

Territorial Foresight: More than Planning Less than Prospective

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After the Y2K crisis many futurists feared that it might take another millennium to receive the same attention the year 2000 brought to us. Fortunately, we have seen that part of the interest in the future that the turning of century and millennium provoked seems to carry on. One of the most remarkable features of this continued appeal is regional foresight, or should I say regional planning? The truth is that many of us are so happy that futures related activity keeps going on, that we do not care much if it is called foresight, prospective, planning, business intelligence or whatever. Granted that it is important to work and to maintain the flow of projects going, but the question remains: the denomination matters or it is just a semantic issue?

In this article will devote some space to the use of different names and its conceptual implications. It is important to clarify the theoretical standpoints in which every notions lies, in order to be able to determine if the present regional planning boom is beneficial for foresight. My intention is to demonstrate that the use of planning as a generic tantamount for foresight or prospective may have a negative boomerang effect. The second part of my presentation will focus on the specificities of planning activities at the city region level. And also, on how some of the most frequent pitfalls that this endeavours show can be avoided using a foresight methodological approach. The final part will concentrate on the importance of incorporating participatory mechanisms in this kind of undertakings.

Taking Advantage of the Conjuncture

I have been involved in futures studies for almost twenty-five years, and I have been working as a professional futurist for more than ten. In all this time the single activity that has taken a greater share of my time is the diffusion of prospective: what it is, why it is important and useful, for what reasons it is worth to spend some money in future research - preferably through me - and other connected points of which I am sure you all are familiar. I have done this under a variety of circumstances: lectures, speeches, classes, professional promotion, participation in media shows, article writing and others, most of the time with no direct reimbursement of any kind (that is why I always say that prospective is also an apostolate). In this context, it would be completely understandable to celebrate the relative increase in working opportunities, and absolutely forgivable to go by the label of planning instead of foresight or prospective (if that is what the customer wants to hear).

In any case, it is true that lately we are witnessing how regions, provinces, autonomous communities, city regions, even small municipalities do engage in a variety of foresight exercises: strategic plans, Agenda 21 plans, Information society adjust plans, and so on so forth. This, I insist, it is thoroughly positive as long as it helps to introduce a foresight culture, but the truth is that many of these possible customers that are eager to hire your services to do a planning exercise, would refuse your proposal if you would name it as a prospective

exercise. Since we all pretend to make ends meet it is no wonder to go for the planning etiquette and keep quiet about prospective or foresight. It may be the case, if you are consistent with the apostolate approach, that you may try to introduce a more prospective addendum in your plan, *pro bonus* of course, in the hope that this will catch and, one day, there will be a demand for prospective services as well as for planning.

However, we have to ask ourselves if this is simply a question of names.

False Synonymous

It is quite common to use foresight, future studies (or futures) and prospective as alternatives to name the same thing. The first thing to note, as I have contended elsewhere¹ is that futures and prospective, although similar, are profoundly diverse: prospective in the continental context refers to a much wider approach and activity as it comprises not only the study of the future (which would be the shared part with future studies) but also the will to influence the future to shape it according to our wishes; following to Slaughter² this second part is totally absent in futures studies as would be bequeathed to Futures Movement approach. But there is a second and important difference, prospective - particularly in the French tradition - it is a very formalised and rigorous activity, this matches badly with futures which is a more open, even loose, discipline, mostly interested with the acquisition and development of knowledge but not specifically concerned in the way of doing so; the consciousness about the procedure is more characteristic of Futures Research.³ So we have to conclude that prospective is a more inclusive, comprehensive and formalised discipline than futures.

But, what about foresight? Again I resort to Slaughter who I consider the main theorist in this concept. He uses the concept foresight, the human capacity to think ahead and to forecast possible outcomes of present decisions, as the basis to develop his foresight principle. That is, the need to transform this forecasting skill in a structural requirement of any given activity or

decision.⁴ In this sense, the use of foresight as a synonymous of prospective or futures is, in my view misleading. The foresight principle is a brilliant construction that aims to let us see that looking ahead is a natural activity and, moreover, that we need to incorporate it the different aspects of our ordinary life. In this context, prospective would be a specific way to implement or to apply the foresight principle. Let me put it this way, foresight would be the capacity to hear but prospective would refer to our proficiency to listen to specific things. In this sense, I would concur that we need prospective to fulfil our foresight capacities.

