

Planning Procedures and Decision Making – the Viennese Experience

by Johannes Gielge, urban planner, City of Vienna

Vienna has been involved in the PROSPECTS¹ research project as one of six “Core Cities” and was examined in one of its four case studies. Therefore it is not necessary to present the strategic planning approaches of Vienna in the context of this workshop. Instead, I shall rather add some personal remarks on my experience of the Viennese situation, which may also underline the importance of the present results and indicate the direction of further research needed.

(1) Sustainable development – a matter of good planning procedures?

During the last decades, Vienna has often been in the forefront of environmentally friendly policies, e.g. regarding waste treatment and recycling, district-heating and energy saving through efficient isolation of buildings, the use of alternative fuel etc. Regarding land use planning and housing policy, the focus on urban renewal has contributed to keeping the lively urban atmosphere of the core city, which is attracting not only tourists but also new inhabitants and enterprises. At the same time, the historical green belt of the Vienna woods has been supplemented by large recreational areas like the new Danube island in the 1980ies, or the National Park of the Danube wetlands in 1996. As far as transport is concerned, the share of car trips is much lower than in most European cities (except Zurich), and has been reduced further during the last decade. So, there is no doubt that some of the most important decisions have in fact been favourable to the environment.

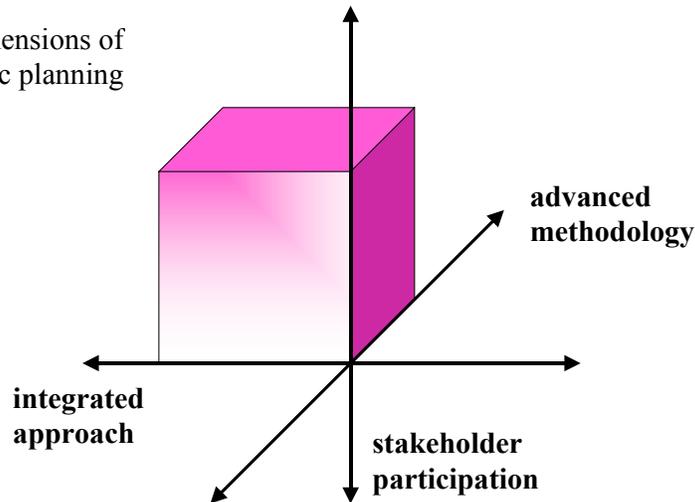
However, most of these decisions were not the result of a stringent planning process with a logical structure. I would rather say that public awareness of environmental issues and political priority for social improvements were decisive. Moreover, all this happened in a favourable context for implementation: economic growth and solid public budgets, a high degree of market regulation and public ownership, a stable government able and willing to act - and enough time for decisions because of the lack of rapid changes. Today, the task is to obtain decisions for sustainable development under more difficult circumstances. Therefore, my first question is whether even the very best planning procedures can compensate for the lack of basic conditions and for differing political priorities. On the other hand, if planning procedures can contribute to favourable decisions for sustainable development, this is of increasing interest just now.

¹ Procedures for Recommending Optimal Sustainable Planning of European City Transport Systems, Community Research funded under the European Commission’s Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development Programme

(2) Integrated approaches – a key to sustainable development ?

In the PROSPECTS guidebook², planning procedures are characterised by several aspects: some are related to **methodology** (i.e. the logical structure and its elements, starting with goals and problems of development, alternative scenarios, predicted impacts of proposed measures, indicators and monitoring of the real change), some concern the comprehensiveness of planning (**integration** of all aspects of spatial development, e.g. through integration of transport and land use planning), and some are linked to the degree of **participation** and involvement of stakeholders.

Fig. 1: Three dimensions of quality in strategic planning



In all three dimensions, progress is recommended, so one could conclude that an integrated approach combined with good methodology and a high degree of stakeholder participation would result in a high quality of proposals and encourage implementation. I now want to characterise strategic planning in Vienna according to these 3 dimensions.

