

Governing the City

From Planning to Urban Strategy

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Abstract

Strategy frames the contemporary epistemological space of urbanism: major cities across the globe such as New York, London and Sydney invest time, energy and resources to craft urban strategies. Extensive empirical research projects have proposed a shift towards a strategic framework to manage cities. This theoretical curiosity is reflected in the rising interest in urban strategy from practice. For instance, the World Bank regularly organizes an Urban Strategy Speaker Series, while the powerful network CEOs for Cities lobbies for a strategic approach to urban development. Critical scholars such as Zukin diagnose not a shift *in* but a shift *to* strategic thinking in the contemporary city. This article poses the question: what makes strategy such an attractive 'thought style' in relation to imagining and managing cities? How can we understand the practice of urban strategy? And what are its intended and unintended consequences? The objective of this article is to analyse strategy as a socio-political practice that shapes cities, and by extension, society at large.

Key words

democracy ■ planning ■ power ■ rationality ■ urban strategy

STRATEGY SEEMINGLY provides the answer to the challenges cities face – and formidable these challenges are: for the first time in history, being-in-the-world means for the majority of people being-in-the-city. Cities represent the arenas in which struggles for environmental sustainability, economic growth, social inclusion and cultural diversity will be won – or lost. Hence, human concerns are always also urban concerns

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and vice versa. Strategy offers a theoretical framework and managerial practice that claims to be capable of addressing these concerns (Carter, 2010; Zukin, 2007).

But let's make no mistake: strategy does not represent a neutral body of knowledge. Strategy has been described as a performative discursive device because it transforms the object it is concerned with (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). As Knights and Morgan (1991: 270) suggest: 'strategy is actively involved in the constitution, or re-definition, of problems in advance of offering itself as a solution to them'. Already one of the early military antecedents of strategy, the German general Carl von Clausewitz (1976 [1832]; see also Hoskin et al., 2006), stressed the transformative socio-political power of strategy when he wrote in a notice to his oeuvre *On War* that most men's actions are guided by the 'tact of judgment'. For action does not need strategic reflection, as Clausewitz points out: tact is sufficient for action. Nonetheless, strategy does play an important if surprising role:

when it is a question, not of acting oneself, *but of convincing others in a consultation*, then all depends on clear conceptions and demonstration of the inherent relations, and so little progress has been made in this respect that most deliberations are merely a contention of words, resting on no firm basis, and ending either in every one retaining his own opinion, or in a compromise from mutual considerations of respect, a middle course really without any value. (1976 [1832], italics added)

Clausewitz understands strategy as political technology that helps, as he puts it, *convincing others*. It does so through framing issues, making people speak, dividing events into causes and effects, devising solutions and evaluating their implementation. In other words, the practice of strategy shapes the very issues it was meant to address in the first place. The critical analysis of strategy undertaken in this article traces the transformative effects that strategy has on cities and society at large.

Philosophically speaking, the article explores strategy as the space in which epistemology coincides with politics. I argue that strategy represents a new regime connecting politics and science (see Serres and Latour, 1995 [1990]). Strategy reties the Gordian knot of power and truth: it links the domain of science, where one quietly listens to 'facts' and tries to make them speak for themselves, with the domain of politics, where one discusses 'values' in a cacophony that echoes the lack of universal ethical guiding principles. The traditional problem of urban planning lies in this tension between politics and science, democracy and expertise. What can the public rationally understand and discuss on an equal footing with the expert, and at what point is it up to the expert to make decisions? Collins and Evans (2007) called the first problem the issue of extension (how far does the public's knowledge reach?), and labelled the second one the problem of legitimacy (how can expert solutions be legitimate in a democracy where every

voice has the same weight?). In short, while science lacks legitimacy, democracy's deficit results from its ignorance. Traditional urban planning has been firmly rooted in the scientific tradition and has attempted to remain outside of politics. Representing a new medium that speaks with the authority of science while simultaneously mobilizing the public and claiming to articulate its political will, strategy differs in how it relates science to politics: it short-circuits politics and science. I will discuss strategy's alchemistic ability to deal with facts and values by applying the formula: theory + theology = strategy.

My argument is structured as follows. First I review some of the early approaches to urban planning that arose in response to the (perceived or real) urban crisis of the late 19th century. I focus on three planners who set much of the agenda for the planning profession – Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright – to indicate the epistemological shift that enabled strategy to gain prominence. In the second section I argue that strategy, a new institutionalized practice that emerged in response to the devastating critique of planning that was mounted in the second half of the 20th century, represents a new discursive formation. While strategy did not arise from the ashes of planning, planning (and the failures attributed to it) provided the epistemological grid from which strategy emerged (section 3). In the fourth section I discuss the power effects of strategy on cities and those who inhabit them. I conclude the article with a reflection on urban strategy and possible questions for future research.

Responding to the Urban Crisis: Howard, Le Corbusier and Wright

Like the body and its shadow, the social and the urban are inextricably related. In the words of Lefebvre, the city is the 'projection of society on the ground' (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 109). This projection turned into an uneasy image during the second half of the 19th century when cities exploded in size (Fishman, 1982 [1977]: 11). The unprecedented urban growth resulted in intellectually challenging and morally troubling projections. *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* from 1883, for example, provided a shocking account of life in London slums, while on the other side of the Atlantic Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* from 1890 illustrated the chaos and disorder of urban life. Charles Booth's *Labour and Life in London* from 1902/3, the first modern social survey, featured a colour-coded map that classified London's poor into four categories, the lowest one, black, representing the vicious and semi-criminal. Such maps rendered visible the link between urban spaces and social classes. So did early photography and film (think of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*), technologies that create representations of the city that capture its dark side (Stout, 1999). Early urban sociologists, including Robert Park and Louis Wirth in Chicago, and Georg Simmel in Berlin, wrote studies that were seismographs of the enormous psychological and social shifts that the urbanization of the 19th century had produced as

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an unintended consequence of industrialization. At the turn of the century, the urban undoubtedly had emerged as an arena for the struggle about what it meant to be human.

