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'What planners don't do is plan': recovering the English strategic spatial planning imagination

Nicholas A. Phelps ^a and David C. Valler^b

^aFaculty of Architecture Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ^bSchool of the Built Environment, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

Strategic spatial planning imagination is fundamentally distributed across private, public and third sectors within national planning systems. Drawing on stakeholder interviews, we review the practice of imagination in English strategic spatial planning post-2010, arguing that it is critically exposed in terms of both breadth and depth. We therefore make suggestions for further mobilizing dispersed imagination in England and underline the need for associated development in the education and training of planners.

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Introduction

Strategic spatial plans have evolved from a typically idealized, comprehensive form involving specific land use allocations and infrastructure network placement to more indicative forms involving 'integration of the spatial dimension of sectoral policies' (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006, pp. 91–92, cited in; Baker & Wong, 2013, p. 84). Imagination is central in this, as a 'faculty . . . of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses' (Oxford Languages, 2024¹ see also Albrechts, 2004, 2010; Albrechts *et al.*, 2003). As such, strategic spatial planning is better understood as a social process arriving at distinctly social constructions (Ward, 2020, p. 14), where the first part of the term indicates a defined strategy and the second refers specifically to supra-local spatial scales (Ziafati Bafarasat & Baker, 2016).

Strategic spatial plans represent 'frameworks for action' that elaborate 'a mutually beneficial dialectic between top-down structural developments and bottom-up local uniqueness' (Albrechts, 2004, p. 747 and 751). Considerable emphasis has been placed on the ability of actors to mobilize images, combining plan representations that are static and fluid, realistic and transformative (Albrechts, 2010, p. 112), and conceptual or narrative frames of reference with which citizens can successfully imagine their futures. This involves imagination and creativity in the search for 'new fictions' (Albrechts *et al.*, 2019, p. 1489), to rationalize the how and why of what goes where. Associated processes can 'liberate innovative creative forces, but they can also become exercises in holding on to the status quo' (Albrechts *et al.*, 2003, p. 126), reflecting the inertia of the built

CONTACT Nicholas A. Phelps  Nicholas.phelps@unimelb.edu.au

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environment itself: not only the sunk costs embodied in it but institutions implicated in its (re)production (Sorensen, 2018, p. 42). Nevertheless, discussion of the potential for imagination to effect change as part of collaboration and consensus-building in strategic spatial planning processes has been prominent (Healey, 1997a, 1997b). Though equally, of course, such processes may lead to unimaginative, lowest common denominator, outcomes (Phelps & Tewdwr-Jones, 2000).

Drawing on Sutcliffe's (1981, pp. 88–89) observation on the history of urban planning as a mix of international, national, local and personal influences, and Mills (1959) notion of the sociological imagination, Phelps (2021) conceives the urban planning imagination as something present at a macro-geohistorical level (the flow and exchange of planning principles, models and practices dating to ancient times); the meso-level of institutionalized national statutory planning and allied industries established since the 1800s, and; the micro-level of individuals operating within meso-level institutional settings. Individual practitioners from across public (local, regional and central government planning and other statutory consultee authorities), private (consultant planners, property developers, utility providers) and third sectors (environmental, social and economic non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) draw on historical streams of thought and practice and are enabled or constrained in the exercise of their imagination by existing institutional arrangements. They may also encounter institutional amnesia (the loss of information and knowledge) in an information-rich age (Pollitt, 2000); and the emergence of institutional voids where there are no clear or accepted rules by which policies are made or evaluated (Hajer, 2003). Additionally, given the fundamentally distributed nature of expert planning knowledge, experience and imagination across public, private and third sectors, the literature on the planning imagination alights on individuals without conferring on them anything like the heroic powers typically accorded to designers and architects in those disciplines (Sandercock, 2004). Instead, the change wrought by the planning imagination 'is the sum of a great number of acts (individual, group, institutional) of re-perception and behaviour change' (Albrechts, 2010, p. 1115).

