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Deconstructing Resilience: Lessons from Planning Practice

Special Edition of Planning Practice and Research

PAUL O’HARE & IAIN WHITE

‘Resilience’ has emerged to become a notion that imbues academic research and policy discourse. But, the term’s prolificacy is matched neither by certainty regarding its definition nor by agreement regarding its application through policy and practice. Like ‘sustainability’ or ‘progress’ the concept, at least from a superficial perspective, is one that is rather agreeable and ‘fuzzy’ and difficult to contest. It seems counter-intuitive to argue that we should not become more resilient, particularly in the face of economic, environmental and social shocks or stresses that can prove to be deeply disruptive—even devastating—to everyday life.

The passive reception of the term, as well as the considerable ambiguity regarding its articulation and application, has only assisted to catalyse the cascade of resilience through a broad variety of policy and practical agendas. Resilience has been heralded as a prime mobilizing concept upon which a host of strategies may converge to help society and cities better prepare for a range of risks across regional, national and global scales (e.g. Conservative Party, 2010; Cabinet Office, 2011; United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability, 2012). Resilient systems—be they cities, infrastructures, communities or commerce—are generally thought to support ‘business as usual’ (London First, 2003), or even business that is better than usual in the face of a threat. Resilience thus promises to be able necessary to carve order from chaos and to construct a capacity to respond (and adapt) to uncertain risks, ultimately fostering the circumstances necessary to support an efficient recovery from their impacts.

Indeed, some interpretations of resilience make a discernible effort to treat the potential consequences of risk, not only as threats, but also as opportunities that may be capitalized upon so long as a certain predisposition to respond positively has been adequately accumulated or anticipated in advance (see, e.g. Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Shaw & Theobold, 2011).

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In this sense, efforts to infuse resilience into governance and society can be at once reactive, in that it could be used to understand how past responses to certain threats could be bettered, but simultaneously proactive; an effort to anticipate future stresses and shocks to a given system. As such, resilience has a fluid temporality and spatiality, seemingly making it effortlessly relevant to differing agencies, strategies and agendas. One only needs to observe how ‘resilience’ has become a frequent adjunct to any number of nouns and verbs for evidence of this mobility (as illustrated by the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, 2013, which was branded with the tag line Resilient Dynamism).

Never a discipline that could be accused to be resistant to the adoption of a fashionable buzzword, the concept has been similarly seconded to strands of spatial planning, exerting an influence across a number of policy spheres and the profession more generally. Urbanists, risk managers and emergency planners in particular have found great appeal in a concept that could mobilize and marshal effort and resources in the face of almost any threat to the functioning of cities, the operation of their critical urban networks, and the safety and security of their inhabitants.

But, the persuasive rhetorical appeal of resilience should not immunize the notion from being critiqued, automatically promoted or unthinkingly employed—both conceptually and when its transfer into practice is studied. Recently, there has been burgeoning academic attention considering the conceptual parameters and utility of resilience in a more critical fashion (e.g. Davoudi, 2012; Porter & Davoudi, 2012). For instance, it is acknowledged that many policy documents referencing the term favour articulations that may be considered less progressive than others, whilst elsewhere, it has been observed that resilience has emerged as a tool of governance: an effort to exert control, or at least the sense of control, over the manifold challenges faced by contemporary society, and to counter the complexities of spatial and administrative governance (for a review of these critiques, see Jasanoff, 2008; Leach, 2008; Morrow, 2008; Rose, 2007; Shaw & Maythorne, 2012; Welsh, 2013).

The pursuit of resilience encounters a series of grounded challenges for planning practitioners and the manifold associated stakeholders. Against the context of these assessments, this issue of Planning Practice and Research presents four papers that aim to ‘deconstruct’ resilience, re-evaluating it to be a term for interrogation and contest rather than a paradigm to be accepted. Together the papers, though acknowledging the inherent ambiguity of the term, make an effort to understand the essence of resilience, and by doing so provide a departure point for assessing the implications of the term’s migration into, and impact upon, practice.