Urban planning emerged in the first decades of the 20th century as an answer to the ills of the 19th-century city: social evils, biological decline and potential political insurrection had to be avoided through urban planning (Hall, 2002 [1988]). Overcrowded city slums represented a moral, biological and political hazard. The city as epistemological space took shape in the minds of those who were determined to control this dangerous amalgamation. Urban planning offered an epistemology that allowed disentangling the complex urban fabric into an ordered space in which symptoms could be differentiated from origins, and causes were distinguishable from effects.

The early epistemology of planning created a path dependency for urban problem-solving to come. Howard proposed a radical *economic* solution to the urban problem. In *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1965 [1902]), Howard was little concerned about the design of the garden city. He knew that the traction of his ideas would hinge on the attraction of the town-country magnet. An economic calculation formed the core of his argument. The high property prices in London did not result from individual activity. Rather, landowners profited from the large population and the opportunities that arose around their property. The community created value, but the property owners captured it. Hence, Howard identified the property owners' surplus as 'unearned increment.' The magnetic attraction of the garden city was based on the radical redistribution of that unearned increment: if a large enough number of people decided to settle on new land, the property value would rise automatically. The rise in property value would be shared among the migrating population, providing the garden city with the magnetic power to attract its constituency.

While Le Corbusier's cure for the urban crisis differed radically from Howard's, both agreed on the diagnosis of what was wrong. Le Corbusier described Paris as a 'dangerous magma of human beings', where 'tuberculosis, demoralization, misery and shame are doing the devil's work' (1987 [1924]: 25, 284). In his eyes, the reason for the dire state of affairs was a simple one: 'The city of to-day is a dying thing because it is not geometrical' (1987 [1924]: 175). The solution derived logically from the cause: the principles of *geometry* would produce aesthetically more pleasing cities, which would automatically result in moral and social order. The idea that aesthetics could precede and in fact determine ethics had a mesmerizing effect on the architectural profession, allowing it to indulge in the ancient Greek dream that the laws of geometry and the laws of society would coincide. Social revolution, Le Corbusier promised boldly, could be avoided through architecture.

Frank Lloyd Wright's approach envisaged *technology* as the cure for the ills of cities. Like Howard and Le Corbusier, Wright's diagnosis of the urban was devastating. His major statement on cities was suitably entitled

‘The Disappearing City’ (2008 [1932]). In contrast to his two fellow planners, Wright identified technology as the force that would solve the urban crisis by dissolving cities. In his essay, ‘The Art and Craft of the Machine’ (2009 [1901]), Wright hailed the advent of the machine age as new ‘rational freedom’ that would result in ‘organic growth.’ Wright argued that the basic unit of space measurement had radically changed through technology. Technology ‘would render the city obsolete’ because the ‘man seated in his motor car’ provides the new scale for urban planning (2008 [1932]: 243, 259).

Urban Planning and Its Discontents

Of course, my short sketch cannot do justice to the subtleties of Howard, Le Corbusier and Wright’s work, nor the voluminous comments written about them (see Fishman, 1982 [1977]). My intention is to use their concepts (economy, geometry and technology) as signposts to define the epistemological space in which planning unfolded. As Peter Hall states, ‘there are just a few key ideas in twentieth-century planning, which re-echo and recycle and reconnect’ (2002 [1988]: 7). Economy, geometry and technology, or finance, form and function, in different constellations and shifting order of priorities, provided the disciplinary grid to analyse and (attempt to) solve undisciplined urban problems. The epistemological space and its underpinning assumptions were contested as soon as they were formulated. Consequently, the better part of the history of urban planning over the second half of the 20th century has to be read as a deconstruction of its own rationality.

First, planning theory turned inward and began critically analysing its accomplishments or, better, its lack thereof. One of its most vocal exponents was Aaron Wildavsky, whose 1973 article provocatively argued, ‘If Planning Is Everything, Maybe It’s Nothing.’ His diagnosis left little room for interpretation: ‘Planning fails everywhere it has been tried. . . . [T]he failures of planning are not peripheral or accidental but integral to its very nature’ (1973: 128). Why did planning fail? Because planning, in its attempt to be based on science, did not understand its relationship with politics and power. Wildavsky argued that planning is the attempt to control the consequences of our actions. Hence, he argued, ‘[p]ower and planning are different ways of looking at the same events’ (1973: 132). Because planning includes changing not only inanimate objects but also people, it means exercising power. Of course, re-introducing power and politics into planning bluntly undermined the status of the planner as a neutral expert-professional (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Friedman, 1998). This left planners in an awkward position. Either they could use power to achieve their objectives, which would mean acting without legitimacy; or they could remain within the narrow definition of planning, knowing that they would have little chance to influence outcomes. Either way, planners play illegitimately, or they are legitimately played with by others.