Building on this, we depict imagination as fundamentally distributed among individuals and across the private, public and third sectors within national planning systems that vary in their licensing and resourcing of strategic spatial planning (Phelps, 2021). In England, a 'weakly-developed relational imagination' (Healey, 2006, p. 541) remains at the meso-level, challenging the exercise of imagination. This, then, is the focus of the current paper, which raises critical questions regarding the depth and breadth of the strategic spatial planning imagination in England. In particular, which stakeholders are able to exercise strategic spatial planning imagination, in what ways and from what bases?

The paper proceeds in four further sections. First, we review the evolving role of imagination in the United Kingdom (UK)-English planning, with special regard to the challenges which have emerged since 2010. A discussion of our research methods follows and then Section 3 presents empirical insights, including reflections on particular cases drawn from strategic planning stakeholders in southern England.² Subsequently, Section 4 offers suggestions for mobilizing an imagination that is increasingly dispersed across and between the public, private and third sectors. The conclusion further argues that creativity and imagination should not be overlooked in the education and training of planners.

A distributed English strategic spatial planning imagination?

The variety of modern capitalist states find expression in national and subnational planning systems and cultures (Newman & Thornley, 1996; Nadin & Stead, 2008; Dühr *et al.*, 2010; Phelps, 2021). Here, the extent of imagination apparent in English strategic spatial planning likely contrasts with the innovation exhibited in mainland European nations in particular (Albrechts, Healey and Kunzmann, 2000; Albrecht). Some of this relative deficit reflects the British planning system's orientation towards land use planning specifically. Also, it reflects both the centralization of the British state when compared to the retained historical significance of regions in some mainland European nations (Keating, 1997), a now uneven emphasis on strategic spatial planning found across UK nations (Colomb & Tomaney, 2016), and the 'underbounded' nature of many historic cities.³ Indeed, the delusion of strategic spatial planning being able to deliver 'flexibility of scaling' (Baker & Wong, 2013) long predates the localism era. Little surprise, then, that Vigar *et al.* (2000) highlight the lack of explicit spatial consciousness and episodic imagination apparent in the UK strategic spatial planning vis-à-vis its European counterparts.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, strategic spatial planning in England has witnessed a decline in human resources and a withdrawal from the proliferation of competing strategies, images and vocabulary in the post-war era. Much of the imagination evident in the generation of 'soft' planning spaces under Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) in the early 2000s reflected desires to increase city-region competitiveness and make austerity-driven service delivery savings, including plan-making and planning processes specifically (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010). Rather than offering transformative imagination, soft spaces became substantially mired in the hard bargaining of highly politicized territorial processes (Valler *et al.*, 2014; Phelps & Valler, 2018). Moreover, the situation in England has worsened when compared to the invigorated national spatial plans in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Boddy & Hickman, 2013; Colomb & Tomaney, 2016; McGuinness & Mawson, 2017; CCN/CRA, 2020, 2021; Geraghty, 2020; RTPI, 2020).

Since the revocation of RSSs in 2010, strategic spatial planning, such as it exists, is exerted through a patchwork of arrangements. Initially, a legal 'duty to cooperate' was introduced in the Localism Act 2011 but was subsequently revealed as inadequate for the purposes of strategic spatial planning (Boddy & Hickman, 2013; DCLG, 2017: para 1.9). Local authorities have been able to develop 'joint spatial plans' under Section 28 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, but these have often struggled or even failed in the face of highly politicized plan-making processes. Additionally, strategic spatial planning is tethered to an assortment of local government structures that include unitary, combined and two-tier arrangements having variable spatial coverage, leadership arrangements and powers. Combined authorities have varied competencies relevant to strategic spatial planning, while bespoke deals and additional powers have been negotiated with central government by directly elected Mayors accountable for decisions made over devolved matters.⁴

Such diverse arrangements do not provide a cohesive foundation on which to build the strategic spatial planning imagination. Also, they have emerged in a prolonged period of austerity that has undermined planning functions. The conundrums observed by Baker and Wong after the demise of RSSs have only intensified, and the facility to

‘think spatially’ (Baker & Wong, 2013, p. 95) has been greatly curtailed under localism. The prediction that a localized approach to planning would usher in a counterpart centralism (Baker & Wong, 2013, p. 97) appears to have materialized. Indeed, centralized requirements around net zero, nutrient neutrality and biodiversity net gain belie concerns of localism’s excessive promotion of development in the name of economic growth.

