

How Does Planning Theory Engage with Property Rights? Revisiting Ten Planning Paradigms

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Abstract

The relationship between planning and property rights is foundational to how land is governed, accessed and contested, but its treatment across major planning theories remains uneven and fragmented. This paper critically reviews how property rights are conceptualised across ten influential planning paradigms, highlighting the assumptions and inconsistencies that shape this engagement. Drawing on insights from legal theory, institutional economics and critical geography, it approaches property as a socially embedded and institutionally mediated arrangement of entitlements, obligations and exclusions. Five analytical lenses structure the comparison: the conceptualisation of property; ownership and the public–private boundary; the roles of key actors; power and spatial justice; and planning’s transformation of property rights through regulatory and institutional intervention. The analysis shows that engagement with property varies according to the explanatory, prescriptive and critical purposes of different theories. Marxist, Coasian and neoliberal planning foreground property as a structuring institution, whereas rational, incremental and collaborative approaches often address it through technical, procedural or governance concerns without consistently examining its distribution or legitimacy. These orientations shape how planning is understood as a mode of governance, particularly in relation to land commodification, state authority and socio-spatial inequality. The paper concludes that more explicit integration of property’s institutional and distributive dimensions would strengthen planning theory’s capacity to address ownership, justice and institutional transformation.

Keywords: Property rights; Planning theory; Spatial justice; Institutional analysis; Land governance; Spatial justice; Ownership.