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Second, from a design perspective, three landmark publications used US cities as the backdrop for their critique of traditional notions of urban design: Robert Venturi et al.'s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977 [1972]), Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (2009 [1971]), and some years later, Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* (1978), formulated influential critiques of traditional notions of urban aesthetics and order. Venturi and his colleagues described Las Vegas as a communication system and an anti-spatial architecture of signs and symbols in which the billboard and the neon sign became prime vehicles of architectural expression. City images competed with bricks and mortar for the ontological status of urban reality (Lynch, 1960). In his study of LA, Banham analysed freeways and hamburger stands, arguing that they form part of a human ecology that is far more important than grand buildings. To paraphrase Banham, mobility outweighs monumentality (2009 [1971]: 5). The ecological approach entailed a fundamental critique of professional planning:

The failure rate of town planning is so high throughout the world that one can only marvel that the profession has not long since given up trying; the history of the art of planning is a giant waste bin of sumptuously forgotten paper projects. (2009 [1971]: 119)

Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* manifesto, post hoc, explored the skyscraper as a new form of building in which the planner and the architect are superseded by the engineer and the financier. These studies discovered cities as blueprints for a new urban aesthetics and social order. The chaotic appearance of LA, Las Vegas and Manhattan followed a deeper rationality, a higher form or organization that planners were not able to grasp. It is not an order conceived by the planner-expert, Venturi et al. argued (1977 [1972]: 52–3), but a Bergsonian order that is only called disorder for the lack of understanding its organization.

Third, from a socio-cultural perspective, writers such as Jane Jacobs pulled the rug out from underneath the feet of the planner. In her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1991 [1961]), she called town planning a 'pseudo-science' arising on a 'foundation of non-sense'. Similar to Venturi and his colleagues, Jacobs saw in the ostensible chaos of city life 'a complex and highly developed form of order' (1991 [1961]: 230) that did not fit into the hierarchically structured world of planners. According to Jacobs, the planners' task was a negative and paradoxical one: to keep plans away from the community and empower it to care for itself. Richard Sennett radicalized this idea in his 1970 book, *The Uses of Disorder* (2008 [1970]), in which he proposed urban anarchy as alternative to the sanitized planned city.

Finally, from an economic perspective planning was criticized as slow and bureaucratic, lacking in, or even worse, blocking the imagination of the urban entrepreneur. Urban entrepreneurialism developed in the 1970s in response to economic decline and pressure on local government budgets

(Harvey, 1989). It introduced a series of new concepts that implicitly pointed out the weaknesses of traditional planning. On a macro-economic scale, neoliberalism identified government as the problem, not the solution (Friedman, 1993). A lean, non-interventionist local government should maximize freedom of individual actors and allow for markets as mechanisms to organize exchange (Hackworth, 2007). Planners, as prototypical bureaucrats, found themselves the key suspects for tying up those invisible hands and crippling the forces of a supposedly self-regulating free market.

Ironically, the neoliberal critique and the ‘positive anarchy’ described by authors including Jacobs and Sennett both merged at their extremes into each other. In their 1969 manifesto ‘Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom’, published in the journal *New Society*, Banham, Barker, Hall and Price advocated an anarchy that was hardly distinguishable from the *laissez-faire* credo of the neoliberals. As one of the authors noted in retrospect, the ‘two almost seemed in danger of embracing back-of-stage’ (Hall, 2002 [1988]: 11).

In summary, the critique of the notion of planning was overwhelming. Aesthetically, cities were not made of grand buildings and boulevards; rather, movement trumped monumentality. From a sociological perspective, cities were populated by diverse communities that looked from the height of the planner’s pedestal like a disorganized anthill. In reality, social order was more refined than the planner’s conceptual apparatus. Economically, planning appeared to be the epitome of the anti-entrepreneurial bureaucracy. Finally, planners criticized their own profession for its unwillingness to understand the complex relations between power, rationality and planning. In the words of Hall (2002 [1988]: 367), planning was criticizing itself to such an extent that it could not claim any unique professional expertise, hence destroying its own claim to legitimacy.

The problem that planning faced was a direct result of the divorce of politics and science. Planners such as Le Corbusier, Wright and Howard attempted to establish planning as a field of expertise not contaminated with the messiness of *realpolitik* (Hall, 2002 [1988]: 357). Planning dressed itself up as exemplifying the principled use of reason, with the calculator, the drawing board and the engineer’s laboratory as the places in which the future would take shape. Politics was shut out altogether as planners defined themselves as a-political experts guided by what Max Weber (2002 [1922]) described as *Zweckrationalität*. The planners had little sense of nor any interest in politics. As Le Corbusier admitted, ‘I am an architect; no one is going to make a politician of me’ (1987 [1924]: 301). Le Corbusier’s, Wright’s and Howard’s ignorance of politics was reflected in the naiveté with which they pursued the implementation of their plans. Their plans required the total destruction of cities as a precondition for fixing them. After total destruction, the new order would emerge at once, *ex nihilo*. Consequently, Le Corbusier argued that only Louis XIV (that ‘great town planner’, as he put it) could realize his plan of Paris. His book *La Ville Radieuse* (1935) is dedicated ‘To Authority’ – an authority Le Corbusier

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thought to have found in Mussolini, and later in the Vichy government (Fishman, 1982 [1977]: 235–52). What Howard, Le Corbusier and Wright suggested resembled a metaphysical re-incarnation of some long-lost utopia on an urban scale.¹

Howard, Le Corbusier and Wright unquestionably ‘hated the cities of their time with an overwhelming passion. The metropolis was the counter-image of their ideal city, the hell that inspired their heaven’ (Fishman, 1982 [1977]: 12). Their critics re-introduced society and politics into planning; they reminded the planner that knowledge and power, science and politics, facts and values are but the two sides of the proverbial coin. For Howard, Le Corbusier and Wright the other side of the equation remained hell. Out of the opposition between heavenly planner and hellish critique, strategy emerged as a promise to solve urban problems.