In Vienna, we have an integration of strategic land use and traffic planning at the institutional level (see **fig. 2**). My own department is responsible for both the Urban Development Plan³ and the Vienna Traffic Concept⁴. Its new edition, the so-called Transport Master Plan⁵, will be completed this year. Besides these two planning documents, which focus on improvements of the transport infrastructure and on measures to influence the traffic demand, two further action programmes concern the field of traffic policy: one is called “traffic management” and deals with the organisation of traffic flows, the other is called “programme for climate protection” and contains technical measures to reduce fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions.

² Developing Sustainable Urban Land Use and Transportation Strategies – A Decision Makers Guidebook, 2003

³ STEP 1994 (Stadtentwicklungsplan für Wien); Beiträge zur Stadtforschung, Stadtentwicklung und Stadtgestaltung, Nr. 53, Vienna 1994

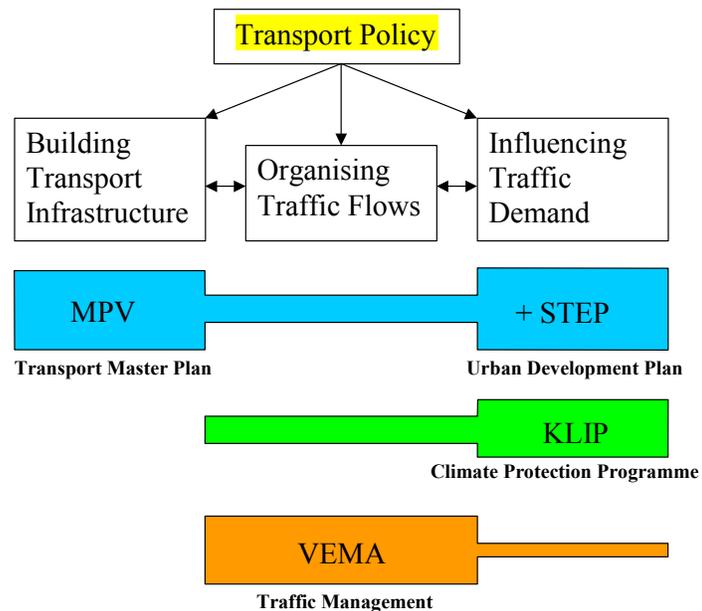
⁴ Verkehrskonzept Wien 1994, Teil 9: Generelles Maßnahmenprogramm; Beiträge zur Stadtforschung, Stadtentwicklung und Stadtgestaltung, Nr. 52, Vienna 1994

⁵ MPV (Masterplan Verkehr Wien), Positionspapier; Werkstattberichte Nr. 43, Vienna 2002

Fig. 2: Strategic Concepts and Action Programmes concerning...

Leading City Departments:

- 18 – Urban Development and (Strategic) Planning
- 22 – Environmental Protection + task force «MD-KLI»
(Chief Exec. Office for the Coordination of Climate Protection Measures)
- 46 – Traffic Organisation



The two action programmes are headed by other parts of the city administration, but all four documents are largely compatible and support each other.

However, when it comes to implementation, not all proposals contained in these strategic concepts and programmes are carried out (because of various barriers investigated in your research project). As a rule, small projects contained in the action programmes tend to be carried out successfully, but they have little impact on the overall development. At the other end of the spectrum, i.e. when it comes to “big issues” such as urban sprawl and regional competition, almost no improvements are achieved, although a whole range of proposals concerning the legal framework and financial incentives (subsidies and taxes) are well-known and recommended by experts at any possible occasion. In the middle of the range are all measures concerning public infrastructure, e.g. extensions of the transportation networks. In this field, proposals are frequently followed by implementation, but... strategic planning is not the only source of proposals. Every institution (e.g. ministries or state-owned companies) responsible for the construction, operating or finance of transport infrastructure has its own ideas about network development and priorities, and these ideas are sometimes laid down in documents differing from Viennese strategic planning. This leads us directly to the question of participation.

