

1.3 STRATEGIC PLANNING THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM ELSEWHERE¹

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Introduction

Strategic planning is composed of two important elements: the planning process (i.e. the plan to plan) and the substantive information regarding the context(s) and object(s) of planning (Steiner, 1997). While it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the two, in that one is a product of the other, this paper is primarily focused on the planning process.

This section explores and reviews many of the main concepts, issues and methods that underpin or are in-bedded within the generic strategic planning process. In so doing, it draws extensively and without apology from George Steiner's seminal book entitled *Strategic Planning: A step-by-step guide* (1997) in seeking to identify lessons of parallel significance for strategic spatial planning. Following on from the previous section, the paper begins with an examination of the fundamental meaning of strategic planning as employed in any complex planning exercise. It compliments Working Papers #2 and 3 and draws on strategic thinking from the world of the military (this being very much the origin of strategic thought), commerce and knowledge management and concludes by pointing to potential new avenues of planning thought and practice that more explicitly deal with decision-making in climates of uncertainty that emerge from recent corporate experiences.

What is strategic planning?

There is considerable diversity in the use of the term 'strategy'. Some include goals and objectives as part of a strategy, others make a firm distinction between the two (Quinn, 1995: 5). It is taken as read here that goals and objectives are an integral part of strategy-making and that strategic planning is *not* merely a process of forecasting and then determining what should be done to assure the fulfilment of these forecasts or the execution of a blueprint for the future (Steiner, 1997: 15). A strategy is instead, the plan that 'joins-up' major goals, policies and actions into a cohesive entity. 'A well-formulated strategy helps to marshal and allocate an organisation's resources into a unique and viable posture based on its relative internal competencies and shortcomings, anticipated changes in the environment (context) and contingent moves by intelligent opponents' (Quinn, 1995: 5).

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Military strategies

To make more sense of the meaning of ‘strategy’ we need to go to its roots in the Ancient Greek word – *strategos* – which means ‘a general’. The term strategy thus literally means ‘the art of the general’ and in this sense, strategies may be seen as offering ‘directional decisions’ that ‘provide purpose and missions to planned actions’ (Steiner, 1997: 348).

Military strategists, such as Von Clausewitz (1836) and Jomini (1838) (see Osgood, 2000), postulate that an effective strategy should concentrate on a few central principles that ‘can create, guide and maintain dominance despite the enormous frictions that occur as one tries to position or maneuver large forces in war’ (Quinn, 1995: 5). Here, ‘friction’ refers to uncertainties, errors, accidents, technical difficulties, the unforeseen and their effect on decisions, morale and actions (Shy, 1986). These include many of the Ancient Greek (Macedonian) principles of warfare, such as: ‘spirit or morale, surprise, cunning, concentration in space, dominance of selected positions, use of strategic reserves, unification over time, tension and release’ (Quinn, 1995: 9).

Stanger (2004) argues that military strategy teaches us that in certain circumstances (contexts), particular goals need to be achieved (sacrificed even) in order to gain other objectives. This implicit acknowledgement of a hierarchy of aims is inherent in all strategy formulation and planning exercises. He also claims that because war is chaotic by its very nature, the simpler the strategy, the more likely it is to succeed, and that the fewer in the command structure the less frequent the difference in interpretations of directives. Jomini (1838; Osgood, 2000) adds that military and diplomatic strategies should be bold, simple and clear but seek to always retain the initiative. (Also see Section 2.7 in Working Paper #2).

An appreciation of these different qualities of military strategy formulation provides essential insights into the fundamental parameters, nature and design of both formal and informal strategies for many other fields. According to Quinn (1995: 11) formal strategies should contain three essential elements: ‘the most important goals to be achieved; the most significant policies guiding or limiting actions; and the major action sequences that accomplish the defined goals’. He also insists that ‘effective’ strategies develop around selected concepts and thrusts that give them cohesion, balance and focus, with some thrusts being of a temporary nature and others carried through to the end of the strategy. Strategy deals with the unpredictable and the unknown, and acknowledges that ‘no analyst can predict the precise ways in which all impinging forces could interact with each other’ (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1970).

While military strategies offer an excellent framework for strategy formulation and appraisal in a variety of contexts and at different levels, Quinn warns that too often one encounters what are claimed to be strategies when in fact ‘they are little more than aggregates of philosophies or agglomerations of programmes ... (that) lack the cohesiveness, flexibility, thrust, sense of positioning against intelligent opposition and other criteria that historical analysis suggests effective strategies must contain’ (Quinn, 1995: 11).

Corporate strategies

Steiner takes a broader view of strategy formulation than that offered by the military and diplomats. Drawing from the corporate world, he refers to strategic planning as a formal planning process that involves ‘the systematic identification of opportunities

and threats that lay in the future, which in combination with other relevant data provide a basis for ... making better current decisions to exploit the opportunities and to avoid the threats' (Steiner, 1997: 13–14). He points out that in the business world the level of formality of the strategic planning processes varies according to the size of the organisation; so that the larger the organisation, the more formal the planning process typically employed, and the smaller the organisation the more ad hoc is the planning process used (see Section 2.9 in Working Paper #2). Interestingly, a number of large multi-national corporations such as IBM have recently argued in favour of using smaller units of production and employing 'looser strategies', claiming that these smaller groups yield higher levels of productivity (see Kurtz and Snowden, 2003); a position also supported by Gladwell (2003) and Surowiecki (2004).

Steiner presents formal strategic planning from four perspectives (1997: 13–15). From the perspective of the future, where 'planning deals with the futurity of current decisions ... and at the chain of cause-and-effect consequences over time of an actual or intended decision ... (so that) if what is seen ahead is not liked then planning presumes a capability to change these future events by looking at the alternative courses of action that are open'. As a systematic process, strategic planning 'begins with the setting of aims, a definition of strategies and policies to achieve them, and develops detailed plans to make sure that the strategies are implemented so as to achieve the ends sought'. This is then 'a process of deciding in advance what kind of planning effort is undertaken, when it is to be done, how it is to be done, who is going to do it, and what will be done with the results'. A strategy is systematic in the sense that it is organised and undertaken on a continuous basis. As a philosophy, in so far as strategic planning is a kind of 'attitude' that 'necessitates dedication to act on the basis of contemplation of the future ... a strategy is more of a thought process, an intellectual exercise, rather than a prescribed set of processes, procedures, structures, or techniques'. Finally, as a structure, a strategy exhibits a hierarchy of linked planned actions and major types of plans. These include: strategic plans, medium-range programmes, and short-range budgets and operating plans.