And then we reach the final contending concept: planning. The first thing we have to acknowledge is that there is a hierarchical difference between futures or prospective and planning. The first two concepts refer to disciplines, or even activities if you wish, with an intellectual domain and tools to apply it. Planning is firstly and foremost a method, that is, one of the tools we could use in futures or prospective to implement the selected future. We have to realise that, conceptually, either futures or prospective are a previous step to that of planning. Planning is, by definition, to conceive an objective and the meanings to achieve it. But planning is less helpful when it comes to decide which could be the best objective and how we can be reasonably sure that it is within our grasp. Even more, planning will fall short to let us foresee the possible obstacles or pitfalls to attain that desired future. This is because prospective and planning have a totally diverse theoretical approach: prospective wants to open the scope to look further in the future and in different intellectual contexts, to improve our chances to detect all the conceivable variables and to project them as far as possible; planning, on the contrary, aims to reduce and concentrate the scope, to make all the effort to converge in a concrete objective and to place it in a near enough future so as to be quite sure of its accomplishment. And this is surely the main reason why in the business ambit planning has a better image than prospective or futures. If you are interested in maximizing benefits and reducing uncertainty planning is your game, prospective implies to

consider many unstable processes and issues and, what it is worst, at a term too long to make it really profitable.

I'm sure that many will make a case that strategic planning represents a medium point respect to what I am saying. It could be argued that the fact of looking for a strategic objective taking into account the environment opportunities and pitfalls as well as the actor strengths and weaknesses places us quite close to prospective. Although I am eager to accept that – as an activity – strategy is nearer to prospective than planning, I believe that most of the conceptual and methodological differences stand, and that futures and prospective are more comprehensive undertakings than even strategic planning.

But this is a completely different thing from the fact that we all should be content that strategic planning, even plain planning, are becoming more consolidated and that this improves our business market. But we have to realise that to plan we only really need to be proficient in the use of certain methods. Whereas, to do prospective we must master a body of knowledge. By renouncing to a greater knowledge base we erode the foundation of our discipline.

The City Region Case

Let us concentrate our attention on the city regions. In most of the occasions, these urban areas are the result of several municipalities that have grown until their borders have become undistinguishable. Typically, there is a major city with some middle towns and several smaller villages. But constituting a one and continued metropolitan space is not their principal trait but the fact that they share some specific features; the most important being that despite they are a conglomerate of different administrative units they function as a whole: higher density of internal fluxes, common needs towards the exterior, similar internal problems, the requirement to rationalise resources, etc. In short, we could say that these city regions need to function as a unit but because of administrative and political questions this is not always

possible.

Let me use the example of Barcelona, Barcelona itself has a population slightly under 1.500.000 which is about the 30% of Catalonia's total population. It is not a big city and it has a territory and a size quite manageable, but the Barcelona metropolitan area is quite another story, gathers 164 municipalities covering a territory of 3.237,1 km² and concentrates 4.301.721 people, more than 80% of the total Catalanian population. Although this metropolitan area has some administrative and political recognition, its competences are severely restricted to some aspects like transportation or waste management because. I believe this is a frequent situation for other urban areas; in which the geographical and economic reality is not paired with a political and administrative recognition. We can speculate about the reason of this, but it seems to me, that in many cases it comes down to the fact that this kind of city region does have the potential to become decision-taking centres that can challenge, or surpass, other power centres. To complicate even more the situation we see that, if externally they have to compete with other traditional administrative units; internally, they reproduce the similar stresses between the major units of the region and the smaller. There is a tension between the major city-or cities- to concentrate the resources and the management capacity and the minor municipalities to retain their competences. Or like the saying in my country: *it is better to be the head of the sardine than the tale of the hake.*

All this defines a context in which these urban regions have the pressure to improve their internal coherence in order to function more efficiently but not always have the internal consensus or are given the level of self-rule necessary to do it. On top of that, the globalisation process has exacerbated some of these points: on one hand, it provides new opportunities for these metropolitan areas to become major actors at the global level, but, on the other, has the potential to distance them more from the political centres. Then, it is fully understandable that these regions have become more aware of the importance to take a proactive role in the

shaping of their future.

