

cross-national comparative research in planning – some things to consider



Planning is a discipline with a long history of international exchanges, dating back to and preceding the emergence of modern planning systems in the 19th and 20th centuries. As Patsy Healey notes:

*'Wherever and whenever elites and activists have been concerned about the qualities of their cities and territories, they have looked about for ideas to help inspire their development programmes. And people have always travelled from place to place, offering suggestions about ways of solving problems or improving conditions in one place based on their experiences in other places.'*¹

An interest in how issues of urban and regional development were addressed in different countries also influenced early planning research and education as the field became more formalised from the early 20th century onwards. For example, the Department of Civic Design established in Liverpool in 1909 epitomised this interest in international planning experience, with teaching and publications drawing on international examples and experiences, notably in Europe and the United States. An examination question from 1912 explicitly required the students

to engage in comparative reflection (see Box 1). Periods of nationalism and conflict have at times frustrated the international 'flow of knowledge and expertise in the planning field'.¹ Yet this has only been temporary and ultimately has done little to inhibit the overall process of international exchanges in planning.

A further example from Liverpool is instructive. The Fourth Lever Professor of Planning, Gordon Stephenson, who was responsible for reforming the planning curriculum and establishing the Master of Civic Design (MCD) degree in 1950, was Liverpool born and studied initially at the University of Liverpool in the 1920s. Yet during the 1930s he also pursued studies in Paris at the Institut d'urbanisme de l'université de Paris, at that time part of the Sorbonne, and worked in the office of Le Corbusier. He also studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), on the new Master of City Planning (MCP) programme, which drew on a wider range of subjects than previous planning degrees – notably social sciences and economics – and was open to a wide range of graduates, including social scientists, architects, landscape architects, and engineers. The MCD which Stephenson introduced in Liverpool and which provided a model for postgraduate planning education throughout Britain and elsewhere was influenced by this experience and by the MCP developed at MIT in the 1930s.²

In more recent times the international dimension of planning has also been fostered by processes of globalisation and rapid development in places

Box 1

An examination question from the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool, 1912

1. In comparing English with foreign towns in reference to their town-planning achievements, what are some of the circumstances in the growth of each that must be borne in mind while making comparisons? What has been the effect on Housing in French and German towns as compared with English? In your answers give, if possible, examples of particular towns.

(Thanks to Peter Batey for this example from the Civic Design archives.)

beyond the 'Global North West' of Europe and North America. This has created a demand for international knowledge about, and education in, planning. Within the European region the opening-up of the continent as a professional and research space has enhanced opportunities to engage in cross-national comparative studies of planning. The TCPA continues to be actively engaged in such work, which is supported and facilitated by bodies like the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), the European Council of Town Planners (ECTP), and EU programmes such as Interreg, Horizon 2020 and ESPON.

International exchanges and studies such as those described above often prove to be very valuable and insightful. Yet they can also be challenging to varying degrees, depending on their ultimate objective – for example gaining a general overview of planning in another country or countries; learning about how a specific aspect of planning (housing, retail, flooding, conservation, etc.) is addressed in one, or more, countries; and more explicitly *comparing* how a specific aspect of planning is addressed in one or more countries. The goal may be 'just' general professional interest and enrichment, or to take lessons away to be applied in practice in another context. There is also a need, particularly when undertaking comparative cross-national studies, to avoid some common pitfalls. For example, this may mean remembering to conduct an effective comparison as opposed to telling two, or more, separate 'stories'.

Informed by the context and experiences outlined above, this article shares reflections on some of the things to remember when considering planning from a cross-national and comparative perspective. They are inspired in part by an ongoing project examining re-urbanisation in North West Europe that is being undertaken by researchers from England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. As part of this project, the authors have re-engaged with some of the 'classic' texts and principles related to conducting cross-national comparative planning studies which emerged around the time of the first flourishing of comparative cross-national research in the 1970s and 1980s. This re-familiarisation, coupled with experience of conducting the project, inform the thoughts that follow, which reflect on some things to consider when embarking on cross-national comparative research in planning.

Is explicit or implicit comparison the goal?