As indicated in the introduction to this paper, Steiner (1997: 18–20) also suggests that the premises of strategic planning are of two kinds: the plan to plan, and substantive information needed in the formulation and implementation of plans. The first can be said to be reflective of how a planning system works and is typically articulated in the form of guidance, whereas the latter is reflective of four other considerations which together constitute what may be called the 'situation (context) audit'. These include: a summary statement of the major outside interests to the plan; a summary statement of the expectations of major inside interests of the plan; a data base of past performance, current situation and forecasts of the object of the plan; and evaluations of the context of the plan, including its: opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses of the subject matter of the plan.

Building on the above premises, the formal strategic planning process thus proceeds from the formulation of a hierarchy of planning actions that includes basic mission (and vision) statements, a statement of purposes and (normative and operational) objectives, as well as policies for associated programmes of action. In addition to the above, other types of planning exercises typically incorporated in strategic plans include (1997: 32):

- **Project plans** – that may be described as detailed plans for specific undertakings which vary in their dimensions, time frame and resource base.

- **Contingency plans** – which are ‘associated with strategic plans but are not an integral part of them’ in that strategic plans are considered more probable, while contingency plans are associated with low probabilities of realisation. Contingency plans are developed more as a precaution to help management meet crises.
- **Scenario/exploratory planning** – which are concerned with ‘possible future combinations of events’ (see Section 1.2 of this Working Paper). While some scenarios overlap with the typical planning periods there is a tendency to develop them around distant time horizons. They are often employed to stimulate senior management thought about what could or might happen in the future; on other occasions, they represent the very basis of a strategic plan.
- **Management by objectives (MBO)** – which is a process where parties working with one another in complex organisations to ‘identify common goals and coordinate their efforts (and resources) toward achieving them’.

Steiner concludes that all the above need to be accompanied by annual monitoring processes as part of the implementation process and that the flows of information here are critical to the strategic planning process. While these will significantly differ according to which part of the planning process they serve, he emphasises that they will often be coloured by the values of senior management and policy-makers.

Spatial planning strategies

Spatial planning is a set of policies and tools of intervention at different levels and for different horizon dates, designed to assist the management of strategic change taking place within territories, their economies and societies, directed largely (but not exclusively) by the public sector. It is an exercise ostensibly undertaken in the public interest to protect civil society against failures of the market system, problems of unsustainable development and concerns of equity as they affect land use and the spatial distributions of activities in cities and regions. If we accept the European Spatial Planning Observation Network’s (ESPON) definition of spatial planning, it is moulded by goals of: economic and social cohesion, sustainable development, and coherence of the European continent (ESPON, 2005).

Spatial planning, seeks to bring the management of the spatial dimension of planning in the UK up to speed with an unprecedented pace and scale of social, technological, economic and political change (RTPI, 2001). It is a blueprint that is based on a core set of ideas, many of which draw directly from European experiences that present planning as:

- spatial – dealing with the unique needs and characteristics of places;
- sustainable – looking at the short, medium and long term issues;
- integrative – in terms of knowledge, objectives and actions involved; and
- inclusive – recognising the wide range of people involved in planning.

Perhaps the most thorough recent examination of the application of strategic thought to spatial planning that provides an invaluable critical overview is provided by Louis Albrechts in an article entitled ‘Strategic (Spatial) Planning Re-examined’ (2004). In this publication he explains that ‘solutions to complex problems (such as regional development challenges) depend on the ability to combine the creation of strategic (long term) visions with short-term actions’ (2004: 743). This does presume

the ability of government (or appointed/elected public sector agencies acting on its behalf) successfully to identify, design and deliver ‘shared futures’ that are capable of expression in spatial forms and agreed by major stakeholders. Herein, unhappily, often lies a level of expectation from those in industry and commerce in particular, that is unrealistic, especially if judged against the kind of (more controllable) criteria with which they are more familiar.

Spatial planning involve strategic processes of decision-making that are by their very nature, necessarily, more democratic and transparent. They are more difficult and more complex in character and often (therefore) slower to agree than their equivalent in the corporate and military worlds. This is in part because spatial planning typically involves a larger number of stakeholders, many of whom have unrealistic expectations of their views being taken into account. While this increased complexity, demand for accountability and resultant delay can reduce the sharpness of the strategic qualities of spatial planning these factors amplify the importance and need for strategic thought and expertise for a spatial plan to prove successful.

Reflecting on the challenges spatial planning faces generally and the experiences accumulated thus far, Albrechts sees spatial plans as strategic frameworks for action. Like Kunzmann (2000) and others, he views these plans as largely public-sector-led, and socio-spatial in terms advocated by Healey (1997b). He considers strategic spatial planning to be essentially ‘about building ideas (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998) and processes that can carry the ideas forward, and ways of organising and mobilising for the purpose of exerting influence in different arenas (Healey, 1997a; Albrechts, 2004: 747). Albrechts views spatial planning as a set of concepts, procedures and tools that may be tailor-made to specific contexts and circumstances, orientated to the achievement of different visions. While acknowledging that many planners may view this interpretation as too broad, he is adamant that there is ample evidence in planning literature that backs up this position.

Overcoming anti-planning bias

A challenge that strategic planning often encounters in many different contexts, whether in spatial planning or corporate planning, is that of an anti-planning bias, especially among those closely associated with booming free market developments and activities. To overcome this bias, whether in the corporate or public world, Steiner argues it is imperative that the planner understands its source and cause. Paraphrasing him (1997: 96–101), resistance to strategic planning (and thus the treatment of risk, uncertainty and complexity in decision-making for the future) emerges from one or more of the following:

- ***The alteration of relationships*** – brought about, for example, by the introduction of a new planning system into an organisation or within a planning framework for several organisations. This can contribute to the break-up of established groups and to the setting-up of new groups, as well as contribute to residual problems, including frustrations, misunderstandings and insecurities which although overtime may evaporate, can become chronic.
- ***The change of information flows, decision-making and power relationships*** – that create new decision-making patterns which inevitably introduce new information flows. This often changes power relationships and even resource allocations which in turn can bring a new apprehension about decision-making whether or not it introduces a more co-ordinated formal planning system.