The question is now, which is the best tool to develop this proactive capacity?

Planning *versus* Prospective

Typically, the planning efforts in city regions follow a similar pattern: the core of the endeavour is the selection and extrapolation of the main variables; then, the resulting projections are impacted in order to have several hypotheses, usually, a trend case, a desirable alternative and a worst-case option, plus the addition of some wild cards. Often, the final step includes some sort of cross impact analysis to integrate all the elements and to select the option that becomes the goal. From a planning perspective, this methodology is impeccable, but it can be argued that, because of its own nature, planning tends to reinforce the continuity of present trends into the future and makes it more difficult to think of alternatives. This should not be a surprise since this is precisely one of the objectives of planning, the lessening of options to consider. Let us now consider the implications of planning for urban areas.

As it has been said, quite often the city regions lack the normative faculty that would allow them to control some, or many, of the key variables in the shaping of their future. All and all, results in a situation in which metropolitan areas may plan but not always have the capacity to put the plans into practise. However, the deeper implication is that if planning tends to reinforce the present then, it becomes more complicated for city regions to design and build alternative visions and goals that would entail a better context for them. What it would be needed is the conception and development of alternative scenarios and the adoption of longer perspectives, and prospective is better suited for these purposes than planning. Otherwise, we are condemning these areas to be trapped in situations in which their chances for betterment are severely reduced.

Am I saying that planning should be completely substituted for prospective? Not at all. I am merely pointing that it could be more convenient to adopt a prospective approach on an

initial stage, even if you are only interested in short term planning. The reasons are several: to enhance our capacity to deal with uncertainty, to improve our ability to manage data and information from diverse precedence, to be more apt to integrate normative elements and focus and, last but not least, to be able to think the unthinkable.

All these positive qualities, in my opinion, are the result of some of the most essential traits of prospective: Transdisciplinarity, normativity and dissension, let us examine these features.

Transdisciplinarity it is not a plus for prospective but a must. If we need a battery of sciences and disciplines to understand the present how could we pretend to unveil the future with less? Simply we cannot. But we have to take into account that this transdisciplinarity is more than the result of having to cover all the possible corners of the future but, mostly, the direct consequence of the instrumental nature of prospective. Prospective is a hollow science that uses the knowledge and information from other disciplines to generate its own, hence the need to be able to integrate not only data but also theories and approaches from distinct disciplines, sciences and information from any source. In any case, transdisciplinarity is recognised as one of the main traits of prospective by several authors such as Masini⁵, Bell⁶ and Serra.⁷

Normativity is seen as something very suspicious by social sciences but it is not the case for prospective. Jim Dator's first law, in its second point, states that *the future cannot be "predicted", but "preferred futures" can, and should be envisioned, invented, implemented, continuously evaluated, revised and re-envisioned (...)*.⁸ The centrality of normativity in prospective has also been supported by other authors among them: Masini⁹, Bas¹⁰ and Serra.¹¹ But the strongest contribution in this regard is that of non-Western thinkers such as: Inayatullah¹², Sardar¹³ o Elmandjra¹⁴ who have outlined that prospective is essentially a political activity and therefore the importance of the normative aspects when working with it. As a matter of fact it is impossible to set aside our phobias and preferences when we studying the future, as

Masini points out: *in futures studies, normativity indicates the relations of these studies with specific values, desires, wishes or needs of the future.*¹⁵

The post-modern wave brought the critical approach to futures and with it the importance to systematically question the present and the future. The need to preserve the future as space of freedom, even from futurists, has driven many authors to contend the centrality of dissonance when researching the future. Once again, it was non-Western scholars those who have defended more strongly this feature. Among them the one that has presented his argument more beautifully is, no doubt, Ashis Nandy: *It is the responsibility of the citizen-futurist in that context to defy and subvert the "inevitable" in the future, which is only another name for a tomorrow that dare not be anything other than a linear projection of yesterday. Students of the future owe it to themselves to create a gap between those whose ideas of the future are modelled in the Wall Street stock exchange or on 19th century Europe's constipated idea of One World and the more marginalized ideas of the future that could be called contemporary versions or reincarnations of the prophetic. The prophets summoned us not because they had elements of the astrologer in them, but because they dared to dream those dreams that were latent in the rest of us.*¹⁶ Let me put it this way, if we know that the less probable future is that in which nothing changes; then we have no option but to develop mechanisms to systematically introduce change and novelty in our forecasts.