(3) Consensus oriented procedures – a key to sustainable development ?

In principle, all strategic concepts are elaborated with active participation of the interested stakeholders. For example, the content of the current Transport Master Plan is determined by several mixed working groups and discussed at workshops which include not only representa-

tives of all relevant parts of the city administration, but also from federal ministries or outsourced administrations (e.g. for highway construction), publicly owned transport companies and interest groups like the chambers of commerce and industry. What is more, public debates are even organised at district level, including local associations and other interested citizens. Altogether, an important effort is made to integrate all diverging interests and points of view.

However, participation does not automatically lead to a lasting consensus on proposals or guarantee their implementation. Firstly, communication is not enough to overcome conflicting interests. Every stakeholder has to optimise his activity according to its specific requirements, and therefore has his own rationality. The delegates are responsible for their own sub-system and cannot subscribe to any kind of general public interest if their institution does not get paid for concessions. But in most cases, it would be necessary to change laws and financial flows to make the interest of a sub-system match to the overall goal. As this task is clearly beyond the competency and time schedule of the participants, delegates dedicated to their own responsibility will either reject all compromise solutions, or will offer a quasi-compromise which just hides the real conflicts.

Secondly, strategic documents generally lack legal authority. On the one hand, this encourages participation of stakeholders in order to ensure the acceptance of the results and the implementation of proposed measures. But on the other hand, participation is not really taken seriously under such conditions, because everybody may change his mind later on. As a consequence, the delegates frequently do not even have the competency to make binding commitments on behalf of their organisation, but act as observers or test negotiators.

Thirdly, consensus-based approaches tend to impair the logical structure of the planning process. Since the different rationalities imply dissension on goals, perceived problems, criteria for evaluation etc. (or at least on their respective weight and priority), reaching a real agreement on goals is difficult. There is therefore a strong temptation to focus directly on the measures which every single partner intends to carry out, and to get agreement on them. As a result, these measures are not examined as to whether they will really promote the declared goals or solve the most urgent problems. Impact assessments and monitoring would still be possible, but... since the results could only add a question-mark to the agreement just achieved, who should really be interested in them? It is much smarter to declare agreement both on the goals and the measures, and leave the reader to sort out how they match together. In any case, if a large assembly of experts has agreed on a result, who would really be able to challenge their judgement?

Of course, these ironical remarks are not a description of our own strategic planning philosophy, but they illustrate why it is difficult to improve planning methodology as well as participation, and might explain why other stakeholders – including the political level – show so little interest in methodology improvements. Nevertheless, let me analyse the state of the art concerning planning methods in Vienna.

(4) Advanced methodology – a key to sustainable development ?

My department has recently finished a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of all existing strategic land use and transport planning proposals concerning the north-eastern part of Vienna – including the neighbouring part of the region⁶. It was not a compulsory procedure based on the EU-directive, and therefore offered some scope for experimentation. The most controversial subject of this assessment was the proposal to build a circular by-pass motorway near the city border which would cross the national park of the Danube wetlands in a tunnel. This proposal had formerly been presented by politicians, interest groups and the media as indispensable to cope with increasing motorized traffic after EU enlargement, although previous studies had shown that it would not be necessary until 2020⁷. Nevertheless, this link was already laid down in the Federal Roads Act⁸ and contained in federal strategic plans⁹. On the other hand, the exact passage of the motorway was still uncertain, although a joint proposal of Vienna and the neighbouring province of Lower Austria had been made¹⁰. In any case, this project is a highly sensible subject, and it even seemed doubtful whether a planning department could dare to offer conclusions differing from decisions already taken at the federal and political levels.

In this SEA, the attempt was made to combine a stringent logical structure with intensive participation of stakeholders. All decisions – on development goals, scenarios, methods and criteria for evaluation etc. – were taken in plenary sessions of about 40 participants including district mayors, heads of administrative units, interest groups and NGO's like environmental agencies. Of course, the subjects proposed for discussion had to be prepared by an expert group, and there was a team of moderators to handle the communication process. At the end, this process led to a development strategy for the north-eastern part of Vienna, which differs somewhat from the original proposal. In particular, a new site was found for the motorway-bypass, and all delegates were able to agree on this compromise.