- ***The highlighting of conflicts*** – brought about by new relationships and resource allocations created by the new strategic plan. These can pitch parties at different levels or in different areas of activity against each other in a bid to gain influence or access to resources under the new regime. The resultant conflicts can be transitional or become structural depending upon how well they are dealt with and the flexibility of the system to absorb them.
- ***The conflict between operational problems and planning efforts*** – created by the clash of influence between those in operations who have power and satisfaction acquired through their track record of effectively coping with operational problems, and the newly acquired influence of strategic planners. The fact that the latter typically have no equivalent track record and are looking into more long-term and speculative futures too often has strategic planning tasks perceived to be less important than resolving more short range operational problems.
- ***The new demands placed on (new) decision-makers*** – often generated by the introduction of strategic planning in contexts where it was previously either too weak or absent. The new perspective(s) brought in by strategic planning often demands different ways of perceiving and doing things that require a mastery of new concepts, methods and techniques, and a capability of thinking in both the short term and long run, as well as from the specific to the complex whole. There is typically a need to also be more intuitive and creative in problem solving rather than rely on old standardised approaches.
- ***The risk and fear of failure*** – is often increased by the introduction of strategic planning. This is because it involves ‘flirting with possible error’ and because wrong strategic choices can incur heavy penalties. Indeed, some parties associate planning with negative concerns of how to avoid error and buck-passing.
- ***The desire to avoid uncertainty*** – often generates a great deal of anxiety (and friction), especially for those more accustomed to achieving more finite goals and being in more control of outcomes. To be ‘strategic’ a plan needs to convey an understanding of how well a plan’s success might fair not knowing how its contexts might change. Strategic planning deals with this uncertainty in a variety of ways and on different levels; more often by the use of different scenarios; failure to do this means that it is *not* a ‘strategic’ plan. Finally, an important task of strategic plans is not only to confront uncertainty but to do this with ‘confidence. A fuller account of how this may be achieved follows immediately below.

Strategy formulation under conditions of uncertainty

Treatment of uncertainty in urban and regional planning

Citing traditional principles of strategic planning of the kind advocated by Mintzberg (1994) and Mason and Mitroff (1981), three McKinsey and Company consultants (Courtney, Kirkland and Viguerie) wrote in the Harvard Business Review some ten years later that ‘at the heart of the traditional approach to strategy lies the assumption that by applying a set of powerful analytical tools, executives can predict the future of any business accurately enough to allow them to choose a clear strategic decision’, whereas, in environments of uncertainty at levels so high that no amount of such analysis allows confident predictions, a totally new approach is needed (Courtney *et al.*, 1999: 1).

This very significant call for greater sensitivity in the treatment of uncertainty (and risk) in strategic planning is today emerging from a number of quarters. It derives from the widespread appreciation that we now live in an increasingly fast-changing world arising from many new technological and globalisation forces. The fact that these changes are so dramatic makes the experience of the corporate world in undertaking strategic planning potentially very valuable for the more public-sector orientated field of strategic and regional planning if any parallels can be established (also see Section 2.9 in Working Paper#2). Before attempting to draw out any lessons, however, a brief historical review follows of the treatment of uncertainty and risk in urban and regional planning in UK since World War II drawn from previous research conducted by the author (Dimitriou, 2005).

As indicated in Section 1.2, during the post-war period, up to say the mid 1970s, uncertainty as a concept and risk-taking as an outcome did not feature greatly in planning in Britain. This was a period when uncertainties were seen to have been dissipated by a combination of knowledge and power (Benveniste, 1970) and where planning projects were conceived and implemented by professionals more confident of their capabilities and expertise. Acknowledged uncertainties were seen to have been prematurely transformed and diffused by planning procedures and techniques, whereas in reality, they merely postponed risk-taking and latent conflicts (Christensen, 1983).

While a certain amount of attention was drawn to the issue of uncertainty in the context of strategic planning and corporate planning in 1970s (see Friend and Jessop, 1969; Edison, 1975), it was during the 1980s that uncertainty, and responses to it, came to be more systematically studied in physical and spatial planning (Hall, 1980). During that period, the procedural school of 'strategic choice' further developed planning methodologies and techniques for decision-makers to cope with uncertainty (Friend and Hickling, 1987; 2005). Others in response argued for an adjustment of planning aspirations and techniques to accommodate the existence of uncertainty rather than seek to bypass or hide it (see Christensen, 1983) in a manner more akin to the approach presented by Courtney *et al.* (1999) below.

Subsequent attempts better to understand and respond to uncertainty and complexity have sought to reduce the risks to which projects (rather than plans) are exposed. These are based on the premise that this can be achieved by means of increasing the knowledge of the project 'content' and (more especially) 'context', and then identify scarce resources to resolve uncertainty. These 'knowledge-generating responses' to uncertainty, of the kind outlined by Steiner (1997) and Mason and Mitroff (1981) seek to fill the gap between 'present knowledge' and 'future information' required to fulfil a project's objectives. They typically depend on the use of sophisticated dynamic prediction models and seek to manage uncertainty by exploring simulated performance in relation to a series of possible scenarios.

Numerous policy analysts have since been engaged in making uncertainty the focus of their research, on the assumption that uncertainty is the norm rather than the exception (Dror, 1986; Innes, 1990; Beck, 1992, 1999; Lash *et al.*, 1998; Courtney *et al.*, 1999). As we entered the 21st century, more attention had also been given to the impacts on uncertainty and risk-taking arising from changing forces of globalisation (Castells, 1991, 1996, 2004; Held *et al.*, 1999; Beck 2000; Seitz, 2002). This is especially significant as some see the world as only just now being 'tipped over' into being composed of agencies operating at a global scale rather than by predominantly national governments (Shaw, 2003). This has major impacts on regional planning and spatial development throughout the world. It is imperative that an understanding of

these circumstances and developments is acquired for effective strategic spatial planning and regional development.