It may be argued that all trans-national research is more or less comparative. Even when the goal is not explicitly stated to be comparative, the 'gaze' of

the researcher from one context, examining how things are done in another, will often be shaped by assumptions, concepts and experiences derived from their own 'home' context. This will often inevitably affect how the issues or policy systems being studied are understood and regarded. When undertaking trans-national research, one of the first issues to be aware of is thus whether implicit or explicit comparisons are to be the goal.³ An awareness of this is important as, even if we are studying another country, or countries, in a self-contained manner (i.e. just examining some aspect of planning within another national context), our reasoning, assessments and conclusions may be influenced by implicit comparisons back to other places with which we are more familiar.

'International exchanges and studies often prove to be very valuable and insightful. Yet they can also be challenging to varying degrees, depending on their ultimate objective'

Ian Masser's 'foreign culture model'⁴ (see Fig. 1 on the next page) – in which knowledge of one's home country informs the questions and approach adopted in considering the other country, or countries, to be studied – acknowledges such influences and suggests a sequence which might be followed in cross-national research. Thus the design of a comparative study may be informed by the conceptualisation which supports a research aim and prior knowledge and experience of a country with which one is more familiar. For example, the presence of a particular planning issue, or problem, in one's own context (housing provision, transport integration, land value capture, etc.), may spark curiosity about how other societies and their planning systems address these issues. This initial 'domestic' motivation for exploring a given topic may then guide subsequent choices in research design for a study, such as the refinement of themes of enquiry and research questions, or the selection of particular case studies from the other country or countries to be studied.

Defining the focus of the research

To enhance the feasibility and methodological rigour of cross-national planning research, Sharpe, writing in 1975, suggested that it should be guided

by two principles: 'maximum similarity' and 'maximum discreteness of focus'.⁵ 'Maximum similarity' suggests that 'like must be compared with like' if comparisons are to be valid – for example similar cities or regions in different countries. The 'maximum discreteness of focus' principle suggests that the focus of the research should be tightly drawn – for example, around a discrete issue or policy approach – in order to reduce the complexities of research and to aid the framing of achievable objectives.

In relation to the first principle, however, Williams noted that 'it may not always be possible to design research projects around theoretically ideal comparisons'.⁶ He suggested therefore that 'maximum similarity should be taken to apply only to a specific planning problem, the approach to which is being studied in a comparative way, and not the national context'.⁶ It is therefore justifiable to compare cities or areas that are not similar in every way as long as this is acknowledged and the analysis is not based on the premise that they are.⁶

In essence, it is suggested that the 'maximum similarity' rule should apply to the planning issue under consideration and that the second principle of 'maximum discreteness of focus' is the key to successful cross-national research, rather than the search for general 'constants of culture, administration, and statute' which do not apply.⁷ Indeed, variation in such contextual factors may be key in influencing the kind of policy challenges that arise and how they are addressed by different planning systems.

'It is suggested that the 'maximum similarity' rule should apply to the planning issue under consideration and that the second principle of 'maximum discreteness of focus' is the key to successful cross-national research'

To enhance the feasibility of cross-national research and undertake meaningful comparisons it is therefore suggested that the 'maximum discreteness of focus' rule needs to be adhered to in clearly defining the research focus around the spatial trends, policy processes and impacts to be studied within different countries. The formulation of well defined research objectives and questions is therefore particularly important in cross-national research.