Urban Strategy

No viable alternative to planning emerged from its critique. In fact, the critics were anti-planning in their tone, favouring *laissez-faire* and positive anarchy over interventions. Their approach was, it seems, anything goes, but it simultaneously felt like *rien ne va plus*. In the midst of this dilemma, strategy evolved as a new medium of governing the urban. In contrast to planning, I argue that strategy is a body of knowledge concerned with the production of truth, while simultaneously being a political mechanism to mobilize people. Planning, on the one hand, was an expert discourse that described the future based on disciplinary (financial, formal, functional) knowledge. Strategy, on the other hand, is a body of knowledge that aims at changing the balance of power in the present. It is not about the future, but a shared belief in the future. Put into a simple formula:

$$\textit{Theory} + \textit{Theology} = \textit{Strategy}^2$$

Strategy is the lovechild of the liaison between theory and theology. These two elements mark the concept’s attraction and pervasiveness. On the one hand, strategy is a practice that provides tools, maps, models, charts, and a whole array of other techniques offering a methodology for problem-solving. Scientific in its gestures, this particular face of strategy is embedded in a field of academic endeavour, articulated in a codified body of knowledge, and institutionalized in universities, organizations, the business world and professional associations. On the other hand, strategy offers a platform for envisaging a big picture that represents a shared future uniting people beyond the differences and conflicts of today. Improvising on Weber’s classical dictum, strategy breathes the *spirit of capitalism*: it transcends economic calculations by basing its *raison d’être* on values and visions. While the first aspect of strategy is theoretical, the second is unmistakably theological. What, then, are the two constituting elements of strategy precisely?

First, theory. Strategy is a body of knowledge, a discursive regime in which researchers, academics, managers, consultants and others compete over truth claims. The field has institutionalized and legitimized itself in recent decades through an array of activities, including the establishment of strategy chairs at prestigious universities; the publication of top-rated journals such as the highly regarded *Strategic Management Journal*, the official publication of the Strategic Management Society; and the production of a continuous stream of popular articles and books generating new ideas that present themselves as scientific advances. Public and private sector firms have created strategy units in their organizations that are often supported by global strategy consultancies, acting as clearing houses for new ideas and trends. In short, strategy has become disciplined.

Strategy researchers play an important legitimizing role in that disciplining process. They develop the theoretical underpinnings that enable the strategist to claim the status of an expert. In other words, research embroiled with the artifacts of scientific inquiry turns strategy into a rational and, hence, legitimate activity that, in turn, produces legitimizing outcomes. Models such as Porter's Five Forces (Porter, 1980), Barney's VRIN model (Barney, 1991) or the balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996) represent theoretical constructs that indicate the direction boxes and arrows have to point to establish cause and effect. Strategy creates relationships between different domains or functions (transport, environment, economy, culture, etc.); integrates time horizons (the goal can be accomplished in year 5, if we follow our strategy and divide it into sub-goals . . .); and links means with ends (the accomplishment of sub-goal A will be input for the next level and so on). In other words, strategy claims the capacity to differentiate between inputs and outputs in an environment where everything has the potential to feed back on everything else.

How can the discourse of strategy assert conceptual clarity in the midst of what Clausewitz has described so aptly as the *fog of war*? Strategy academics are aware of the potentially de-legitimizing effects caused by the absence of agreed definitions of their core concepts and established boundaries for the expertise they claim to have. Therefore, the academic discipline of strategy performs regular boundary maintenance activities and rigorously monitors its own discursive development. For instance, Nag et al. (2007) address the lack of a common definition of what strategy is.³ Because there is no explicitly agreed upon definition, Nag et al. assume that strategy scholars must share a definition implicitly. The question is, then, how do you demonstrate a unifying definition that no one has been able to articulate (yet)? Nag et al. picked 447 articles from three major US journals and emailed 585 authors who had presented at the strategy division of American Academy of Management meetings. On a scale from one to four, they asked their respondents to rate whether the articles (presented with titles and abstracts, but no authors) were strategic management articles or

not. Based on this survey, Nag et al. (2007: 942) determined that strategy 'a) is the major intended and emergent initiatives, b) is defined by general managers on behalf of owners, c) involves the utilization of resources, and d) enhances the performance of firms in their external environments.' Drawn up to take the pulse of their field, their elaborate research design resembles a consensus operation. Limiting the number of surveyed journals to three North American publications, and asking the predominantly white, male, North American attenders of the Academy of Management conference what they perceive as strategy clearly contributed to the 'finding' of Nag et al. that the 'diverse community members seemed to be linked by a fundamental implicit consensus that helps the field to cohere and maintain its identity' (2007: 952). As a theoretical construct that asks for scientific legitimacy, strategy needs to arrive at a definition that can support its claimed jurisdiction and expertise. It presents its history as one of linear progress moving to an ever more complete understanding of its subject matter (e.g. Hoskisson et al., 1999). Through such consensus operations, strategy establishes its credentials as a scientific discipline that produces experts and expertise.⁴

Second, theology. Strategy would suffer from its epistemological inadequacies and share the limited appeal of other technical management disciplines (such as accounting, for instance) if it did not harbour a deeply theological spirit. Its spirit expresses itself in the aesthetic form of the big picture. The big picture is a representation of a desirable future. Like every representation, it is an aesthetic phenomenon that is more effective if the strategists can convince their audience with an impressive performance. In a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1959), strategizing is a social activity that has to be performed to be effective. Strategy has developed an impressive repertoire of rituals and routines, including research methods, workshop techniques, consultation techniques, presentation formats, demonstration techniques (think PowerPoint), reports and other written documentation as well as evaluation methods and ongoing controlling techniques that allow strategists to perform their roles convincingly. In so doing, strategy provides the script and the props for a convincing performance of the future in the here-and-now. By extension, it offers the routines and rituals upon which strategists can peg their identity. In this sense it is strategy that makes the strategist, not the other way round.