The resulting denuded and austerity-impacted efforts at strategic spatial planning are now critically exposed across southern England especially, where long-established anti-growth, environmental planning rationalities often induce incrementalism and lowest common denominator solutions rather than radical de- or post-growth let alone growth-oriented strategic spatial planning imaginaries (Phelps, 2012; Murdoch & Abram, 2017; Savini *et al.*, 2022). The demise of strategic spatial planning work towards an Oxford-Cambridge ‘Arc’ is symptomatic of the parlous state of strategic spatial planning in southern England at present (Valler *et al.*, 2023a). Indeed, the professional voice and values of planners are seemingly heard less within discussions of critical strategic importance within England (Sturzaker & Hickman, 2024) as we go on to detail further below.

Methods

Our analysis builds on previous research (including over 100 interviews across five discrete projects conducted individually and jointly by the authors over more than 10 years on strategic spatial planning deliberations in southern England (defined as including the Southeast, Southwest and Eastern administrative regions of England where our research has encompassed six locales). Previous research examined the cases of South Hampshire, South Oxfordshire, the Gatwick Diamond and Oxford-Cambridge Arc areas (Phelps, 2012; Valler *et al.*, 2012, 2014, 2023a, 2023b; Phelps & Valler, 2018; Valler & Phelps, 2018). For the present paper, we further investigated strategic spatial planning deliberations in the Gloucester-Cheltenham and the Slough-Windsor-Maidenhead areas, and briefly re-examined the Oxford-Cambridge Arc and Gatwick Diamond cases. These areas reflect the opportunities and constraints posed by existing infrastructure and environmental and planning designations, as well as jurisdictional conflicts; exactly the challenges that strategic spatial planning seeks to reconcile. We should also note that planning for growth in these areas has faced the longstanding objective to prevent settlement coalescence.

The further research reported here involved in-person and teleconference interviews with a variety of national and local stakeholders, including current and retired local and national government planners, private planning consultants, environmental NGOs, business representative groups and university sector employees, all of whom were able to comment on the imagination evident in strategic spatial planning deliberations. In all, 28 new interviews were conducted during 2022–2023, with recorded interviews lasting between 30 and 90 min. Interviews were gained initially with those most closely associated with the promulgation of key strategic spatial planning initiatives or involved in joint working arrangements intended to produce strategic perspective, and we then ‘snowballed’ from there to gain wider insights where possible. The coverage achieved with these interviews was greatest for the Gloucester-Cheltenham case study and progressively less for the Gatwick Diamond,

Slough-Windsor-Maidenhead and Oxford-Cambridge Arc areas. The interviews sought to uncover: (a) what if any imagination stakeholders perceived was apparent in strategic spatial planning deliberations, who possessed that imagination, and where it came from. Subsequently, attention turned to deliberations on population and employment growth and potential spatial implications, including (b) the continued use of urban extensions; (c) the status of greenbelt designations; (d) the potential for settlement coalescence. While contextual differences are important in respective policy details, planning cultures, and the framing of strategic responses, the messages regarding the strategic planning imagination were remarkably coincident, as the empirical discussion below demonstrates.

Since the structure of our interviews was simple and involved just four themes, we did not code the interview transcripts. Here, we have sought to synthesize key insights from interviews regarding the extent, nature and origin of the strategic spatial planning imagination across diverse stakeholders and to distill the associated implications across four cases, thereby providing a broad assessment of the context for the extended southern England region.

The institutionalized poverty of strategic spatial planning imagination in England

Interview responses across all sectors referenced the multiple constraints under which local government planners are operating: planning is perceived as process-oriented and largely regulatory or reactive in nature; creativity has been effectively negated by public expenditure cuts, with spending on planning, development and housing declining by more than 50% in the 10 years to 2019 (IFS, 2019); strategic planning skills and capacities have likewise been eroded; localism has directed some strategic planning activities towards district councils that lack jurisdictional scale and voluntary joint working or cooperation arrangements have been found wanting.