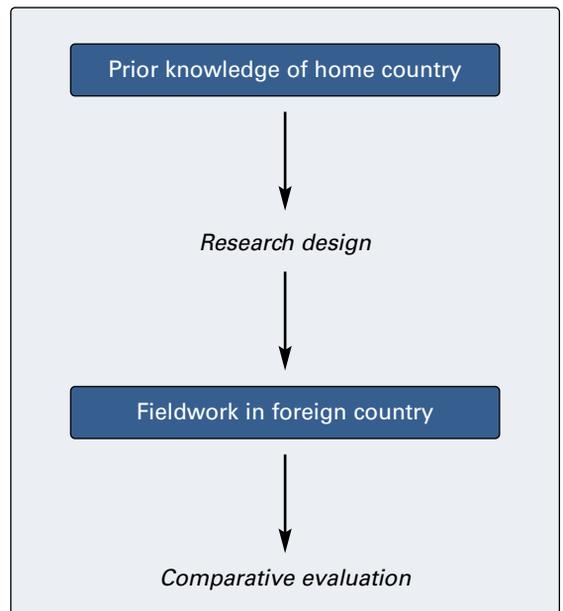


Fig. 1 The 'foreign culture model' of cross-national research

Based on I Masser: 'Some methodological considerations'⁴

Symmetry

A further issue which arises in conducting cross-national research is the 'symmetry' of the research.⁶ This relates to whether a similar structure and level of coverage will be pursued in each country. This may be a choice influenced by the particular resources and skills (for example in languages – see below) of an individual researcher. Larger studies may have the advantage of being able to adopt the 'parallel teams' approach, in which 'researchers from the countries to be compared' work on their domestic contexts within a common conceptual and comparative framework.⁸ Yet while such collaborative studies often adopt a symmetrical structure, Williams feels that this is not always appropriate in the case of individual research projects and that 'an asymmetrical structure or presentation of the findings may be appropriate, since so much general knowledge of the home country can be assumed'.⁶

Although the conceptual frameworks may provide a setting for research, many contextual factors typically have to be taken into account in exploring spatial trends and policy responses to certain planning and development issues – for example the institutional and governance contexts, with their different scales and competences of local and metropolitan governments, in the countries studied. Care is needed to avoid assuming the direct comparability of specific institutions which exist in

different national and sub-national contexts – for example the recently established *métropoles* in France and combined authorities in England.

Thus the different contexts being studied need to be addressed adequately so that a picture that is as accurate as possible can be built up of the nature of key institutions, policies and programmes in different countries, and so that oversimplifications and misplaced assumptions of direct comparability or equivalence can be minimised. This does not always mean that research will need to be exactly 'symmetrical', or 'balanced', in terms of crude measures such as the word length, or number of pages, dedicated to different countries, but that the treatment of different settings needs to be of a broadly equal standard, depth and quality in terms of the adequacy of the descriptive and analytical accounts it provides.

Data questions

Descriptive statistical analysis often provides an initial stage and core building block of comparative studies, and, as King *et al.* remind us, 'good description is better than bad explanation'.⁹ Furthermore, as Booth notes, it could be assumed that 'if direct comparison is part of the research, then statistical data provide a surer basis for comparison than written or oral record'.⁸ But he goes on to note that this can be a false assumption, as 'apparent similarities conceal considerable differences in what is actually being measured',⁸ particularly as concepts and the categories of data collected to 'capture' them may also vary greatly (for example, what is the threshold for a small, medium or large settlement in different countries; which morphologies and densities are considered to characterise 'urban' or 'rural' areas?).

Within comparative studies the use of ostensibly objective descriptive data sources is thus often complicated by a lack of comparability across national boundaries and statistical agencies. As van den Berg *et al.* note, when undertaking comparison between countries use of such data can be 'hampered' by:

- 'the lack of synchronization between national censuses';
- 'the lack of standardized data among national censuses';
- 'the fact that the available data do not relate to standardized spatial units. This makes it virtually impossible to compare small areas; in measuring urban change and population movements appropriate geographical units are indispensable'; and
- 'the fact that, because of differences in national statistical systems, some variables, such as

commuting and employment structure, are available for a limited number of countries only'.¹⁰

Many of these issues arose in the study that the present authors have undertaken on re-urbanisation in North West Europe. Many definitions of re-urbanisation are concerned with population change in urban regions, dividing them into an (urban) core and a (suburban) ring. Comparison was made challenging in relation to administrative differences and data availability.

For example, the territories of French cities are much smaller than their counterparts in the other countries. English cities, with some exceptions (notably Leeds), in turn are smaller than German and Dutch cities. Within countries, the size of local authority districts can differ substantially, too. France and the Netherlands have statistical definitions of functional urban regions, in England it was necessary to rely on administrative city regions, while in Germany no readily available geographies exist for functional urban regions.