As performance the discipline of strategy consists of the mastery of practices, routines and processes. Its content is a purely formal matter. Hence, strategists do not need to be experts in the field they are working in. Rather, it is the process know-how of the strategist that generates trust and reassures the audience that the desired outcomes are achievable. The value of strategists lies in their ability to apply a process to problems with fuzzy boundaries, and order data so that the *fog of war* lifts and the big picture can be extracted from the ambiguities, serendipity and complexities of the present.

Ironically, the theological element of strategy is particularly evident in business schools. For instance, Cynthia A. Montgomery, head of the strategy unit at Harvard Business School, argues that, ‘strategy is not just a plan, not just an idea; it is a way of life for a company. . . . At heart, most strategies . . . involve some mystery’ (2008: 56, 59). An even more evangelical notion of strategy is presented by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, the two INSEAD academics who introduced the notion of red and blue oceans (2005). They follow a biblical narrative in which a new promised land (= blue ocean) awaits those ready to follow their advice. Bathing in blue oceans, the struggles of capitalism will be transcended. In this sense, big picture strategy is one of the few genres that offers grand narratives that have weathered the erosive forces of late modernity.

Yet the big picture is just an image, as Bruno Latour (2005) reminds us. He uses the panorama as an example of how the big picture is projected onto a screen and made consumable for the masses. However, the ‘pan’ does not mean that the picture *shows* everything; rather, it refers to the fact that the picture *covers* the entire space in which it is exhibited and wraps the audience completely in its subject matter. The big picture captures our view, not the world – arguably an important difference. While we are fully immersed in the image that leaves no space for alternative projections, what stares at us is only a small glimpse of the many possible futures. In this sense, the big picture represents one perspective as an absolute and all-encompassing point of view. It is the only opportunity to understand the whole as a whole. This is the theological element of strategy. The big picture shows but one master narrative that mistakes itself for the whole. It does not convince through logic but seduces through aesthetics. It diverts interest from the manufacturing and the framing of the image (both deeply political issues). The big picture forces the viewer to step back, and look at it from afar. It introduces a distance between what the viewers see and what they can do. The big picture breeds passivity.

Theory and Theology in Action

As argued, strategy’s attraction resides in the alchemistic combination of the theoretical truth claim and the theological big picture projection. Geoff Mulgan, formerly chief strategist under Tony Blair and author of *The Art of Public Strategy* (2009), offers a fine example of strategy’s dual properties. He prescribes strategy as a logical problem-solving mechanism that is equipped with models, maps and tools.⁵ According to him, strategy-making unfolds in a neat strategy project phase model (Mulgan, 2009: 122). He proposes that the implementation of strategy will be facilitated through ‘tough targets, precise measurement of performance (to enable the principal to judge the agent), clear divisions between purchasers and providers, and competitive markets to weed out the weak’ (2009: 137). As a strategist, he offers a theory of how things work, and how the desired state of affairs can be achieved. The language of his argument, including the

models and graphs, bestows a scientific aura on strategy and legitimizes those who perform it. But strategy would remain a technical affair if it did not contain clearly spiritual elements. The application of strategy will lead to a better and brighter future, Mulgan reminds us: 'Rather than a Leviathan or a marketplace', the strategically minded state of the 21st century will radiate like a rainbow: 'A rainbow combines many different colours which add up to a coherent whole. It is transparent. And it constantly pulls our attention to the horizon' (2009: 258). From Mulgan's pen flows a political vision of the future and an ostensibly neutral technology of governing which meet in the discourse of strategy. The theology of the rainbow meets the theory of process, targets and precise performance measurement. Who else but the strategist could, in one and the same operation, relay a mechanism to accomplish desirable outcomes and draw an inherently political big picture vision of the future?

Strategy's power lies in the fact that it operates theoretically while simultaneously seducing theologically. Only because strategy combines a theory of how things work, and a spiritual expression of what the future will hold, is it able to offer itself so successfully as a solution to the complexities that organizations, including cities, face. If it were nothing but a technique, it would not generate interest beyond a small group of experts; if it were simply a spirited conversation about the future, without a visible transmission belt into the present, it would be regarded as mere talk. It is precisely this blend of mechanics and mission, of theory and theology, which explains the power that strategy exercises. In contrast, plans such as the ones devised by Le Corbusier, Howard or Wright envisage an image of the future based on knowledge and truth. Their plans should change reality without considering the *realpolitik* of the societal circumstances in which they were embedded. The strategist does not only rely on revealing the truth about the future; he also concerns himself with politics in order to alter the context in which the truth will be verified and become an effective means of change.