Additionally, there has been a lack of leadership from locally-elected politicians (councillors) to license the imagination of planning officers. Instead, interviews revealed councillors as often defensive in the face of anti-growth agendas, limited with regard to strategic perspective, and lacking in political courage. In part, this reflects the abandonment of the RSS system where ‘there was a structure that protected strong leaders’ (Interview 21, Planning Consultant, 3 January 2023). Also here, social media has further sensitized local political representatives to the concerns of their electorates, in near real time. The rise of independent local councillors aligned with specific residents or special interest groups may also have reinforced a defensive posture regarding planning decisions at the local level.

The view of a business-led NGO representative in Gloucestershire serves as the *leitmotif* of this paper:

‘Are the planners equipped to be creative? Well, I think the title is wrong to start with. What planners don’t do is plan. They review other people’s plans and they either say yes or no to them. Part of that is the nature of the work and part of it is just resource, and the bandwidth of planners to be able to take a step back and think long term.’ (Interview 2, Director, GFirst Local Enterprise Partnership, 11 July 2022)

This clearly poses a fundamental challenge to the societal value of local government planning (Parker, 2020) and ultimately the scope to deliver more sustainable and equitable future settlement patterns. It also emphasises the increasingly distributed character of the planning imagination, which has relocated outside of its traditional local government base, partly into the private sector. On the one hand, individual developers, landowners, and planning consultants may be able to exert their imagination as proponents of larger schemes, with consultants sometimes acting as intermediaries to reframe strategic spatial planning thinking in politically acceptable ways. The comments from one consultant with clients across the South of England suggested, for instance:

‘With the greatest of respect, not many planners have imagination. . . . the local authority planners are probably far too rushed to actually sit and think about these things. They need a little help from their developer friends. I exploit my developer clients because they have an insatiable appetite to make money. The way they make money is they build a lot of houses. The way it is easier to get housing built is if you come up with something a little bit more sustainable and it is accepted and pushed by the local authority. So, it is joining up the dots, making sure you are riding the agendas and then pushing those through.’ (Interview 10, Partner, Ridge and Partners LLP, 21 July)

On the other hand, developers also face significant constraints in terms of business approaches, finance and scheduling, potentially limiting the scope for creative imagination and reinforcing the tendency towards disjointed incremental developments (Phelps, 2024). Indeed, the development industry is often criticised for formulaic and repetitive projects which are not responsive to strategic challenges. Additionally, of course, private actors are reliant on the timeliness and reliability of public sector planning, which sets the context within which developers can operate; this may itself limit the scope of development under consideration.

These issues played out in particular ways across our various case studies. With respect to the Oxford-Cambridge Arc area planners have, as yet, been unable to bring strategic spatial plan and accompanying imaginary coherence to an amorphous and fragmented area, not least in the context of localised planning arrangements and tepid central government support. Nothing less than the constitution of an entirely new region was effectively implied in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc project. However, the project proved beyond the imaginative capacities of the individual practitioners involved because of the lack of prior institutional and political foundations and the limited capacity of local government planning authorities and their currently attenuated strategic planning tools. The spatial imagery associated with the Arc remained under-developed, its influence on local policy was limited, and it has not achieved a degree of hegemony as a strategic spatial planning imperative (see Valler *et al.*, 2023a, 2023b).

In Cheltenham-Gloucester, since war-time boundary commission deliberations (Davis, 1946) and the *County Development Plan* (1951) there has been an explicit presumption against developing land between the two historic settlements. This was carried forward even through the modernizing thrust of the *Severnside Study* (1971) and *The Structure Plan for Gloucestershire* (GCC, 1979). In the post-RSS context local authorities individually, and latterly jointly, have been undertaking planning for population and employment growth with recourse to piecemeal extensions to the existing major settlements. However, only ‘pockets of aspiration’ now remain and as one local government planner acknowledged, those with aspiration:

‘are not all planners. Many decades of planning looking at your own district boundaries and looking at housing targets has reduced the planning ambitions within local authorities.’ (Interview 13, Head of Planning Strategy and Economic Development, Stroud District Council, 12 August)

The apparent lack of a strategic approach prompted the County Council, through its non-statutory *GOTO2050* (since changed to *Gloucestershire 2050*) initiative, to exercise a strategic spatial planning imagination of sorts. As the leader of the County Council argued:

‘Districts continue to struggle just to do the day job and continue to struggle around the five-year land supply. And the capacity to think beyond the process just doesn’t exist for them . . . It is the County that has acted as the attempt to stretch the imagination a bit.’ (Interview 9, Leader, Gloucestershire County Council, 18 July 2022).⁵

The County Council invoked the idea of a ‘supercity’ for Gloucestershire enabled by development on greenbelt land between the two historic cities of Gloucester and Cheltenham. This was an altogether larger-scale and different approach to strategic spatial planning for the area than had been entertained historically and included options anathema to post-war British planning orthodoxy: the partial scrapping of a designated greenbelt and the promotion of settlement coalescence. The County Council’s non-statutory attempts to stir the strategic spatial planning imagination were supported by the Local Enterprise Partnership (GFirst) and facilitated by a local university which convened a series of ‘leading places’ discussions funded by central government (The University of Gloucestershire, 2018). However, given the legacy of historic planning approaches to the area and entrenched local authority interests, it is clear that calls for a ‘supercity’ would have required considerable diplomacy and skillful presentation to achieve significant traction. The supercity idea failed in this; however, and has been overtaken locally by interest in the central government’s promotion of ‘garden communities’.⁶

The Crawley-Horsham area sits at the centre of the RSS-era ‘Gatwick Diamond subregion’. This was one of the weaker strategic spatial imaginaries at the time, lacking spatial and numeric specificity regarding housing land use allocations for example (Valler & Phelps, 2016). As a medieval market town set within an extensive rural district council jurisdiction, Horsham has expanded through several rounds of urban extension. The most recent of these have been placed at the boundaries of the local authority area abutting Crawley, a New Town designated in 1946 adjacent to Gatwick Airport. Crawley was comprehensively planned and developed from the 1950s with a major town centre, socially balanced neighbourhoods, a mix of housing types and major industrial estates. However, it is now fully built-out to its administrative boundary. Rather, like many parts of Southern England, the growth dynamic of Crawley-Horsham affects settlements of very different origin, identity, demographics and even planning cultures. These are played out in the local media as a fear of coalescence producing a ‘London Borough of Crawsham’ that draw, in turn, on the original planning of New Towns built specifically to cater to London’s over-spill (Heraud, 1966). Thus, there is a clash of cultures and imaginaries with respect to these two settlements:

'It feels to me that the pressure that Crawley is under because it has a higher need for social housing, because it has such pressure on its land . . . it has to come up with more creative solutions . . . Horsham has land, they continue to build the two, three, four, five-bedroom houses that developers want to build. It feels like there is this external pressure, this evolutionary pressure on Crawley that is causing them to be more creative.' (Interview 15, Representative, The Iffield Society, 25 August 2022).

For this representative of a local civic group, it was precisely these different external pressures that were a differential source of the strategic planning imagination.

In Slough-Maidenhead-Windsor, Slough has been intensively developed from the 1920s on the back of England's first privately developed and operated trading estate and subsequent 'planned' expansion to accommodate London 'overspill' (Masom, 2016). Slough remains subject to substantial and ongoing growth pressures today but is heavily constrained, surrounded by the London metropolitan greenbelt and tightly hemmed-in by the M4 motorway to the south of the built-up area, the River Thames (and Jubilee River hydraulic channel) south of the M4 and the neighbouring twin infrastructure connections nearby including the M25 and Heathrow Airport (with debate still ongoing regarding the development of a third runway). The speed and character of Slough's growth have conferred a lack of civic identity that has been compounded in popular commentary (Masom, 2016). By today, Slough sits at the centre of a complex sub-regional housing market and travel to work areas that necessitate a genuinely strategic approach to an otherwise fragmented local government arena. Administratively, the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Council and Buckinghamshire Unitary Council (previously Chiltern District Council & South Buckinghamshire District Council within Buckinghamshire County Council) abut Slough's tightly drawn boundaries, reinforcing the political divides and the sharp urban-rural split. In this context, Slough has proposed a largely untested and substantial northern urban extension into Buckinghamshire to respond to its urgent housing needs (Interviews 26 and 27, Strategic Planner Oxford-Cambridge Arc, 3 August 2022 and Planner, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, 19 April 2023). The extension could be considered sustainable in its location with the enhancing of key strategic infrastructure projects, however for a planner from the neighbouring authority:

'The dynamic with Slough is that they will still say that we do have unmet need. It should be met in Buckinghamshire. And it should be met in South Buckinghamshire as it is the closest to Slough. Buckinghamshire's view would be: well no, if we accept that there is an element of need . . . to be met in Buckinghamshire, we will locate it in Buckinghamshire where it fits our spatial strategy. And that may not necessarily be in the South of the County as that would necessitate greenbelt releases'. (Interview, 28, Senior Planner, Buckinghamshire Unitary Authority, 21 April 2023)

Here, in parallel with Gloucester-Cheltenham, it has proved difficult to engage imaginatively in strategic spatial planning despite the obvious imperative. It is also noteworthy that the sanctity of one particular (greenbelt) policy designation may heavily constrain the imaginative impulse.

Overall, then, the experience across these important strategic contexts in southern England suggests the paucity of the contemporary strategic planning imagination *per se* and a level of dependence on development interests to set spatial parameters and lead practical place-making. In this context, we argue the need for the recovery and more

effective mobilization of a strategic spatial planning imagination, accepting its essentially distributed form.

Recovering the English strategic spatial planning imagination?

Where should we look to find strategic spatial planning's 'core values and forms of knowledge' (Baker & Wong, 2013)? Here, we offer tentative directions for a recovery, based around three possibilities: building on existing 'interstices of expertise'; restoring institutional memory; and navigating a potential shift toward a nascent post- or de-growth planning paradigm.

First, the distributed nature of strategic spatial planning expertise and imagination reflects a more general 'betweenness' in the organization of economy and society (Phelps, 2017). Many of our interviewees sat on County or region-wide informal networks operating among professional planners, landscape and urban designers, and environmental scientists, or on formal panels advising local government planning on specialist environmental and other matters. These liaisons have long existed and in some cases form a locus for residual strategic spatial planning imagination. They exist in the interstices between public, private, and third sectors and draw increasingly on the expertise present within civic and environmental interest group organisations. Evidence exists elsewhere in England for the survival of strategic spatial planning expertise in such 'in between' spaces (Ward, 2020). Away from the time pressures and decision-making cycles of statutory local government planning, these interstices afford the opportunity and time to communicate, broach and ultimately reach levels of consensus on matters of a genuinely strategic importance. The challenge is how to fully mobilize the imagination and expertise residing in such interstices and bring them into the statutory planning sphere, perhaps as institutional venues for the exercise of strategic spatial planning imagination?

Certainly, there are instances where interest groups provide leading-edge knowledge and practices into strategic spatial planning processes. Notable here is how environmental interests such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Wildlife Conservation Trust, have shifted from being primary objectors at the development application stage to providing knowledge inputs to forward planning processes. They have been joined by new environmental NGOs – such as Build with Nature – which have pioneered tools valuable to forward planning by both public and private sectors.

The imagination and expertise that exists in these interstices could also be mobilized in other ways, such as 'challenge panels' (Interview 21 *op cit.*). These would mobilize planning expertise from across the private and third sectors to challenge and help develop the overall quality of planning taking place in the public sector. This expertise could help improve the robustness and the imaginative content of local government planning processes at the outset and during plan making processes, rather than have the planning inspectorate seek to improve the quality of plans by way of examinations in public after their preparation.⁷

Second, there is residual institutional memory and associated planning capacity to be found in particular institutions and places across England. The Town and Country Planning Association remains the guardian of garden city and new town ideals, for

example. The new towns themselves remain live examples of strategic spatial planning practice, as one senior planner wryly observed:

‘you talk about the planning imagination – Crawley has been doing it since the 1950s. The developments that have come through have come almost with the twenty-minute neighbourhood that is now being seen as this is what we should be doing in planning - actually it is going back in a way to what was being done.’ (Interview 25, Senior Planner Crawley Borough Council, 15 February 2023)