In order to address the much smaller size of the core local authorities of French city regions in comparison with their German, Dutch and English counterparts, data from the core local government area for each conurbation were combined with data for the immediately contiguous surrounding local authorities (see Fig. 2 for example outcomes). This worked quite well in one of the French case study cities, giving an area approximating to the core urban area of the city region, but less well in a second case. These caveats had to be taken into account and reflected upon in the comparisons undertaken.

Then the lack of readily available and consistent small-area data presented a problem in countries other than England and the Netherlands. Conversely, the lack of resident registration in England meant that estimates had to be relied upon for population data between Census years.

Further problems encountered were that it was difficult to find comparable data (different housing systems meant that directly comparable data are not publicly available); the social data collected in the different countries are different, too; and, more qualitatively, it was difficult to compare planning and urban policies directly – for example, England had large substantially supported national programmes, yet in the other countries local authorities have a stronger financial position and generally more autonomous control over their planning and urban policies.

The latter point reminds us that comparative studies often also rely on more qualitative forms of analysis. These may be based on reviewing institutional

structures and the 'content analysis' of policy documents and other relevant sources that can shed a light on the policy/political treatment of the planning issues under investigation; or on interviews with stakeholders in the planning system and process. This requires attention to context, an appreciation of which is commonly seen as key to all forms of comparative research, whether carried out across 'national, cultural or societal boundaries'.¹¹ It also often requires an ability to read documents in the language of the country or countries to be studied and to speak the language sufficiently well to undertake meaningful interviews with those involved in, or affected by, the planning system and process.

Language

As Klaus Kunzmann has long argued, while English may have become established as a key language of international exchanges around planning research and professional networks, the language of practice in different settings, both of practitioners and citizens, remains 'local'.¹² This is an important issue to consider if the long-mooted theory/practice gap in planning is not to be prised even wider in the majority of planning contexts where English is not spoken and used in administration and debate on planning issues. From the beginnings of widespread cross-national research in planning, a number of authors stressed the importance of being able to read documents in the language of the study country, and of understanding nuances of meaning and interpretation.¹³ Ideally, those working on researching a country should have some native language ability which allows them to read relevant documents in the original language.

A related issue is that of translation for purposes of understanding. Translations should aim to reflect the sense and meaning of the terms as they are employed in planning, rather than be the literal translations of the words. And although translation software makes a basic understanding of texts written in another language easier to acquire today than in the pioneering days of cross-national planning research, the literal translations of terms it often produces still do not necessarily give the exact sense of what words mean when used in a given (planning) context. After all, even *within* the same language, professional jargon sometimes deploys words in ways that have specific meanings which are removed from their 'everyday' usage.

Another challenge is the proliferation of translations. As far as possible, where previous research has discussed similar themes, and the same institutions and policy instruments, it is advisable to try to use

the translations adopted in the interests of consistency and comparability (assuming the previous translations are accurate).

It is also common practice to use 'home language terms' following an initial translation of meaning. This follows the convention established in much writing on European spatial planning and aims to avoid the confusing proliferation of diverse translations of the same terms, and relatedly to better connect with and accurately represent the context being studied.¹⁴

For example, a local land use plan in France is termed a *plan local d'urbanisme* (PLU). A well known online translation programme renders this as a 'local urbanism plan'. This is a linguistically accurate translation, but confusion could arise, for example, if a similarly titled instrument existed in another planning setting where the English language is used. An observer from this context may not unreasonably make the assumption that the similar naming implies that the French instrument is fairly analogous to the plans they are familiar with from their own context. But this may be a misleading assumption. Similarly, an observer from England may think that the similar, although in this case not exactly the same, naming means that a PLU is simply the French equivalent of a Local Plan (which is only partly true in terms of the nature of the two instruments).

For these reasons it is often advised that, once a translation (and perhaps some information to describe the nature and purpose of a planning instrument) is provided, it is best to use the original language's terms – for example in the case above to use PLU, which will aid non-French researchers and planners who may want follow-up examples (which they will find by searching for PLUs, not 'local urbanism plans'), and will help French researchers and practitioners who may take an interest in international research on planning in France.