Effects of Urban Strategy

What are strategy's consequences for cities and their governance? Strategy reconceptualizes the relation between time and space; it casts the city as an aesthetic phenomenon; it reinvents the public; and it marshals political will. In the final analysis, strategy has to be analysed not only as a camera that represents an image of the future; it is also an engine that produces this very future.⁶

Space and Time

In Wright, Le Corbusier or Howard's approach to urban planning, time is eliminated while space is abstracted. Their plans talk about a future that is

demarcated by a clear break from the present. The future the planners depict is strangely timeless as it could not evolve from the present. Similarly, their notion of space suggests a *tabula rasa*, a destruction of the present as precondition of the future to be. In contrast, strategy's future is always a present future, and its spaces multiply beyond the geographical.

First, strategy enacts the future in the present. It talks about the desired future, and the process that leads towards it. Strategy transcends the present and envisions a promised land where the conflicts of the here-and-now are resolved and obstacles are overcome. Strategy brings the future into the present. It is the mode in which the future is consumed in the present. This sets up a reverse causality: the big picture that illustrates the future creates the reason for actions in the present. Through strategy, the future shapes the present. The strategist turns the arrow of time and makes the future impact on the here-and-now. The future becomes the *a priori* (the precondition of the possibility) of the present. There are two modes at opposite ends of the spectrum that illustrate strategy's enactment of the future. On the one hand, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the future moulds the present through the formative powers of a projection. Exorcism, on the other hand, is a less positive intervention into the present state of affairs, legitimizing action in the present in order to avoid future ills. Self-fulfilling prophecy and exorcism mark the positive and negative extremes of the future consumed as an image that folds back onto the present. Therein lies the power of strategy: through envisioning a future that shapes the present, it creates the conditions for its own verification in the present. In this sense, the poetry of the big picture is deeply political: the vision of the future that strategy depicts is part of the present and strategy is the vehicle with which the future shapes the present. Quite literally, *strategy buys time*.

Second, strategy extends space. Traditionally, space has been thought of as relative or absolute. The planner, the quantity surveyor, and the property developer find themselves in an absolute space that they measure, conquer and fill like a container. In this view, space is territorial, demarcated by clear boundaries. This absolute notion of space that underpins traditional planning is dissolved and multiplies in the strategy process. Strategy opens up new spaces that flex, move, expand and shrink with the activities that constitute it. It offers a language to think space in non-territorial ways: strategy is concerned with the semiotic space of images and brands; it deals with the social space of communities; it manages the economic space of markets and networks; it focuses on the political space of culture and identity; and it navigates the space of government. While traditional planning focuses on the territory it has under its jurisdiction, strategy expands beyond the legislative space of the city, including its regional and sometimes global context. Strategy allows the expansion of a city's sphere of influence beyond its territorially defined and democratically legitimate boundaries.

The Conquest of the City as Image

In the introduction, we mentioned Lefebvre's definition of the city as a projection of society on the ground. In turn, this projection reflects back on society and structures it. The corollary of this insight is that governing cities implies managing projections. With its concern for the big picture, strategy performs this function: through visions and images it creates projections of the future that reflect back on the present. As argued above, the power of strategy rests in the fact that it creates an image of the future that transforms the present. In contrast, the plans that Wright, Howard and Le Corbusier developed were visions of the future that offered radical alternatives to the present.

Every image needs framing. Strategy frames the conversations that provide the raw material for its edition of the future. As a framing device for problems worth discussing, strategy implicitly makes assumptions about what is inside the framework and what remains outside. The label 'strategic' performs the function of an inclusion/exclusion mechanism. It depoliticizes certain aspects of reality: is the discussion about global warming more important than the rising crime rate in my neighbourhood? Strategic framing is inherently linked to what Foucault calls the politics of truth: judgements about what is true and false are only possible within a pre-established framework. In this sense, strategy as a frame can never be true or false because it is the precondition for judging what counts and what doesn't.

As image, strategy is an aesthetic phenomenon. Strategy circulates and is consumed as image. Visuals, models, catchphrases, watchwords, presentations, glossy reports, websites and all those other representations of the future derive their mesmerizing power from the aesthetic qualities of strategy. The onlooker's eyes are glued to the PowerPoint presentation of the strategist, watching the future emerge, point by point, slide by slide. The images that strategy projects do not convince – they seduce by balancing on that fine line between promise and persuasion. These qualities ensure that strategy seamlessly fits into the media landscape. A plan, on the other hand, does not seduce. A plan appeals to a trained eye. The consumption of a plan presupposes a skilled professional, a patient reader.

Politically speaking, there is an immanent danger in the aestheticization of politics that is inherently embedded in the work of strategy. Walter Benjamin (2007 [1936]) concluded that the aestheticization of politics inevitably leads to fascism, because it creates emotionality while anaesthetizing the reasoning mind. Benjamin's well-known thesis is based on the assumption that non-fascist politics does not rely on aesthetics – an assumption challenged by Jacques Rancière (2004 [2000]), who argues that all politics play themselves out in the relationship between stage and audience. As such, politics is always aesthetics. It relies on the sensible, on a shared perception of what is sensible. Politics means giving an account on behalf of those who cannot express themselves; it means giving speech to those who

cannot speak (Rancière, 1999 [1995]). Politics is the art of making things visible and making them count while making other things disappear. Strategy increases the aesthetic repertoire of politics by rendering the problems of the present and the solutions of the future visible. Strategy favours images over plans, evangelism over analysis, and the poetry of the possible over the prose of the present. The pathos of the strategists replaces the bureaucratic ethos of the planner.