(5) Planning and decision making – two subjects not to be confused

Is this a “happy ending”? Not yet, because again the outcome of this procedure is not binding for anyone, and a differing political decision – e.g. for the original proposal – can still be taken. This shows again that planning is not to be confused with decisions on the implementation of projects. In this sense, the most important deficiency of planning procedures appears

⁶ SUPer NOW (Strategische Umweltprüfung Entwicklungsraum Nord-Osten Wien), Arbter / Plansinn / ÖIR et.al., commissioned by MA 18, 2001

⁷ 6. Straßen-Donauquerung, System- und Trassenstudie 1994 (Pauser / Snizek / Zottl-Erber commissioned by MA 18); further publications on this subject: Berichte – Veröffentlichungen der PGO (Planungsgemeinschaft Ost) n° 1/1997 (Verkehrsentwicklung in der Ostregion) and n° 1/1998 (Verkehrskonzept Nordostraum Wien)

⁸ under the title B 305 (Austrian Federal Law Gazette I 182 of 19. August 1999)

⁹ GSD (Gestaltung des Straßennetzes im Donaueuropäischen Raum), Regional Consulting commissioned by BMWA 1999, GVPÖ (Generalverkehrsplan für Österreich), BMVIT 2002

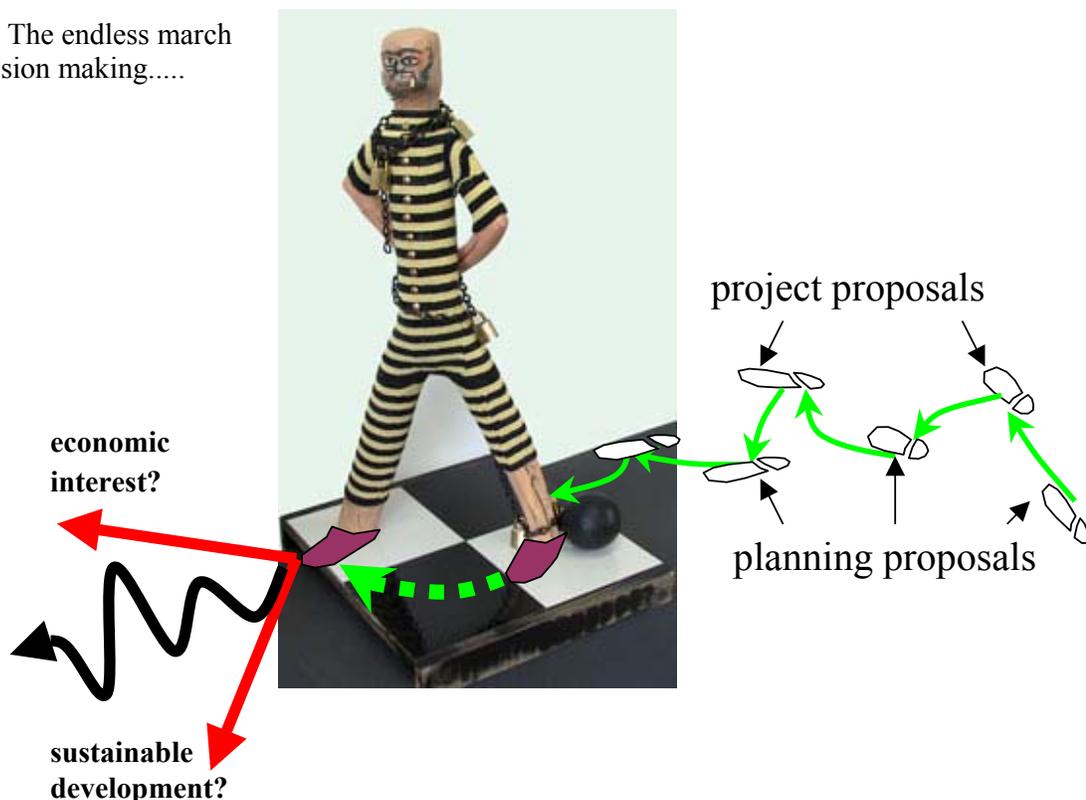
¹⁰ Nordostumfahrung Wien, Trassenstudie/Regionales Begleitkonzept (Endbericht Juli 2000), Donau Consult + Regional Consulting, commissioned by PGO

