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Summary excerpts of:

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **Multiplicities, Interwoven Threads, Holistic Paths: The Phronetic Long-haul Approach**

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Understanding the intricate details and intertwined plays and shifts in complex urban processes is a key to empowering change for the better. A longitudinal qualitative research approach can be particularly valuable to that endeavour. In this chapter a ‘phronetic long-haul’ methodology is proposed. The authors have sought ways to facilitate a rich, deep, holistic and integrated understanding of contemporary urban change over time, underpinned by the concept of phronesis. Keeping attention on issues of power, using multiple narratives to show how power works, the approach seeks to comprehend urban planning situations in a practical way by maintaining a long-term, ethnographic and reflective connection with the practices under study.

The chapter outlines Flyvbjerg’s contemporary concept of phronesis. Then over four subsections it explains the core components of a ‘phronetic long-haul’. It then draws on the combined research experience of the authors, highlighting examples from four different case studies (in England and New Zealand) to show the value of a phronetic approach.

The notion of a phronetic long-haul has been grounded in a quite specific way in the chapter. Recently, a range of discourses have emerged that propose various strategies and principles for achieving more sustainable urban places and spaces. What one group of these discourses share is a commitment to more compact, human scale urban forms,

which enhance a sense of community, cohesion, and democracy via a variety of urban design principles (see Aldous 1992; Calthorpe 1993; Duany et al 2000; Katz 1994; Thompson-Fawcett and Bond 2003). Examples of these discourses include New Urbanism, Smart Growth, and the 'urban renaissance' in Britain. Under the umbrella term 'urbanism', these discourses present a paradigm driven by an ideology that seeks to transform urban spaces and places in order to achieve greater sustainability. The question is: do they? While certain claims of achieving higher degrees of environmental sustainability have been founded, the achievement of social and democratic sustainability goals are uncertain (Beauregard 2002; Bond and Thompson-Fawcett, *forthcoming*; Ford 2001; Grant 2006; Talen 2000; Talen and Ellis 2002; Thompson-Fawcett and Bond 2003; Till 2001). Moreover, research tends to focus on process or outcome, social or environmental issues, rather than taking a more holistic, integrated approach. There is little research that seeks to integrate all aspects of the urbanist transformation of urban places and spaces in a comprehensive long term study. The urbanist rhetoric around participatory planning and local governance, combined with apparent patchy understandings (on the part of proponents and policy makers) of how such processes operate in practice, prompted the authors to fashion a methodological approach that would tease out the intricacies and trajectories of the development and establishment process, and furnish a penetrating narrative courtesy of the stakeholders involved.

The outcome of a phronetic long-haul approach to examining urbanist practices is an analysis that is informed by a pragmatic interpretation and mission. Hence, while a holistic, integrated, case-based longitudinal research design is prized, there is no attempt here to establish a universal approach. The key is in devising guidelines for a concretised and rich investigation of the dynamics of power from the earliest conception of urbanist projects to the lived experience of them. The task in such work is to elucidate and contemplate everyday habits and procedures over time, ultimately sketching out in public how processes of power might be perceived differently or conducted differently. As planners, the goal should be keenly future-oriented; necessarily debating what is desirable in ongoing practice.

The research examples highlighted in this chapter demonstrate the particular benefits of the approach for gaining insight into social and political interactions, passions, emotions and a multitude of experiences of events and situations. Such understandings have provided platforms from which to launch further specific enquiries into enlightening micro and macro practices and processes. The longitudinal nature of the approach has allowed recognition of the shifting nature of relationships, the importance of the dynamics of varying power plays over time, and it has fostered a meaningful reciprocity between the researchers and those researched.

In terms of its wider contribution to research design, the phronetic long-haul approach provides a fruitful means of analysing the power processes surrounding urban projects. It facilitates the investigation of stakeholders and the processes that they are a part of within the planning system, and it expedites discernment of the subtleties, exchanges and patterns of urban development practices over the long-term. While the results of such research are not statistically generalisable, they do offer an analytical representation that is applicable to other new urban development projects in contemporary planning. Specifically, using the above approach enables the crafting of conceptualisations of a sequence of ongoing participation in project planning over time.

It is the aim in this chapter to demonstrate the benefits to both academic and practicing planners of employing a holistic qualitative methodology when seeking to understand complex urban changes. For the scholar, adapting the notion of a phronetic long-haul approach to urban research facilitates an integrated and rich understanding of context, experience and processes, while emphasising a practical reciprocity between researcher and researched. These elements have been mistakenly absent from many recent studies. The approach also offers practical advantages to practitioners and policy analysts by using a diversity of accounts to identify the breadth, nature and implications of local power relations, expediting the potential for reformation of power inequities. Attention to the detail of particular cases gives authentic insight into when and how to effect positive transformation.