Coping with different types and levels of uncertainty

Returning to the corporate world and the work of Courtney et al. (1999), they claim that present-day environments (contexts) of high uncertainty require the abandonment of the traditional binary view of the concept, where uncertainty is either underestimated or overestimated, and where analysis is sometimes even abandoned. The new approach they advocate offers a useful framework which explicitly helps policy-makers decide which analytical tools can inform decision making under uncertainty and which cannot.

It begins by differentiating among four levels of uncertainty (see Figure 1), and within this, presents three generic strategies that can be used in each level. The four levels of uncertainty include (after Courtney *et al.*, 1999: 4–5) also cited in Section 1.2 of this Working Paper:

- **Level 1** – which represent most likely outcomes based on clear trends that can help define potential demand for products and services;
- **Level 2** – which include currently unknown outcomes but knowable in the future assuming that the right analysis is undertaken of performance attributes for current developments that are predictable to certain levels of confidence;
- **Level 3** – which incorporate currently unknown but not entirely unknowable variables on the premise that there are certain performance attributes for current technologies, and trends in stable conditions that reveal these; and
- **Level 4** – which represent ‘residual uncertainty outcomes’ that reflect the uncertainty that remains after the best possible analysis has been conducted and/or as a result of incomplete/inconclusive developments.

The last category, deemed by the authors to pose the highest risks, can be further sub-categorised into four situations. Situations representing a ‘clear-enough’ future that enables planners to develop a single forecast that is precise enough for strategy development; those requiring consideration of alternative futures whereby the future may be seen as one of a few discrete alternate scenarios²; those warranting an examination of a range of potential futures defined by a limited number of key variables with an ‘actual’ outcome lying on an identified known continuum but with no discrete scenarios³; and those representing the state of ‘true ambiguity’ where multiple dimensions of uncertainty interact to create a context that is virtually impossible to predict. Unlike Level 3, the range of potential outcomes here cannot be identified, let alone scenarios within that range. Courtney *et al.* explain that not only is the last level in reality rare but over time tends to move toward one of the other levels. They claim that at least fifty per cent of all strategy problems in the corporate world fall within Levels 2 and 3, with most of the remainder falling within Level 1. The most uncertain of contexts – where true ambiguity is believed to exist – is the rarest of situations, albeit on the increase (1999: 6–11).

² What is most important here, is that some, if not all, elements of the strategy would change if the outcome were predictable.

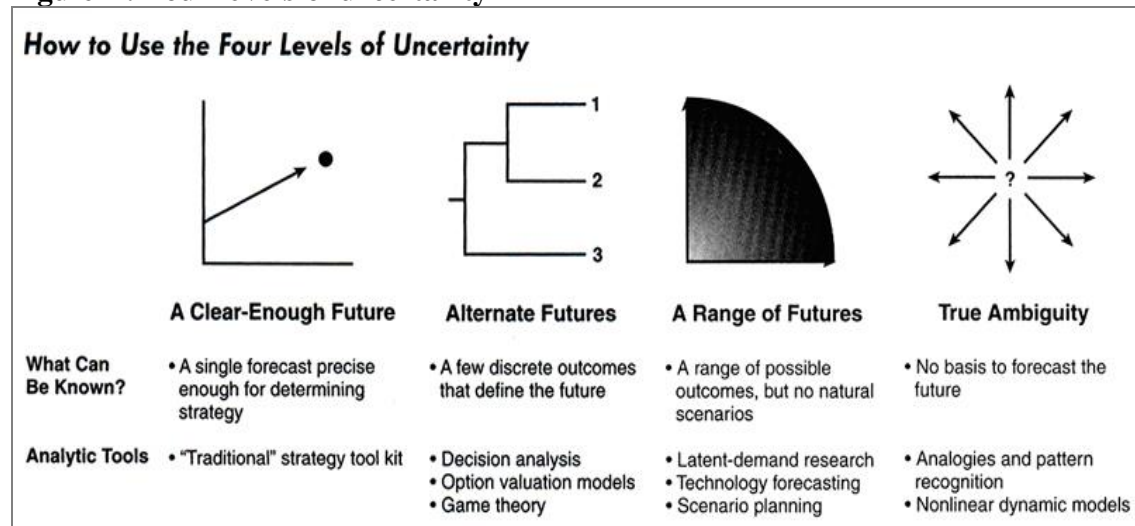
³ As in level 2, some, and possibly all, elements of the strategy would change if the outcome were predictable.

The conclusion then is that different strategic planning exercises warrant different types of approaches, depending on the level of uncertainty (and risk) reflected in their decision-making and their decision-making contexts. The fact that most current planning practices both in the corporate and public sector worlds, including spatial planning for regional development, fail to recognise this but instead pursue strategies that are more suited to Levels 1 (and maybe Level 2), represents one of the most significant obstacles to effective strategic planning. Aspects of this are further alluded to in the Baghai *et al.*'s (1999) who highlight three horizons of sustainable growth (see Section 3.7 in Working Paper #3).

Responding to the above identified situations (contexts), the McKinsey Consultants offer three strategic postures for strategic planning (see Figure 2); where 'posture defines the intent of a strategy relative to the current and future state of any industry' (or region in the case of regional planning). They include postures that:

- **Shape the future** – where strategies are about creating new opportunities either by shaking-up relatively stable 'level 1 activities' or by attempting to control the direction of the market in circumstances with higher levels of uncertainty;
- **Adapt the future** – where planners take the existing situation and its future evolutions as given, and adapt strategies to react to the opportunities that the market offers; and
- **Reserve the right to play** – which is a special form of adapting, and relevant only to levels 2 and 4 of uncertainty, that involves the making of investments step-by-step in an attempt to place an operation in an advantageous position (Courtney *et al.*, 1999: 15–17).