Taking into account both the formal, informal and cultural aspects of planning

For Reimer *et al.*, the 'classic' comparative analysis of planning systems can be contrasted with approaches that focus more on transformations of planning systems.¹⁵ Planning cultures approaches seek to recognise that there are both 'formal and informal institutions that determine planning practice'.¹⁵ Thus 'the formal institutions include particularly the legal and administrative fundamentals of spatial planning, while the informal institutions primarily comprise the cognitively anchored patterns of perception, beliefs, shared values and behaviour of the actors involved'.¹⁵ This

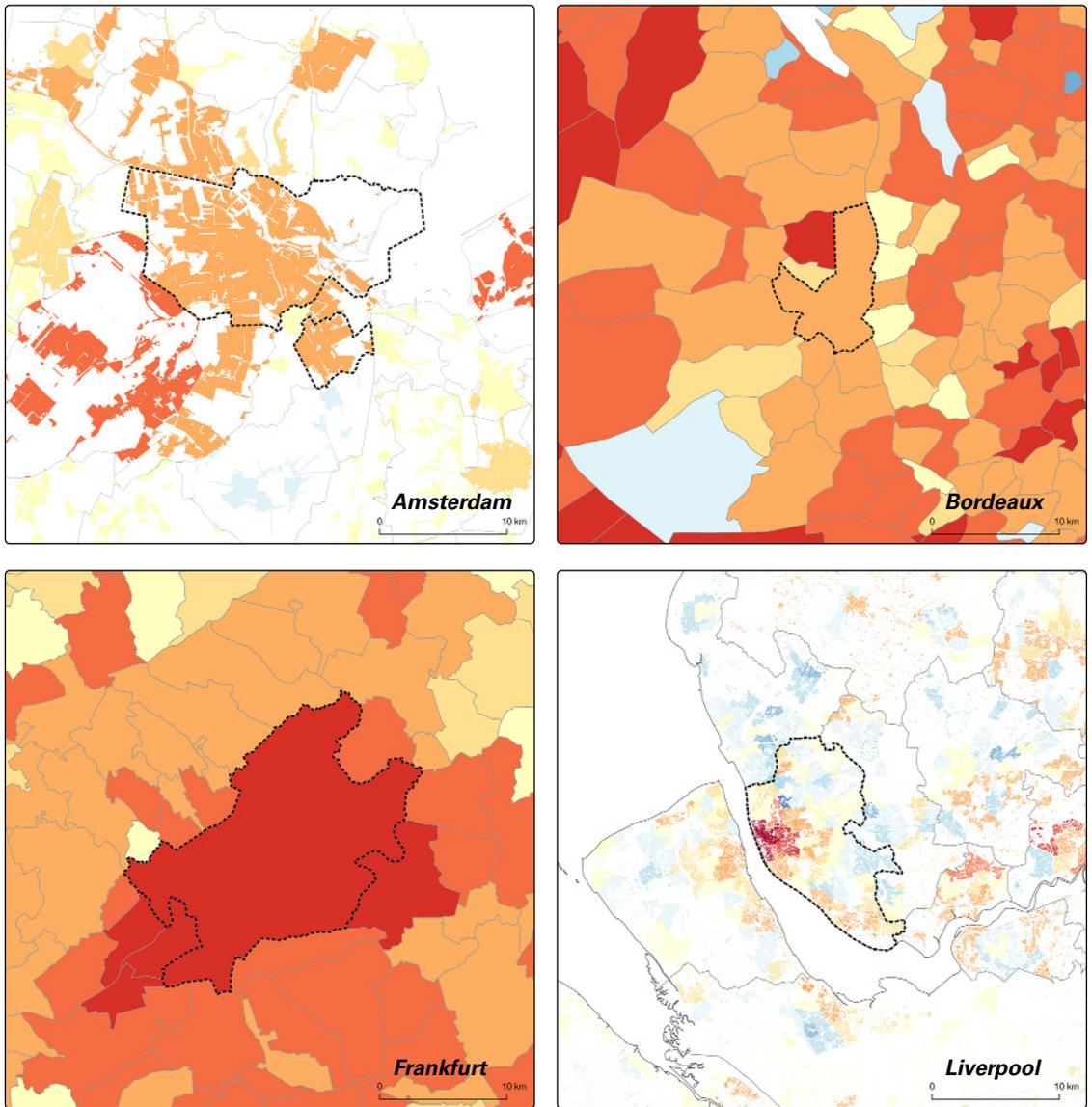


Fig. 2 The different sizes of local authority areas in a sample of European city regions (with the core city authority boundary shown by the dotted line), also showing different data availability (in this case population change)

means that ‘spatial planning systems are not exclusively dependent on the legal-administrative systems, but also on the different socio-economic, political and cultural structures and dynamics prevailing in each country’.¹⁵