In short, a prospective approach would grant us with a more transversal, long term and comprehensive basis to develop a foresight project. Not only that, it will have helped us to take into account the preferences and dislikes of the involved actors and, finally, it will have provided a better basis for considering hypothesis that represent a wild departure from the present. In my opinion, this provides an optimum foundation even as a preliminary stage previous to a planning project. As a matter of fact, a prospective approach will grant us an additional advantage, a better way to reach consensus.

Consensus is one of the key elements in any successful future enterprise. If a collectivity or a community has to engage in an endeavour of defining and implementing a future goal, it is essential to reach a sufficient level of agreement. The typical planning methodology is not particularly well suited to manage participation, it consists of techniques designed for experts and trained professional. Prospective, on the contrary, benefits from a long tradition to make future methods more open and participatory, Robert Jungk is, no doubt, the first name that comes to mind, but it would be unfair to forget the contribution of Elise Boulding, Jim Dator, Wendy Schultz and others have developed and deepened this kind of techniques. Thanks to all of them, today we enjoy futures workshops as a well-tuned tool to let people participate in prospective projects. But, what is it a Future workshops? They are a structured process to make people project into the future of any given subject. Moreover, they are an excellent way to benefit from the knowledge capital the participants may have. In its visioning version, focused to produce visions and goals, or in its ordinary variety, designed to generate future scenarios, the future workshops are an ideal preparation for the participants to discover what it may involve get into a foresight, prospective or even a planning enterprise.

Typically, every participant hopes to convince the rest of the people of the excellence of his or her images and ideas. Soon they all find out that everybody has the same purpose. It is then, that they realise that they will have to negotiate their respective ideas and preferences, in the process of dialoguing they begin to see that some proposals are incoherent, that others are too far away to be feasible, others too short sighted, and so on so forth. This way, it is relative easy to create a consensus on the best proposals, which seldom is the preferred proposal of nobody but the less disliked idea of everybody.

I believe that this is extremely important in the context of city regions. If consensus is imperative in any future public project, it is essential in cases where they may be internal tensions as it is often the case in city regions. In

this context, future workshop offers one last benefit, they tend to facilitate agreement, this is not because of any magical feature but simply the result that it is easier to set up bridges for concurrence based on future common aims than on present differences. My personal experience and that of other futurist confirms this.

Conclusion

The present relative abundance of future projects opportunities is positive. However, it is paramount to take advantage of the situation to promote prospective, not planning (even strategic planning) as the generic label for this kind of activity. Prospective is the term that best describes the kind of task we can develop. To systematic renounce to introduce this concept may trap us in a situation in which what is demanded from us is a reduced portion of our skills. What is more, it represents the refusal to characterize our work as an art: a discipline that contains a theoretical and conceptual corpus plus a symbolic domain. At the long term it would mean our transformation into artisans, practitioners at best, of our skills but no more scholars or professionals. Although this may sound a bit too dramatic, it is my sincere belief that this would signal the slow death of prospective as a science.

In the case of city regions, planning implies a relative narrow, trendy and short-sighted approach that may lead to a lack of success or even frustrations if the expectations of the future are not matched. A prospective focus, on the contrary, offers a more transversal, comprehensive and inclusive foundation to engage in a future visioning or planning project, furthermore, it will help us to make the whole process more open and participatory and, therefore, to improve our chances of accomplishment.

I firmly believe that the present century provides plenty of opportunities for city and other sub state regions, but only those who would hit the right mark, those who would position themselves strategically in the new order, those who develop a proactive attitude and embed it in its ordinary life and functioning. Prospective offers these entities a better chance

to attain this than planning. Finally, I also hope that this would help futurist and prospectivist around to be consolidated as the professionals better prepared to help any organization or community to achieve this.

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Notes

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