Figure 1: Four levels of uncertainty



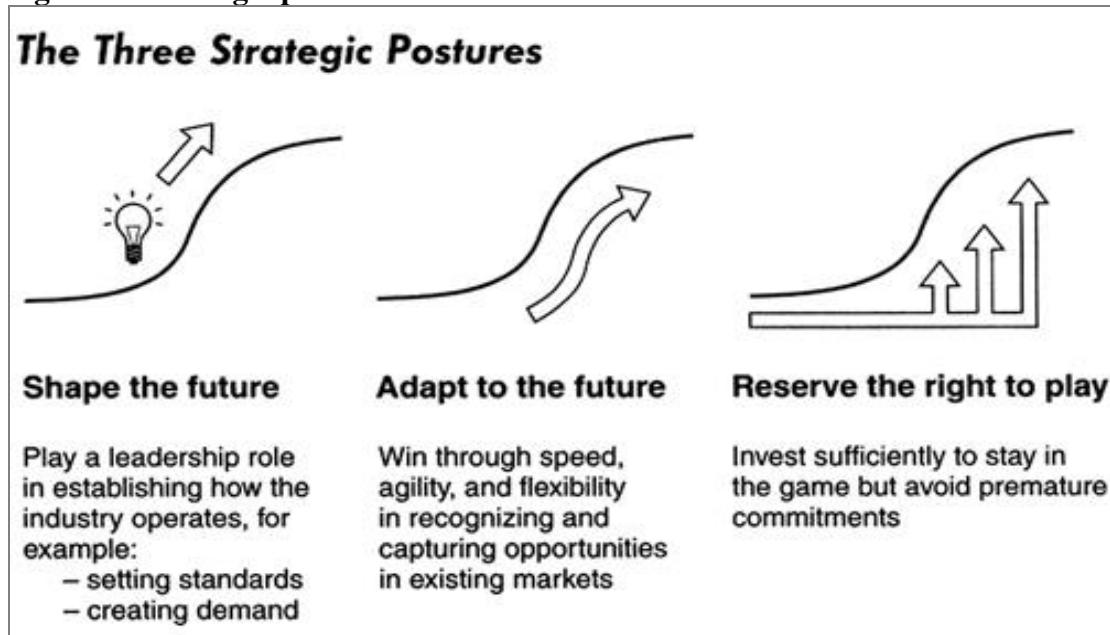
Source: Courtney *et al.*, 1999: 6–7

Courtney *et al.* then identify three types of 'moves' that can be employed to implement a strategy as part of a portfolio of actions in a climate of uncertainty (see Figure 3). These include:

- **Big bet moves** – which are major commitments to strategies, such as large investments or major acquisitions. Not unusually, shaping strategies typically involve making 'big bets' whereas adapting and reserving the right to play postures do not.

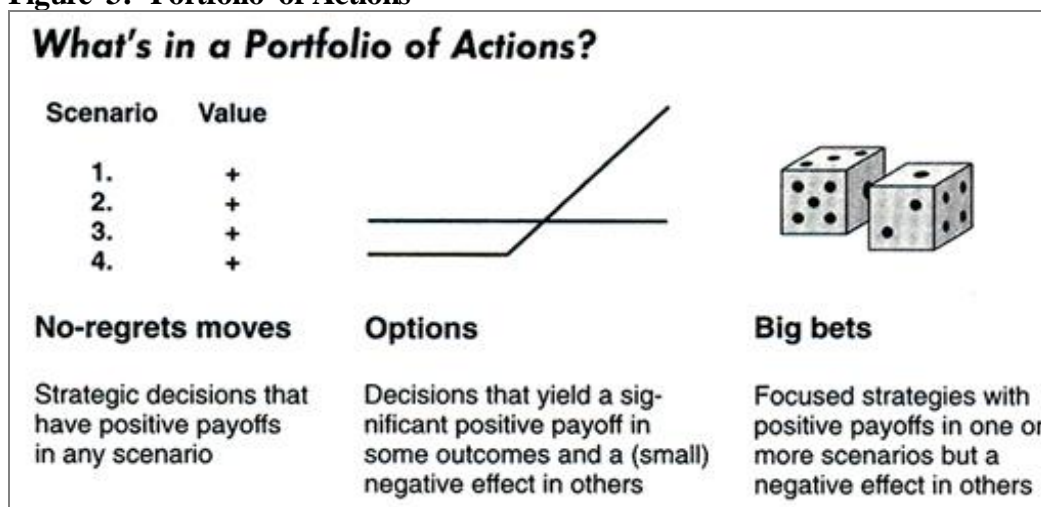
- **Option moves** – which are designed to tie-down the major pay-offs of the best case scenarios, while minimising losses in the worst-case scenarios. Those reserving the right to play posture rely heavily on options, although shapers also use them.
- **No-regret moves** – which are destined to ‘pay-off’ no matter what transpires. These include initiatives that reduce costs in highly uncertain contexts, taking strategic decisions like investing in capacity in advance of a market and the decision to enter certain markets in advance of them becoming apparent to competitors (1999: 18).

Figure 2: Strategic postures



Source: Courtney *et al.*, 1999: 16

Figure 3: Portfolio of Actions



Source: Courtney *et al.*, 1999: 18

The choice of strategic posture and accompanying follow-up portfolio of strategic actions outlined here are almost entirely reliant upon the level of uncertainty confronted/addressed by the strategy. In this way, the four levels of uncertainty assist in helping provide a framework for designing an appropriate strategy for any given situation.

Planning as learning

Through the use of scenario planning, Shell International has done much to highlight the importance of strategic planning as a learning process (GBN, 2004). The company has even argued that strategic planning is ultimately more valuable as a learning process than a plan-making one. The basis of this claim is explained by de Geus first in his book *The Living Company* (1997) and later in the *Harvard Business Review* (1999). It rests on the belief that the key to adaptability of any organisation to continuous change is the institutional learning process it acquires over time 'replete with switches from expansion to self-preservation and back again to growth'. Institutional learning in this context refers to the 'process whereby management teams change their shared mental modes of their company, their markets, and their competitors' (de Geus, 1999: 52–53); clearly, the labels would need to change for application to the public sector.

The lessons of the above for strategic planning for regional development in the UK is immense given the waxing and waning of national and regional economies in the country over the years, and the dramatically different emphasis placed by respective governments on regional planning efforts (see Chapters 2, 3 and 7). In the business world, it has estimated that for 'every successful turnaround there is two ailing companies that fail to recover' (de Geus, 1999: 54). If one was to conduct a similar analysis of the performance of regional development and planning agencies in the UK, the rate of failure of 'turnaround' could be very much higher. An important institutional question that needs to be asked (and answered) here is why are some organisations better able to survive than others?