Re-inventing the Public

The strategy process is communication-intensive, inclusive and collaborative. It stages public gatherings, stakeholder meetings, focus groups, exhibitions, briefings and a whole array of other events to make people respond to questions they would not have asked otherwise. Bourdieu (2007 [1979]: 418) once remarked that the most important political issue is the modes of production of answers to political questions. How are people made to respond to political issues? Traditionally, this has been the challenge of democracy. Putting a mark next to a name or a party at elections is a passive mode of production of answers to political questions. It suffers from a legitimacy deficit. Strategy provides a new way of producing such answers: How are people made to respond to something that they might not have had an interest in in the first place, or would not have said anything about if they had not been asked? Strategy is a mechanism to ask certain questions that people might not ask themselves otherwise and then edit them into a big picture that functions as legitimization and mobilization of action in the present. Questions such as ‘How do you want your city to look in 20 years’ time?’ force people to think abstractly. *In situ*, something must be said. The aggregated answers become an indicator for the public’s will. The individual has little idea and even less control over the political function that the aggregated answers assume once they are framed to illuminate an issue the individual was not aware of in the first place. In this process, the opinions of individuals are translated and aggregated into a statement that might not reflect their contradicting and often unpronounced worldviews. Through this mechanism, strategy functions as a machine to elicit answers from the public. Strategy makes the public respond to a future it can hardly imagine and edits its fragmented utterances into a legitimate vision of the future, a big picture that confronts the individual with a precision and direction that is in sharp contrast to their vague ideas and shifting opinions. In fact, strategy achieves what democracy congenitally struggles with: it produces answers to political questions and legitimizes action while providing the strategists with enormous freedom to conduct their business of framing the conversations backstage, unseen by and unaccountable to the public.

Mobilizing the Public, Marshalling Political Will

Some scholars argue that the ideal of democracy is an ill-equipped contender for governing the public. For instance, Eric Hobsbawm states, ‘the “will of people”, however expressed, cannot actually determine the specific tasks of government. . . . [I]t cannot judge projects, only results’ (2007: 109). Thus, he diagnoses that when there is ‘a massive transfer of functions to unelected institutions, public or private . . . a good deal of politics will be negotiated and decided behind the scenes’ (2007: 111). Clarence Stone (1989) describes ‘urban regimes’ as informal groups of self-appointed leaders who effectively govern the city without being accountable to the public. Ethically problematic, urban regimes function as a mechanism to solve problems that cannot be resolved by counting votes or letting consumer preferences dictate the solutions. Under these conditions, the political becomes a site of competition for control over non-professionals and the right to speak in their name (Bourdieu, 1991). The challenge is to translate the cacophony of their fears and dreams into one clear voice and to marshal their desires into one political will. In other words, the task of the urban strategist is to mobilize the public and marshal political will (often vis-a-vis state and federal governments). The question is then how strategy approaches this formidable challenge.

Strategy redefines the notion of political will. In classical political theory, the will of the individual has to be reconciled with that of the collective. The private ‘I’ and the public ‘We’ have to be mediated. Strategy avoids this confrontation by inviting the most private parts of the ‘I’ into the heart of the public. The strategy process is a mechanism to make people talk about their fears and desires, and brainstorm and collect their ideas. The political and the non-political, the private and the public are deliberately blurred as strategy invites conversations about facts and values. Strategy spins a grand narrative where the personal idiosyncrasies of an individual captured on a sticky note are placed next to global issues. In the vision of the future, the social division of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ appear to be overcome.

In this sense, strategy poses a solution to the fragmentation of society by constituting the public in the form of communities. Its consultations and deliberations are neither exclusively focused on experts nor individuals nor elected (and, hence, democratically legitimized) bodies but community groups. Yet the public as sum of communities suffers from a lack of legitimacy. Who can claim to constitute a community? Why are certain communities included in the strategy process? Who has the right to represent the interest of one community? And who are those representing communities accountable to? These questions allude to the notorious democracy-deficit of community consultation and other deliberative forms of democracy (see Newman, 2005). In traditional democracy, the question is solved through the ‘one voice, one vote’ principle. In deliberative democracy models, clearly some people have more voice than others. Interest groups and lobbying bodies such as local chambers of commerce, city tourism, marketing

agencies and so on form part of new political regimes. It remains unclear through what process a spokesperson is authorized to speak on behalf of a community. One could suspect that a meeting of ‘unauthorized actors’ (Beck, 1999) and other only lightly legitimized spokespeople of diverse communities would focus on the commonalities and the consensus amongst them, while differences and contentious issues might be avoided.

Politically speaking, assembling the public as communities has two effects. First, it homogenizes parts of the population and glosses over the differences between them by labelling them as a community. Does the gay community, for example, not portray a false unity among a rather diverse set of subcultures? Second, it undermines the building of solidarity between diverse groups. By dividing the population into communities, it stops them from engaging with each other and discovering common platforms for joint action. Do small and medium enterprises and inner city residents not both suffer from the ruinous effects of out-of-town shopping centres? Instead of cross-community identification and collective action, communities compete with each other for influence over the little airtime they enjoy with those in power and the small niches they are concerned with (see Rose, 1999). While the categorization of people into communities renders the public manageable, strategists can design the big picture out of their mosaic-like concerns and feed it back to the public as a supposedly legitimate representation of its will, manufactured outside of the democratic process.

