Davoudi S.

[Response to Ernst Alexander's comments.](#)

***Planning Theory* 2016, 15(2), 215-216.**

Copyright:

This is the author's manuscript of a comment published in *Planning Theory*, published by Sage Publications Ltd, 2016.

DOI link to article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1473095215625244>

Date deposited:

18/02/2016

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/)

Response to Ernst Alexander's comments

I am grateful to Ernst Alexander's thoughtful comments (Alexander, 2016) on my essay 'Planning as Practice of Knowing' (Davoudi, 2015) and to the editors of *Planning Theory* for providing the opportunity for an open intellectual conversation which under the current climate of performance indicators is often seen as an indulgence.

There are two main parts to Alexander's comments. In the first part, he raises a question. In the second part, he presents his own answer to that question which he then uses to build his remaining arguments. While the question is fair, the answer does not accurately represent the essay. Also, the arguments that follow from that answer appear to misunderstand my suggested framework, as I elaborate below.

Alexander (2016) asks, 'Why is the essay addressed specifically to planning', why not replace the term planning in the title with the term 'action' to make the 'conceptualisation' 'of much wider and more general (if more abstract) relevance'? This is a fair point, put quite clearly in the second paragraph of the comments and then repeated in the subsequent five. I agree that a similar framing can be used to think about the relationship between knowledge and action in other fields such as those mentioned in Alexander's comments. Indeed, the essay cites a number of other scholars who have argued along similar lines (if not the exact framework) in relation to other fields, notably Hendrick Wagenaar's study of administrators. However, just because the framework is applicable to other fields, it does mean that 'planning' can be substituted with other subjects, and that is exactly the reason for the essay to speak about planning and not 'cooking'. Alexander raises similar concerns about the

work of Hoch and Friedmann who also speak of planning while, in his view, the points they make readily apply to other fields.

After raising the question, Alexander provides his own answer: ‘I think I know the answer to my question’; it is because of Friedmann’s definition of planning, which ‘is problematic’ because ‘it can be just as well applied to other fields’. He follows this with a rhetorical question: ‘But is planning this kind of generic practice?’ (Alexander, 2016). Of course not and nowhere in the essay I have suggested or implied that planning is a generic practice. On the contrary, knowing *what* (epistemic knowledge) is an integral part of conceptualising planning as practice of knowing and this is clearly shown in my proposed framework and the diagram. I have written at length about the significance of ‘knowing what’ in planning (Davoudi and Pendlebury, 2010) and the need for advancing the epistemological understanding of space and place as key objects of planning’s intellectual enquiry (Davoudi, 2012). In the essay, I focused instead on conceptualising the relationship between knowledge and action because what distinguishes planning from other fields lies in not only its epistemic knowledge, important as it is, but also in the interaction between this and knowing *how*, knowing *to what end* and *doing*. So, although epistemic knowledge is necessary in the framing of planning as practice of knowing, it is not sufficient. What distinguishes a seasoned planner from a ‘world-league poker’ player (Alexander, 2016) is not just their different specialised knowledge and skills, but crucially their different values, a sense of the purpose of their knowing and doing, and the socio-political environment in which they operate.

Contrary to Alexander’s assumed answer to his question, I speak about planning (and not cooking) not because I consider planning as ‘a generic subject’, but because planning has and should have claims to specific

ways of knowing and doing. When I suggest that ‘everyone is knowledgeable’ (Davoudi, 2015: 322), I do not mean that everyone have the same forms of knowledge. I simply mean that different people contribute different forms of knowledge, and it is not helpful to demarcate some people as ‘expert’ and others as ‘lay’, or determine ‘who is suited to which type of knowledge’ (p. 322). This is because ‘normative knowledge is inescapably intertwined with other types of knowledge, and wherever we cut into the process, we see a fusion of science and politics, facts and values, norms and techniques’ (p. 322). Therefore, what distinguishes planners from poker players is as much about their *knowing what* as it is about their *knowing to what end*.

In the latter part of his comments, Alexander appears to revert back to the conventional view of action as applied knowledge, suggesting, ‘I can’t think of a better conceptualisation of the application of the different kinds of knowledge there are, to [...] action’ (Alexander, 2016). While I am grateful for the complement, I feel that I am misunderstood because the entire essay is an attempt to challenge this perspective and suggest that action is a constitutive part of knowing; it is not merely an application of knowledge. The concept of knowing is used in the essay, instead of the term knowledge, to move away from bifurcation of theory and practice and from seeing action as ‘a precondition to, or coming before knowledge in a linear, causal chain’ and to conceptualise ‘knowledge and action as recursively interlinked’ (Davoudi, 2015: 317). None of these takes away the significance of *knowing what*; and none of this reduces planning to a generic subject. What they do is an attempt to develop

a unified account of knowing (in its multiple forms) and doing in which knowing is not a simple matter of taking in knowledge; it involves a re-

conceptualisation of that which is assumed to be a natural category (such as evidence, experts) as a cultural and social construct. (Davoudi, 2015: 327)

Simin Davoudi

School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape

Newcastle University, UK

References

- Alexander E (2016) Comment: Perhaps ‘Action as the practice of knowing’. *Planning Theory* 15(2).
- Davoudi S and Pendlebury J (2010) Evolution of planning as an academic discipline. *Town Planning Review* 81(6): 613–644.
- Davoudi S (2012) The legacy of positivism and the emergence of interpretive tradition in spatial planning. *Regional Studies* 46(4): 429–441.
- Davoudi S (2015) Planning as practice of knowing. *Planning Theory* 14(3): 316–331.