As Masser and Williams note, ‘cross-national comparative research raises questions such as national culture, language, institutions of government and law, political divisions, and evolution of urban structure’.¹⁶ Studies frequently may seek to derive insights from both the ‘planning systems’ and

‘planning cultures’ perspectives. Such considerations are significant in shaping problem perceptions/ definitions and responses in different national and sub-national settings. For example, ideas about the importance of managing phenomena such as urban sprawl, or actively promoting re-urbanisation, may vary from one country to another, based on a host of factors beyond the social and physical manifestations of such trends.

In some contexts policy debates may be framed in specific terms whose meaning may be rather

culturally and context specific and may require some explanation to non-domestic audiences. For example, a policy goal such as 'urban renaissance' in England takes its meaning from a specific socio-historical context and stage in the urbanisation cycle in that country. Its import may be less clear to an outside observer if it is not contextualised thoroughly.

Sensitivity to the multi-scalar nature of planning issues and practices

An awareness of different national settings is therefore important in cross-national research. But there is a need to be aware, too, of potential differences *within* individual countries being researched – for example between regions or cities with different economic, environmental and social contexts and/or institutional structures. As Hantrais notes with regard to social policies, most 'are framed at national or supranational level, but they are more often than not implemented at local level, thereby offering scope for identifying regional and local disparities in delivery'.¹¹

'Cross-national comparative perspectives are particularly valuable, not only for the substantive insights that they might offer on how planning can contribute to addressing issues, but in fostering and keeping alive the flame of the internationalist spirit of enquiry and exchange which animated so many of the founders of the planning project'

Similarly, in urban policy and planning a national policy may play out, or be applied rather differently, with varied outcomes in different regional, city, or neighbourhood contexts within a given nation state. Reimer *et al.*¹⁵ thus warn of the potential problem of focusing on the national level of analysis as a basis for comparison of planning systems. This they term 'methodological nationalism', which may underplay or overlook the fact that planning systems 'are differentiated at different scales'.¹⁵ This becomes particularly the case, for example, in federalised states, where the national level may play a role in

setting some general framework policy orientations, but the key competences and tools of planning may be principally held and exercised at the level of the constitutive federal states, or regions.

Conclusion

This article has reflected on some of the things to think about and remember when considering planning from a cross-national and comparative perspective. It has revisited some long-established principles related to conducting cross-national comparative planning studies and provided some reflections based on experiences of ongoing research examining re-urbanisation in North West Europe being undertaken with colleagues in France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Without claiming to be comprehensive it has discussed some things that might be considered when embarking on cross-national comparative research in planning. It is certainly not intended as a 'health warning' to those planning to undertake such work, or to make true the saying often attributed to US President Theodore Roosevelt that 'Comparison is the thief of joy' by making looking at planning from a cross-national comparative perspective seem peculiarly fraught with difficulty and challenges.

Many of the principles and issues discussed can also arise in other planning research and activities, and looking at planning cross-nationally can often generate particularly valuable insights, not just on how things works in other places, but often (through comparison) on how things are done and work in our own home contexts. On a wider front, as outlined in the introduction, an interest in international planning experience and exchanges goes back to the origins of modern planning and beyond, and has remained strong even through moments when internationalism more generally has faced tough times.

The present time is again one in which some societies seem to be opting to cloister themselves and turn inwards, apparently incurious about the wider world, even as global challenges such as climate change patently require collaborative international working and load sharing. In such a context cross-national comparative perspectives are particularly valuable, not only for the substantive insights that they might offer on how planning can contribute to addressing such issues, but in fostering and keeping alive the flame of the internationalist spirit of enquiry and exchange which animated so many of the founders of the planning project.