beyond their own elaboration process, after they have been concluded. Of course, decisions have also been taken during the planning process, but sustainable development obviously does not depend on *those* decisions only. Therefore, all efforts to improve planning procedures regarding their comprehensiveness, methodology and participation may not improve decision making on projects. I am not sure whether this problem was within the scope of your research project – perhaps it is rather up to political scientists to make proposals on how to strengthen the authority of strategic planning.

By the way, this problem also concerns the EU directive on the SEA. According to its provision, only compulsory plans are subject to this assessment. If large-scale projects may be carried out without previously having been included in a compulsory strategic plan – which is the case for many big projects in Austria – their environmental impact does not have to be examined at this level. Therefore, an obligation to include large-scale projects in strategic plans would be a prerequisite to a really useful SEA (otherwise, an additional assessment of strategic plans is like beating an empty sack before having caught the thief in it...).

However, I would not suggest that decision making on projects is completely independent of strategic planning. Perhaps the relation between the two fields can be represented as the two legs of a marching man: once a step has been made with the “planning leg”, the “project decision making leg” has to follow in roughly the same direction, although it may influence the direction of the further march. Next, the planning leg has to reintegrate the *fait accompli*, but is again free to make his own advance etc. In this sense, every leg is the “prisoner” of the other, which could be illustrated by the following picture.

Fig. 3: The endless march of decision making.....



(6) Prospects for the future – how can difficulties be avoided?

What else can be done to improve the situation? To a certain extent, I have to revise my picture of the two legs, because in fact there is more than one “project decision making leg”. There are of course special institutions for every transport mode on the one hand, for different political levels (federal, provincial, local...) on the other, and – in a third dimension – for the different tasks regarding infrastructure, such as construction, maintenance, operating, tariffing, finance... In addition to this somewhat natural division, there is a tendency to establish additional bodies by outsourcing administrative tasks, creating public-private-partnerships, but also by splitting transport companies into several independent units. For instance, negotiations with the federal railways can prove quite tricky because the real estate division sometimes seems ready to sell property which would be needed for future projects of the planning and engineering division, whilst the construction division and the operating division are not informed about these plans. This might get worse if every unit becomes an independent company. The problem for strategic planning is not only the increasing number of stakeholders (which makes participation even more difficult), but the increasing focus on the economic dimension of every activity. If political influence is diminishing and the economic efficiency of a single unit is made increasingly important, the scope for economic concessions in the public interest will tend to disappear. As I have already mentioned, it is quite difficult to adjust the financial conditions so that the rationality of a subsystem will match general development goals. And even if this was possible, it would probably generate huge administrative expenditures, because many things would have to be measured and paid for. Moreover, experience has shown until now that privatisation is usually not combined with intensive regulation in the public interest. Therefore, we must expect that it will become even more difficult to reintegrate the public interest in the behaviour of stakeholders if they are split up into small units obliged to be successful under market conditions (and I appeal in particular to the European Commission to consider these aspects).

To sum up, my message contains both good and bad news: the good news are that strategic planning in Vienna is characterised by a highly integrated approach, intensive involvement of various actors and methodological innovation, and thus satisfies most of the points recommended. The bad news are that this is not sufficient to ensure that decision making on real projects is favourable to sustainable development. Therefore, the outcome of the PROSPECTS research project seems to me of particular interest.