In de Geus' *Harvard Business Review* publication he reminds us that it is pain that makes people and living systems change, although he also points out that 'pain management' (crisis management) is a 'dangerous way to manage change' (1999: 54). He warns that crisis situations typically offer little time and few options to resolve problems, and that the deeper one is in crisis the fewer options to resolve them remain. Having said this, it is clear that one of the positive attributes of crisis management is its speedy decision-making but the track management of crisis management is not good.

Ultimately, it is best then to acknowledge and react to change before crisis points are reached. The most effective way to do this, de Geus argues, is for those involved in planning to be continuously engaged in a learning process both about the context of strategic planning and the planning process itself. This requires, however, managers and decision-makers to review and change their own mental models on a continuous basis and to be willing to enter into joint amendments to their models as they dialogue and learn from past experience. The difficulty here is that the speed of this (institutional) learning process is often too slow for 'a world in which the ability to learn faster than competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage'. The issue then is not whether a company will learn but 'whether it will learn fast and early enough, and how institutional learning can be accelerated? De Geus adds a very significant rider to this conclusion. He makes it very clear that 'the only relevant

learning in a company is the learning done by those people who have the power to act' and this does not typically include the planner (1999: 55–56).

The method employed by Shell to trigger institutional learning is by the use of scenarios that include some 'out of the box' models of the future, i.e. scenarios not within the normal probability range of expectancy) (Shell International, 2003). Their use enables the development of mental models of what could happen to be extended and changed, with planners taking on the role of facilitator, catalyst and accelerator of the learning process. There are, however, according to de Geus (1999: 57) several potential pitfalls of this approach that need to be taken into account. Firstly, planners sometimes start with a mental model that is unrecognisable to those whom they seek to influence. Secondly, they often take too many steps at once, and in so doing lose credibility among those they seek to influence. Finally, planners also have a tendency to communicate their information and guidance through instruction rather than persuasion.

Perhaps the most significant of all observations made by de Geus is that because planners do not typically hold the same level of influence in the boardroom as they do in the seminar room, it is of utmost importance that the institutional learning is completed well before the board meeting at which key strategic planning decisions are made. The failure to do this has major negative ramifications where (as in spatial planning) the institutional learning exercise needs to take place not only within one agency but in association/partnership with a wider range of stakeholders in the community.

Pitfalls in strategic planning

The perils of strategic planning highlighted by Steiner (1972) on the basis of findings of a survey conducted more than 30 years ago in the corporate world still resonate today. A common error is senior management delegating the entire planning function and to assume that a simple linear extrapolation of past data will provide acceptable forecasts for the future (Steiner, 1997: 287–298). Drawing from the same survey results, he identifies four sub-groups of strategic planning pitfalls. These relate to: getting started; misunderstanding the nature of strategic planning; undertaking strategic planning; and using strategic plans (1997: 290–292). While Steiner's list pertain to pitfalls of strategic planning in a corporate world those involved in strategic planning in the public realm will not find it difficult closely to identify with these shortcomings.

The tendency for many public sector planning agencies to declare broad long term goals and promise sustainable visions of development that fail to translate into meaningful operational targets can add to the problem by generating frustration among those less sympathetic to the complexities of the situation and who expect more immediate 'solutions'.

The failure of top management to communicate their confidence in strategic thinking to lower management tiers can unwittingly undermine the capability of an organisation to think both long-term and short-term, and to link strategy to tactics. 'Line managers at low levels in an organisation will not spend time on projects that they do not believe top management is thoroughly committed to doing' (1997: 293). The spread of this lack of belief in strategic planning can be reinforced by high levels of bureaucracy associated with planning legislation and the complicated planning procedures that must be followed. These circumstances can stifle flexibility spontaneity and creativity in plan-making in problem-solving and kill-off many of the

important pre-conditions of good strategic planning. Situations become even more problematic if a lack of commitment to strategic planning infects both the communities and private sector interests the planning system is intended to serve. We have witnessed aggressive calls by various vested interests for the further dismantling of planning legislation (and the planning process) and the introduction of more speedy market-led solutions. Which carry the potential danger of less equitable outcomes.

The new dynamics of strategy

Order, rational choice and execution

The last decade has seen the gestation of another highly significant approach to strategy. In the realm of large corporate players, in some quarters, there has arisen a degree of disillusionment with highly centralised strategy formulation. IBM is a prime example. In the late 1990's the operation moved to the promotion of smaller decentralised units in its corporate global strategy. Simultaneously it recognised that excessively tight and formal strategic planning based on large organisational units can often suffocate innovative thinking – a conclusion that seems likely to have significant implications for a wider spectrum of strategic planning.

Influential in this radical shift was an internal research-arm within IBM which was originally founded to promote knowledge management within the corporation (also see Section 2.10 in Working Paper#3). Its locus of competence expanded into the development of a new strategic planning paradigm displacing the preoccupation with scenario planning approaches (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003). That team became known as The *Cynefin* Centre for Organisational Complexity, and on divesting itself from IBM, it subsequently became Cognitive Edge. Its past director, Snowden, challenged three basic assumptions that underpin the formal strategic planning process in the corporate world. These are the assumptions of: the necessity for order, the practice of rational choice decision-making, and the ability to execute intentional capability.