In the first paper Darryn McEvoy, Hartmut Fünfgeld and Karyn Bosomworth discuss the importance of ‘framing’ in terms of how concepts are understood and exert influence within practice and policy, detailing how this can occur at the meta-level, conceptual level and operational level. Drawing upon urban case studies conducted in the State of Victoria, Australia, their paper investigates how resilience competes with other framing mechanisms, such as that of climate change adaptation. They observe that the terminology of climate change and vulnerability is increasingly replaced by a rhetoric with more ‘positive connotations’, for
instance with a refocused emphasis on the ‘strengthening’ or ‘resilience’ of local communities. They reflect on the implications of this discourse for future policy and practice. Whilst acknowledging that resilience holds great appeal to practitioners and policy-makers, the authors note that articulations of resilience are currently unable to adequately account for social phenomena. They conclude by observing that even seemingly progressive interpretations of resilience (such as ‘bouncing forward’) will remain mere sound bites until more solid conceptual underpinnings are developed and applied.

The theme of framing as a ‘sense-making device’ (Weick, 1995) is traced through the second paper by Gérard Hutter and Christian Kuhlicke. They explore the differences between resilience ‘talk’ and ‘action’, utilizing a sense-making conceptual frame to identify how the terminology is understood within a crisis situation. Using the example of a small town in Germany that has experienced flooding, the article identifies and discusses four key processes that can be used to appreciate the relationship between policy and practice: a commitment to resilience, an expectation for resilience, arguments and contestation about resilience, and the manipulation of resilience. In conclusion, Hutter and Kuhlicke call for scholars and practitioners alike to use the term resilience with caution and reflect upon the importance of understanding social contexts in order to promote the term’s value.

Simin Davoudi, Elizabeth Brooks and Abid Mehmood use the special issue’s third paper to develop a conceptual foundation to critique London’s draft Climate Change Strategy. Recognizing that interpretations of resilience possess both regressive and progressive opportunities, the authors construct a four-dimensional framework (persistence, adaptability, transformability and preparedness) based on three broad perspectives on resilience: engineering, ecological and evolutionary resilience. They assert that most policy manifestations of resilience tend to be dominated by engineering (persistence-focused) interpretations, which ultimately fail to explore alternative futures at different temporal and physical scales. The authors assert that those with a stake in promoting resilience must take greater account of ‘the politics of place and what ought to be done’, to not just respond to contemporary and future challenges, but rather to influence them.

The fourth and final paper by Jon Coaffee reflects further upon how the turn to resilience has infiltrated the practice of an ever greater array of governance stakeholders, including the planning profession. The paper describes how the ‘turn to resilience’ can be characterized as a series of generations—the first regarding efforts to absorb risk, the second reflecting efforts to mitigate and prevent risk and a third generation capturing how resilience has become embedded within ‘everyday practice’ (not least the activities of planning professionals). Beyond these three generations, Coaffee introduces a fourth—‘integrated place-making resilience’. As summarized, this more nuanced conceptualization of resilience reflects how the term has been recruited to counter a broader scope of threats and dispersed throughout an increasing array of locally based professionals and communities.

Combined, the papers in this issue help deconstruct resilience and identify a series of important lessons that might help lend greater clarity to the term’s transference through to planning practice. These lessons may be encapsulated as a series of disconnects within three key areas: meaning, policy milieu and place—all of which are brought into sharp focus by the integrative, political and spatial
dimensions of planning. First, as conceptualizations of resilience have changed over time—a trend that is sure to endure—there is an essential need to communicate the interpretation of resilience that is set to be traced through to policy goals or practice protocols. Second, resilience operates within complex policy and political environments that can be conflicted and fragmented, but all of which inhibit the impact of any such integrative concept upon planning practice. Finally, rather than being used as a broad, generic aspiration, articulations of resilience must be rooted within spatial contexts and must account for spatially specific distinctions and peculiarities.

As the papers in this issue demonstrate, where planning for ‘resilience’ is divorced from meaning, or is abstracted from the realities of the world of practice, obstacles to achieving desired outcomes will be an inevitability. Together, the papers acknowledge how resilience has emerged as a concept that might be commonplace, but that is inherently contested and in practice is frequently subject to conflict. Many tensions emerge for societal and institutional bodies involved in shaping urban environments as well as for communities subjected to these transformations. Whilst academic literature and theories promise that resilience may hold transformative potential, this expectation appears to be rarely met in the realities of planning, with many policies and practices struggling to reconcile the broad applicability of the concept with place-specific social processes. Given this dislocation, there is now serious concern that the currency of the concept of resilience is being undermined; a warning that emerges at various junctures throughout the research presented here. Yet, as carefully caveated throughout these same papers, the concept is not yet entirely bankrupt. Perhaps devices that can help adequately frame resilience may contribute to more successful sense-making and place-making, whilst a critical reflection on policy and context offers the potential to aid the more meaningful application of resilience into the spheres of planning policy and practice.

References


Deconstructing Planning and Resilience