The British new town model travelled the world (Masser *et al.*, 1986). So much so, that national institutions such as those in Singapore have made strenuous efforts to record and retain the planning knowledge involved, curate and refine it, and ultimately re-export it as a tradeable service (Miao & Phelps, 2019). In this regard, the story of Britain’s new town planning expertise is a tragic one. One of our interviewees (Interview 17, Senior Planning and Enabling Manager, Homes England, 5 September 2022) reflected on how the expertise needed to develop the new towns of the past is now irrevocably lost, and that the creation of Homes England partly reflected a desire to assemble public sector expertise comparable to that of developers with the capability of master planning settlements a fraction of the size, complexity and time scale involved in the new towns. More generally, the story of strategic spatial planning in all its forms in England should serve as a salutary reminder of the value of conserving and tending to the strategic spatial planning imagination, knowledge and experience.

Elsewhere, there are imaginative capacities in some of the most informed, well-resourced and well-intentioned private sector actors with an interest in the legacy of the places they plan and develop, including landed estates, larger developers, and Homes England.⁸ Caution is most certainly required in the licensing of greater initiative and freedom for even the best intentioned of these actors, to support the highest standards of placemaking. Indeed, our respondents were critical of the central government’s own development-arm body, Homes England, which was characterized by our interviewees as little different from ‘run of the mill’ private sector developers in its approach:

‘Homes England, you would think, would be doing it right. On the one hand, they produce all the documents about placemaking. And then, on the other hand, they act very much as private developer, and it is just about what we can sell’. (Interview 25 *op cit.*)

Yet the approach and resources of some larger developers may provide grounds for optimism since they are often able to mobilize interdisciplinary teams and take a longer-term approach to the master planning of communities in a way that local governments currently cannot.

Third, imaginative work and associated deliberation – in which alternatives are properly evaluated and judicious decisions made – takes time (Healey, 2006, p. 541). However, this highlights the disjuncture between collaborative, imaginative, inclusive and transformative planning *in theory* from the everyday reality of urban planning in England as the regulatory control of development *practice*. It also emphasises that the paucity of strategic spatial planning is only gradually revealed:

‘Getting strategy wrong is not something you feel immediately. That is not the measure of it. It builds up over time and it is cumulative. I think we are feeling the cumulative impact of

things being done piecemeal and at too granular a level.’ (Interview 19, Strategic Housing Advisor, Southeast Local Enterprise Partnership, 14 December 2022)

In this sense strategic spatial planning in England has become less spatial and more immediately temporal in emphasis as a result of the urgency, turbulence and overload it now faces (Friend & Hickling, 2012; Rozee, 2014).

A further implication of the current short-termism is a relative neglect of the most basic questions around growth and sustainability within planetary limits. Indeed, looming societal slowdowns on planetary and national scales (Dorling, 2020), together with growing geopolitical turbulence, will demand a reformulation of how settlement futures are imagined. Regardless of the needs and demands of the immediate present, this will require a fundamental uncoupling of strategic spatial planning from basic trend-based projections of quantitative increases in populations, formal employment numbers and total economic output (Gross Domestic Product, GDP) that typically have informed land use allocations. To say so seems to fly against a future-oriented evidence-based form of strategic spatial planning. However, the self-fulfilling prophecies of ‘trend planning’ have long been recognized (Pickvance, 1982), and it is clear that more radical and dynamic responses will be essential. Stated positively, strategic spatial planning is *the* activity – in its judicious locating of transit and digital infrastructure, housing and employment land allocations – to make smart, post- or de-growth ideals tractable in policy terms and realizable in practical terms for developers (Savini *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusion

Some time ago Vigar *et al.* (2000) were able to observe the aspatial nature of British planning, with central government policy and housing numbers driving local land allocations. In the absence of a statutory foundation for strategic spatial planning in England, the residual level of imagination in the national and local government sectors has retreated further from the ‘complex relationality’ that it needs to confront (Healey, 2006). Institutional context matters for the exercise of the planning imagination, and the absence of some form of statutory strategic spatial plan making for 15 years now – over a third of a planner’s career span – suggests that institutional memory may have faded. Against this background, the current study serves as a spur to compare and contrast the imagination exerted both with respect to strategic spatial planning internationally and across different substantive areas of planning. First, while many national planning systems across Europe have shed some of their comprehensiveness and integration (Schmitt & Smas, 2020), and their institutions and policies become more prone to shocks (Reimer *et al.*, 2014), with the abandonment of any form of statutory strategic spatial planning, the strategic spatial planning imagination in England has likely diverged further from that evident elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, in light of the difficulties encountered with respect to infrastructure planning, it might even be argued that the strategic spatial planning imagination in England now fails to match that evident in the United States in its typical guise of that associated with specialized metropolitan planning organizations (Knaap *et al.*, 2015). Second, while strategic spatial planning remains vital to integrate planning at local scales