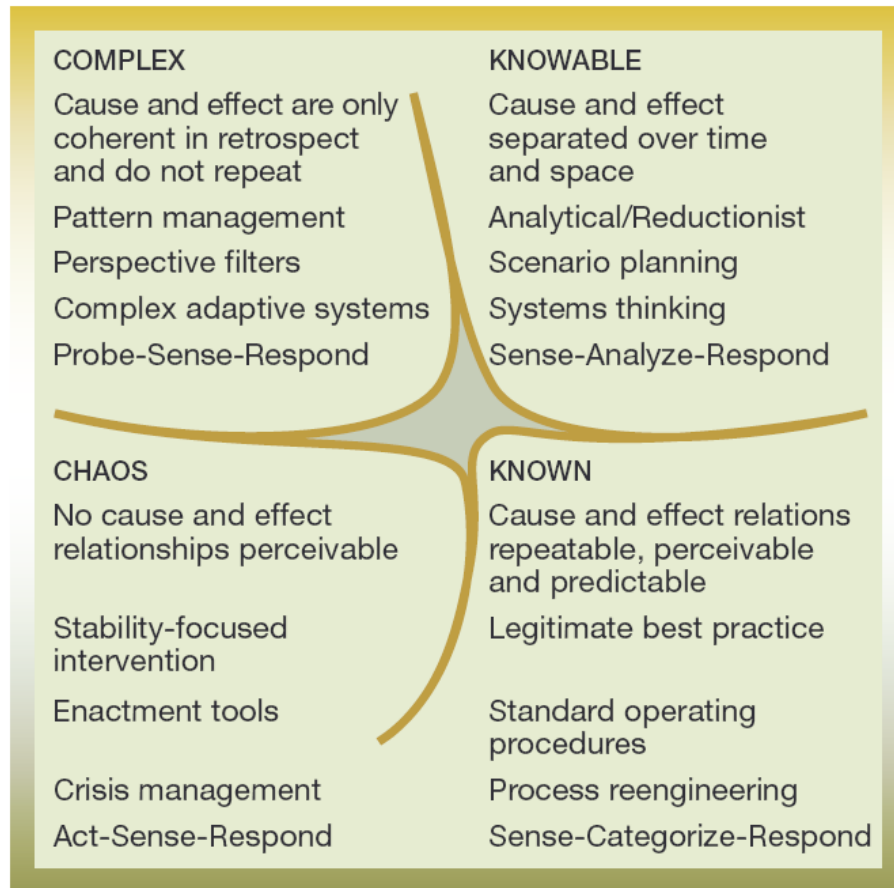
Snowden (2004) argues that the decision-maker operating amidst complexity requires two things: an appreciation of the concept of 'complexity' as the *context* of decision-making; and a 'sense-making' capability in order to understand the complexity of the decision-making environment. He has directly addressed that requirement by developing a 'sense-making' framework intended to provide decision-makers enhanced capabilities to better understand a wide spectrum of unspecified problems. The main value of the framework is to help decision-makers 'consider the dynamics of situations, decisions, perspectives, conflicts, and changes in order to come to a consensus for decision-making under uncertainty' (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003: 6–7).

The starting point of the *Cynefin* Framework is contextual. There has been a hundred years of management science and consultancy based on Newtonian physics and Taylorist principles. The application of machine metaphors to the firm, such as process re-engineering has brought significant gains, however, Snowden and his team advocate that it and other methods went astray when they were deployed to tackle things beyond the boundaries for which they were designed. According to Snowden, a strategy for a system which is inherently complex necessitates completely different management and planning methods: a framework that is drawn from the science of complex adaptive systems and knowledge management which powerfully encapsulates the issues of decision making under uncertainty (see Figure 4).

The Cynefin framework

The *Cynefin* model illustrated in Figure 4 (and elaborated in Table 1) divides into the right side ‘directed order’ (or simply ‘order’) which includes the known and knowable quadrants; and the left side ‘emergent order’ (or ‘un-order’) which incorporates the complex and chaotic. Each has its own distinct dynamic, analytical method, diagnostic method, intervention approach, and set of supporting tools and technologies.

Figure 4: The Cynefin Framework



Source: Kurtz and Snowden, 2003

In the ‘known quadrant’, cause-and-effect relationships are defined and are often predictable. In that domain, incoming data is sensed and responded to in predetermined categories/events. This is the legitimate domain of standard operating procedures and best forecasting practices, which only work when there is a directly understood relationship between cause-and-effect. The ‘knowable space’ is the systems thinking quadrant. Here there are cause-and-effect relationships, but there are a great many of them. They are separated over time and space, and to discover and understand them, may require a great deal of time and resources. There is here a heavy dependence on experts. In strategy formulation this is where scenarios come into play. In both of these cases, the assumption is that, given the data, there is a discoverable cause-and-effect chain, which is empirically verifiable and repeatable. Repeatability is the heart of empirical science and the basic assumption of most

management science. In the ‘complex domain’, cause-and-effect relationships exist, but they are inherently unpredictable and *only* coherent in retrospect. That is in part how they are identified. In the ‘complex space’ there are cause-and-effect relationships but they are ‘unknowable’ because they are constantly changing and shifting. These cannot be broken down and thus have to be viewed from very many different directions/perspectives. Decisions here need to be based on the emergence of patterns but steps have to be taken to reveal the patterns within the space (see Section 2.10 in Working Paper #2). The final domain is ‘chaotic’. Here there are no cause-and-effect relationships whatsoever. There is no point in analysing, probing or categorizing observations. Instead, action is needed to impose will on the space in order to structure it. Complexity Theory (seemingly) implies, however, that a disturbance to the system may trigger interactions that activate an attractor and bring about a new emergent order as discussed in Section 1.2 of this Working Paper.

Response models and emerging order

It is evident that different types of situations (contexts) will require different blends of techniques with which to analyse and make good strategic decisions in the treatment of risk and uncertainty for complex problem-solving. The four spaces and their appropriate response models identified by the *Cynefin* framework include (after Kurtz and Snowden, 2003):

- Known sense-categorise–response models;
- Knowable sense–analyse–response models;
- Complex probe–sense–response models; and
- Chaotic action–based –response models.

The need here is to understand and know how to distinguish between these models in different decision situations (contexts), and to select and deploy the appropriate tools and techniques for these circumstances. These are plentiful and familiar in the ‘known’ and ‘knowable’ domains; they are however relatively rare and unfamiliar in the ‘complex’ and ‘chaotic’ domains.

There is a potential pitfall in the temptation to assume that everything is ‘complex’. It would be a mistake to move from a position of saying ‘all things are ordered’ to one of saying ‘all things are un-ordered’ (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003). In reality, things are both ordered and un-ordered at once, and they interact with each other. The value in separating order and un-order is to enable us to understand the different dynamics in operation. In real life, they are found side-by-side. It is not unusual, for example to find organisations with formal command structures and informal trust networks running alongside each other (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003).

In their seminal work, Kurtz and Snowden believe that strategic planning assumptions of order incorrectly presume that there are *always* explainable underlying relationships between cause-and-effect in human interactions and markets that enable, ultimately, the production of prescriptive and predictive interventions (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003). They claim that planning assumptions of rational choice, based for example on minimising costs or maximising benefits, erroneously imply a capability that collective behaviour can be successfully managed by ‘sticks and carrots’, and disseminated through formal education/information networks. They also suggest that assumptions of intellectual capability within the planning process wrongly presume its acquisition automatically leads to an intention of its use, and that decisions and

actions taken by competitors, populations, governments, communities, etc. are the result of intentional collective behaviour rather than *ad hoc* happenings.

