspectives. Nevertheless, what happened then with its content? Is planning burdened with complex ideas which only serve to enclose to the facade of democracy, and serve to raise expectations, and the interest in a hopeful failure of articulating the public interest?

### **UNDERSTANDING THE CONTENT OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST**

Planning does not have any values without a substantial content (Campbell and Marshall, 2002) and viewed from a positive perspective, the persuasive need for planning and requirement for new social ambitions will drive the city planners to confer shape and content to the public interest (Davidoff, 1965).

After the 1947 Town Planning Act, the new land use policy tried to facilitate economic development that also served the public interests. The content was articulated by the provision of new housing, healthcare services, the development and reconstruction of the towns, raising employment possibilities and community services, designation of new parks, power given to the local authority to assure public access to the countryside (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002). However, the actions taken in the public interest throughout the 1950s, nowadays, materialize in urban sprawl, traffic jams, air pollution and, above all, the unsuccessful urban renewal and public housing projects which uncovered the misleading notion of the post-war conceptualization of the public interest. All these actions support the idea that values change after a certain time (Grant, 2005); nevertheless, planning can lose its value if it does not have substantive content (Campbell and Marshall, 2002) and the same is valid for the public interest.

The advocacy planning introduced by Davidoff gave acknowledgement for planners about the multiple interests. It denies the single public interest and enlightens several political choices. As a consequence, the planning theory turned to examine the processes and developed frameworks in order to supply the common good. If planners have lost their skills in searching for the public interest, then, the next step is to help communities to find the ways of defining these (Grant, 2005). Consequently, if communities became the ones who give context to planning, it is important to understand their views

and not to base policies and theories on idealistic perceptions of communities (Campbell, 2005). In contrast, the difficulties with citizen participation programmes consist in the 'reactive' approach of residents to the programme and not the drive to propose aim for future actions (Davidoff, 1965). It leads to the pluralist case of advocacy planning which requires established laws and legal institutions to judge conflicting arguments (Campbell, 2005). Alternatively, the communitarian implication connects planners to the public interest. This happens at the point when the development proposals are assessed only in conformity with the community's objectives and norms already articulated in statutory plans and regulations (Alexander, 2002).

Nowadays, collaborative planning has increased its popularity and recommends that planners work together in defining the public interest and in discovering dynamic ways in order to solve conflicts and create beneficial outcomes for everyone (Grant, 2005); the planning theory has distanced from the 20th century and we slowly enter a new historical period of post-industrialism, globalization, post-Fordism, and the "new economy" (Campbell and Fainstein, 2003). In order to find out the public interest planners should use proper principles such as normative theories like 'new urbanism and smart growth' through which the urban form becomes a common benefit. These objectives include a new design with mixed use, tidy, pedestrian friendly streets (Grant, 2005). However, nowadays the dilemma in how to satisfy the public interest arises when democracy and created well-being lead to a society that requires changes in the social order, economy, environment, but it does not intend to contribute with anything for this purpose. As an example, we can mention travelling, where some groups of the public would like to have endless transport possibilities, but they are not willing to stay calm in the case of traffic jams; therefore, new expectations and new interests arise. Further, another example would be the expected environmental friendliness and guaranteed life quality, but several society members refuse to take care of the energy consumption, water usage and waste recycling. It is certain that interest exists, but the only problem is the attitude which causes a dilemmatic situation for planners with regard to the society's interests, their concept about it and drives us to think that we will never reach a level when this interest could be separated, recognized and fulfilled. Thus, the question is: are planners able to serve the public interest? As part of our profession it is our responsibility to advise communities, our task as planners is to show our ethical perspective and enlighten the righteous preferences set in the planning outcomes. Planning involves political choices with regard to the nature of land, facilities and resources. In many cases, outcomes are not satisfactory for everyone, common agreement is not always possible and resources are sometimes very limited; however, our role is to represent not only issues, but also options for those who take part in the decision-making process, as well as for those who are affected by these decisions (Grant, 2005).

Campbell (2005), for example, talks about a certain category of planners who see their planning practice as a form of service. Consequently, they think that community members should 'go along with the planning' mainly because they believe in public interest, in its course of action and, overall, they aim to serve the public interest. As result, these planners expect from residents, developers, the elected officials to see the benefits of the public interest. According to Swain and Tait (2007), planning involves a network of competing interests from a variable social, economic, political and environmental context. It was framed as an activity which works in the public interest (Campbell and Marshall, 2002), it meets tensions in solving these multiple concerns with regard to the public interest, fact which leads to difficulties in securing that confidence which suggests that the planning system surely works in the interest of the public.

The neo-liberal critiques say that efforts were made by the planning system to work in the public interest, but in order to satisfy interest these became inferior to the market mechanisms and were not able to succeed. On the other hand, the post-modern critiques do not accept those universal theories fundamental for the term and their inability for diversity. Therefore, they endeavour to gain trust from different groups. Even though the planners' selfless work in the public interest has been questioned by many writers who point out and identify the danger and difficulty of the process (Swain and Tait, 2007), some planners believe that their own normative positions are the ones representing and working for the public interest. Nevertheless, in the end, outcomes become more political though (Grant, 2005).

In terms of nowadays, we can say that it is obvious that many planning systems strive to serve the public interest, but the great danger they face lies in those planners whose definition of the public interest is limited to physical planning and do not take in consideration the possible social effect which, in the end, leads to harming other society groups.

### CONCLUSIONS

As pointed out in the first part of the paper, public interest is part of the common well-being, which drives the society to demand for such economic, social and environmental frameworks that could provide it to its members. There is a need to create such political circumstances that are able to supply this demand by using specific methodologies, processes and policies, obviously built with consideration to the diversity of the public interest.

Planning should be used as a guiding tool in the methods that ensure that land use and regulations, as well as property development, provide the best services in order to serve the public interest that, as emphasised in the paper, is certainly not a cumulative term of several individual interests.

Nowadays, in the modern era, the biggest concern regarding the development of land, land use regulations and development frameworks is that these could contribute to the planning censure. Therefore, the correct redefinition and predetermination of the public interest would set a new milestone in the planning process and policy-making. The public, the society has new interests and it is essential to find out which are those in order to create such conditions for the land use planning to allow their achievement. As public interest has many levels, it is fragmented and, because of the interest's diversity, it is highly competitive. Therefore, it is a challenge to determine what it covers, to emphasize on it and to create planning regulations which serve the well-being of the entire society. Building consensus and trust are important elements of the planning profession by which the professional identity can be reflected. There is an urgent need to reach consensus, values need to be clarified even if this process requires an honest debate. In a democratic state, on the one hand, public needs to be informed, but on the other hand, it also needs a certain level of responsibility in order to contribute to this process. However, it is important to aspire to such planning decisions that contribute to and consider the public interest. Meantime, this also serves the interests of planning as a profession in an ethical and rational manner distinguishing the planning profession from other occupations.

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