In order to mobilize political will, strategy stages demonstrations. These demonstrations do not take place on the streets of cities but are enhanced, mediated and played out in presentations, images, models, speeches, drawings, etc. (see Stark and Paravel, 2008). In these forms of demonstration, political and technical matters are conflated and aestheticized. Images of fresh, organic fruit and vegetable markets in a green city hide the complexities and the interdependencies that make up its socio-economic fabric. The demonstrations with which strategy mobilizes conceal these complexities and gloss over conflicts. Instead, they provide the image of an ordered future in which problems are only allowed to exist in the form of dot points, and where icons, symbols, drawings and photographs express what words cannot capture. Strategy works like a billboard; it does not convey information but persuades. In this sense, it mobilizes the public.

Conclusion: Urban Strategy as Camera and Engine

As Nikolas Rose said pointedly, to govern means to be condemned to find an authority for one’s authority. In our society, the expert traditionally fulfilled this function. Experts offer knowledge that promises to rein in those problems that, ironically, have derived so often from expert knowledge in the first place. As Rose and Miller explain, ‘experts hold out the hope that problems of regulation can remove themselves from the disputed terrain of politics and relocate onto the tranquil yet seductive territory of truth’ (1992: 188). While planning was traditionally located squarely on the side

of the expert and truth, the critique that arose in the mid 20th century and onwards rendered it increasingly less powerful.

Strategy offers itself to fill the void. As opposed to planner experts, strategists have one foot on the ground and one in the library, reassuring both those who know and those who have to act that there is a vague yet, for the strategist, decipherable relation between the problems of society and the solutions of science. Strategy opens up a new epistemological space in which the problem of extension (How far does the public's knowledge reach?) and the problem of legitimacy (How can expert solutions be legitimate in a democracy where every voice counts the same?) can be addressed simultaneously in one and the same process. In fact, strategy dissolves the problem of extension and legitimacy by acting as a hinge between the public and the expert. Its theological elements legitimize, while its theoretical ambition provides the scaffolding for the desired future to be built. The representation of people and the production of truth occur as part of the same process. Facts and values are woven together in a grand narrative that assures that the future has a future. As the big picture, it frames reality and includes certain issues while relegating others to the sphere of non-decision-making. Strategy represents the big picture and uses it as legitimate reason for action in the present. In short, strategy is a *camera and an engine*.

Further analysis of urban strategy could build on two problematizations that follow from our argument. First, the politics of strategizing: paraphrasing Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci once said that there is an inherently conservative element in politics, because 'society does not pose itself problems for whose solutions the material preconditions do not already exist' (1979 [1929–35]: 194). Strategy, I suspect, has inherited this conservative element. It is more concerned with the politics of what is doable than the open space of what can be imagined. As such it will support the status quo rather than question it. Yet strategy bestows a misplaced sense of certainty upon us that may decrease our ability to deal with the unpredictable. Strategy's big picture resembles a panoramic image which completely occupies our senses. This is the dangerous illusion from where the alternative costs of strategy have to be analysed empirically: Who screens the big picture? Who are the heroes, who the villains? Who wrote the script, who provided the props? What special effects are used? What has been edited out? And, who is condemned to watch, and what is the price of admission to the show?

Second, resistance to and appropriation of strategy. In the introduction I argued that strategy is a 'thought style' (Fleck, 1980 [1935]), constituted by practices and a discursive structure that legitimize actions and justify decisions. Yet, empirically, strategy will always, at least partially, fail to determine the future because agents may use, abuse and sometimes subvert strategies. One may think of Michel de Certeau (1984 [1980]), who described how the tactics of those who have little or no voice sometime undermine the strategies of those in power. In the urban arena, outsiders

and Simmelian strangers engage reflexively with their environments, and through their actions they scrutinize, modify and maybe even transform the city. They do not have a voice in the official strategy discourse, yet their semiotic resistance articulates itself in those tags and graffiti that form part of an unauthorized counter-discourse that has the potential to undermine urban strategy. Thus urban strategy may remain contested and fragmented: ‘The city writes itself on its walls and in its streets, but that writing is never completed. The book never ends and contains many blank or torn pages. It is nothing but a draft, more a collection of scratches than writing’ (Lefèbvre, 2003 [1970]: 121).

Notes

1. Planners shared this deeply modern trait with Descartes, who wrote: ‘those ancient cities which were originally mere boroughs, and have become large towns in the process of time, are as a rule badly laid out, as compared with those towns of regular pattern that are laid out by a designer on an open plain to suit his fancy’ (1954 [1673]: 15).
2. The formula is inspired by Derrida, who wrote, ‘speculation is always theoretical and theological’ in *Specters of Marx* (2006 [1993]: 183). It is important to note that the notion of theology is not used to describe a particular religious meaning; rather, it is meant to characterize the importance of the belief in the future that strategy engenders.
3. Other examples of narcissistic self-inspection of the field include Hoskisson et al. (1999), Ramos-Rodríguez and Ruíz-Navarro (2004), Gavetti and Levinthal (2004) and, more recently, Furrer et al. (2008), Cummings and Daellenbach (2009) and Mellahi and Sminia (2009).
4. We can argue critically that the objective of strategy – to make organizations perform better – is an elusive one, because strategy is played out in competitive arenas. Hence its effectiveness depends on the position of other relevant players in the field. In other words, a successful strategy can lose its value once competitors have adopted it. Paradoxically, the truth of strategy theory might be the inverse function of its dissemination.
5. For a collection of diagrams, charts and other visualizations of Mulgan’s strategic thinking, see: <http://interactive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/survivalguide/site/intro/introducing.htm>
6. This play on words is inspired by Donald Mackenzie’s 2006 book, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*.

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