As disciples of both Complexity Theory and Chaos Theory, Kurtz and Snowden see no directional or designer in control of all change. This was a point also raised by Section 1.2 of this Working Paper. They instead recognise the development of phenomena that in certain circumstances ‘emerge’ and evolve without apparent direction through the interaction of many entities over time and space, to create an ‘emergent order’ that is more organic than mechanical in nature. This ‘light touch’ contrasts greatly with the deployment of elaborate planning systems using extensive computing power to simulate complex patterns of behaviour, population movements, traffic flows, land use interactions and so on, as used by many public sector planning agencies in the past. Kurtz and Snowden maintain that these elaborate strategic planning tools are valuable *only* in certain contexts and not in others, and that the basis for deciding which approach is applicable depends very much on the ‘sense-making’ of the context in which the planning is to be undertaken.

The essence then of the *Cynefin* approach is that not only should strategic planning incorporate sense-making of the context of a planning exercise, but also that planners should become more aware of the complexity of these planning contexts by differentiating between ‘directed order’ and ‘emergent order’. Kurtz and Snowden (2003) believe that strategic planning assumptions of order incorrectly presume that there are always explainable underlying relationships between cause-and-effect in human interactions and markets that enable, ultimately, the production of prescriptive and predictive interventions. They further argue that planning assumptions of rational choice, based for example on minimising costs or maximising benefits (see Heap *et al.*, 1992), erroneously imply a capability that collective behaviour can be successfully managed and disseminated through formal education/information networks. They furthermore suggest that assumptions of intellectual capability within the planning process wrongly presume its acquisition automatically leads to an intention of its use, and that choices, decisions and actions taken by competitors, populations, governments, communities, etc. are the result of intentional collective behaviour rather than *ad hoc* happenings.

This new approach is of radical significance for strategic spatial planning and the treatment of risk for complex problem-solving in climates of high uncertainty. It emphasises the inextricable link between a strategic planning process and the contexts to which it is applied. Over time, this relationship can generate new contextual outcomes that call for different planning approaches not perhaps previously considered. In this regard, the division between the planning process and the planning context is ultimately artificial in that the one inevitably interacts with the other, with challenges of complexity, uncertainty and risk-taking prevailing throughout. On the other hand, the import and dynamics of ‘context’ provides the level and nature of uncertainty that spawns the risks that need to be addressed and taken.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the broad scope of the above discussion, and on occasions its complexity, there are certain generic lessons regarding the strategic planning process that offer invaluable insights and conclusions for the spatial planner engaged in strategic spatial planning. These are summarised (in no particular order) as follows:

- ***Strategic planning contains both ‘the plan to plan’, and the substantive information needed in the formulation and implementation of plans*** – the process and the content.
- ***A strategy marshals and allocates an organisation’s resources into a unique and viable posture*** based on its relative internal competencies, concentrating on a few central principles that can create, guide and maintain dominance despite the frictions it may encounter.
- ***No analyst can predict the precise ways in which forces interact*** with each other in pre-analysis for strategy-making.
- ***Complex strategic planning tools are valuable only in certain contexts***; the basis for deciding which approach is best suited to what circumstances depends on the ‘sense-making’ of the context in which planning is to be undertaken. Different strategic planning exercises warrant different types of approaches, depending on the level of uncertainty (and risk) reflected in their decision-making and their decision-making context.
- ***Strategic planning must be capable of differentiating between ‘directed order’ and ‘emergent order’*** where the latter is often attributed to cultural factors, ‘inspired leadership and/or ‘gut feelings and recognising the benefits of the use of both at the appropriate time/place.
- ***Uncertainties in strategic planning can no longer be seen as being dissipated by a combination of knowledge and power***, i.e. by increasing the knowledge of the project ‘content’ and ‘context’, and then identifying scarce resources to resolve the uncertainties. Strategic planning must be engaged in greater sensitivity analysis of risks and uncertainties. There is a growing number of new strategic policy analysts that now place uncertainty (and risk) in the milieu of their research, on the assumption that uncertainty is the norm rather than the exception.
- ***Planning and planning projects in the past were conceived and implemented by professionals more confident of their capabilities and expertise than today***. No longer can uncertainties be seen as being diffused by planning procedures and techniques for what this does in reality is to merely postponed risk-taking and creation of latent conflicts.
- ***There is a tendency for public sector planning agencies to declare broad long term goals and promise visions of development that fail*** to easily translate into meaningful operational targets. This adds to the frustration of those who expect immediate ‘solutions’.
- ***It is common for top management to mistakenly communicate to its lower management tiers its lack of confidence in strategic thinking***. This can unwittingly undermine the capability of an organisation to think long-term and short-term, and link strategy to tactics.
- ***Much of the lack of trust in strategic planning arises from the high levels of bureaucracy associated with government planning legislation and the complicated planning procedures*** it often insists must be followed. These can engender a lack of flexibility and an absence of looseness and simplicity in plan-making which excessively restrain creativity in problem-solving.
- ***When the lack of belief in strategic planning infects the communities and private sector*** interests the planning system is intended to serve, the resultant cynicism and distrust can lead to aggressive calls by vested interests for the further dismantling of planning legislation and the introduction of more market-led solutions with potentially less equitable outcomes.

- *The larger the organisation, the more formal the strategic planning process tends to be*, and yet excessively tight and formal strategic planning based on large organisational units can often suffocate innovative thinking.
- *The formal strategic planning process can be challenged in terms of their assumptions of the necessity for order*, the practice of rational choice decision-making, and the ability to execute intentional capability.
- *To understand an event or an entity one must consider ‘ordered’ as well as ‘un-ordered’ factors* as certain phenomena emerge in circumstances almost organically without direction to create ‘emergent order’. Planners should become more aware of the complexity of the differing planning contexts and differentiate between ‘directed order’ and ‘emergent order’.
- *Elaborate planning systems are only valuable in certain contexts*. They are especially ineffectual in contexts associated with emergent order and when it comes to managing people and knowledge.

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