with respect to particular substantive concerns (environment, transportation, etc.), it may be less amenable to the exercise of imagination than commonly assumed when set against, for example, neighbourhood-level place-making or inner city or suburban regeneration. A fuller survey of the strategic spatial planning imagination would, of course, need to move well beyond the geographical confines of the South of England, well beyond the UK in the global north, and well beyond the global north more generally.

What remains of the English strategic spatial planning imagination now exists in a partially integrated ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) distributed across the public, private and third sectors. It is vital that we find new ways of mobilizing that imagination in assistance of the statutory planning system, to better integrate and utilize this distributed capacity. This would entail the reaching out by central government to actors with a strategic time horizon, interest in, and resources to devote to the legacy of developments across all sectors, and, if necessary, selectively license or incentivize the imagination found in parts of the private and third sectors. Concomitantly, there is a question of training and education. One specific and long-standing ‘expert’ skill deficit with respect to public sector strategic spatial planning has been the divorce of planning education and practice from that of urban and landscape design. Planning practice has become ever more circumscribed as an administrative or regulatory activity rather than one centrally concerned with the design of places. Indeed, there are senses in which planning has become an increasingly administrative process less clearly oriented to considerations of geography or the design of place.

Moreover, in an era marked by the ‘jumbling of perspectives in which new insights and methodologies sit alongside old ways of “doing” planning’ (Davoudi, 2009, p. 39) a continuing task is to develop and bring imagination to bear in strategic spatial planning proposals that better embrace citizens’ knowledge and aspirations. The challenge is one of further developing planners’ persuasive powers alongside mastery of the evidence and argument in the policy making process (Majone, 1989). This begs further pedagogical questions of how and in what ways room can be made to develop the persuasive potentials of creativity and imagination in planning curricula (Phelps, 2021). Planning’s persuasive powers are visual and rhetorical. With regard to the former, there is a value in (re-)forging scholarly research and teaching disciplinary alliances, with landscape ecology, urban design, and architecture as well as geography (Phelps, 2023). With regard to the latter, the value of storytelling in planning practice (Sandercock, 2003) may be greatest with respect to strategic matters – i.e. those at geographical scales and on time frames that capture the public imagination least. Our findings pointed to the contemporary inability of planners in England to fashion compelling images or tell compelling stories of strategic spatial importance. Since the garden city and new town ideas, and in the postwar era in England, one might argue that even the best qualified and experienced planners have struggled to exert leadership (Garvin, 2009), and that this failure of leadership has been a failure of imagination. The challenge of making room for these skills in university curricula and professional continuing education is significant given the expanding array of substantive technical, but also analytical and research, as well as negotiation, and leadership skills needed to evidence and argue planning cases in increasingly corporatized and legalistic arenas (Taylor & Close, 2022).

Notes

1. <https://languages.oup.com/> (accessed 26 May 2024).
2. For the purposes of the paper, this encompasses the Southeast, Southwest, and Eastern administrative regions of England.
3. The term underbounded refers to the administrative boundary of a settlement being too tightly drawn to reflect, for example, the travel to work patterns or housing market areas centred on it (see Bennett, 1997).
4. See the Local Government Association's 'Devolution Register': <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/devolution-explained/devolution-register>
5. See The University of Gloucestershire (2018) and www.glos2050.com/
6. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/garden-communities>
7. Draft plans prepared by local planning authorities are examined in public by a centrally appointed planning inspectorate to ensure conformity of plans to central government guidance.
8. Homes England is an executive non-departmental body sponsored by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, which acts as the Government's housing and regeneration agency and funds new affordable housing.

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ORCID

Nicholas A. Phelps  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8407-9788>

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