● **Dr Olivier Sykes and Dr Sebastian Dembski** are with the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Liverpool. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 P Healey: 'The transnational flow of knowledge and expertise in the planning field'. In P Healey and R Upton (Eds): *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices*. Routledge, 2010
- 2 P Batey: 'Gordon Stephenson's reform of the planning curriculum: how Liverpool came to have the MCD'. *Town Planning Review*, 2012, Vol. 83 (2), 135-64
- 3 R Hague and M Harrop: *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 (Seventh Edition)
- 4 I Masser: 'Some methodological considerations'. In I Masser and R Williams (Eds): *Learning from Other Countries: The Cross-National Dimension in Urban Policy-Making*. Geo Books, 1986
- 5 LJ Sharpe: 'Comparative planning policy: some problems'. In MJ Breakell (Ed.): *Problems of Comparative Planning*. Department of Town Planning Working Paper 21. Oxford Polytechnic, 1975
- 6 RH Williams: 'Cross-national research: translating theory into practice'. *Environment & Planning B: Planning & Design*, 1984, Vol. 11 (2), 149-61
- 7 P Booth 'Guest editorial: Design and implementation of cross-national research projects'. *Environment & Planning B: Planning & Design*, 1984, Vol. 11 (2), 131-32
- 8 P Booth: 'What can we learn from France? Some reflections on the methodologies of cross-national research'. In EA Silva, P Healey, N Harris and P van den Broeck (Eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods*. Routledge, 2015
- 9 G King, R Keohane and S Verba: *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton University Press, 1994, cited in *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction* (see note 3)
- 10 L van den Berg, R Drewett, LH Klaassen, A Rossi and CHT Vijverberg: *Urban Europe: A Study of Growth and Decline*. Pergamon, 1982
- 11 L Hantrais: *International Comparative Research: Theory, Methods and Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009
- 12 K R Kunzmann: 'Why not Italian? Differences matter! A comment on Ben Davy's Viewpoint in *TPR* on "Thoughts on internationalism and planning"'. *Town Planning Review*, 2019, Vol. 90 (1), 3-9
- 13 DEC Eversley: *Report on Anglo-German Conference on Public Participation*. Royal Town Planning Institute, 1978, cited in RH Williams: 'Cross national research: translating theory into practice' (see note 6). See also the discussion in Chapter 4: 'Language and meaning: the Tower of Babel problem', in RH Williams: *European Union Spatial Policy and Planning*. Paul Chapman Publishing, 1996
- 14 *The EU Compendium of Spatial Planning Systems and Policies*. Regional Development Studies 28. Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission, 1997.
<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/059fcedf-d453-4d0d-af36-6f7126698556>
- 15 M Reimer, P Getimis and H Blotevogel (Eds): *Spatial Planning Systems and Practices in Europe: A Comparative Perspective on Continuity and Changes*. Routledge, 2014
- 16 I Masser and R Williams (Eds): *Learning from Other Countries: The Cross-National Dimension in Urban Policy-Making*. Geo Books, 1986

central london meeting rooms for hire

The TCPA has two meeting rooms for hire in the centre of London for conferences, meetings and training events.

The refurbished Boardroom overlooks the Mall. It can accommodate up to 40 people in a theatre-style layout and up to 28 in boardroom/roundtable style. A small meeting room, which can accommodate up to 10 people, is also available for hire. A laptop and projector can be hired, subject to availability. Refreshments and lunch (not included in the room hire) can also be ordered at the time of booking.

The TCPA's premises are situated in the Grade I listed 17 Carlton House Terrace, close to Trafalgar Square, and a few minutes' walk from Charing Cross and Piccadilly Circus Underground stations. The TCPA has no parking facilities, but a National Car Park at the end of the Terrace in Spring Gardens can be accessed via Trafalgar Square.

The rooms are available for hire all year round during office hours. Evening hire may be available by arrangement.

Booking priority and preferential rates are given to TCPA members.

For further information and hire rates and to check availability, ring **020 7930 8903** or e-mail roomhire@tcpa.org.uk



TCPA
17 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AS
www.tcpa.org.uk