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Research Article

STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING: TOWARDS CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION IN ARABIC SCHOLARSHIP AND A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to clarify the concept of strategic spatial planning within Arabic scholarship, explain its foundations and defining characteristics, examine its relationships with other planning approaches, and develop a diagnostic framework for assessing its use in studies and planning documents. It addresses overlapping terminology and classification levels, as well as the difficulty of distinguishing defining characteristics from tools and normative objectives. The study combines a selective critical integrative review of the literature with comparative conceptual analysis, connecting strategic, relational, and institutional perspectives and linking strategy formulation to implementation and learning. The analysis indicates that strategic spatial planning is characterized by the interdependence of spatial understanding, priority setting, appraisal of alternatives, and mobilization of capacities and resources. It also highlights the need to distinguish planning approaches from spatial scales, sectoral domains, instruments, and documents. Urban, regional, and national scales provide settings for applying the approach, while regulatory and structure plans and sectoral programmes can perform complementary implementation functions. The proposed diagnostic framework connects characteristics to assessable evidence and explicit rules for judging its adequacy. Its relationship to earlier frameworks is specified, while evaluation of planning processes is distinguished from evaluation of their impacts. The study contributes a conceptual synthesis for Arabic scholarship that draws on international literature while recognizing institutional and spatial diversity. Its findings remain conceptual and comparative; assessing the prevalence of conceptual ambiguity in Arabic literature and validating the framework require subsequent empirical testing.

KEYWORDS: Strategic spatial planning; Conceptual clarification; Planning approaches; Spatial relations; Spatial governance; Diagnostic framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

Economic, social and environmental transformations, together with changes in the distribution of populations, activities and resources, raise continuing questions about the capacity of planning to guide spatial development. These questions extend beyond locating land uses and estimating future needs to understanding relationships between places, interactions between sectors, overlapping levels of decision-making, and differences in actors' interests and capacities. In this context, planning approaches are needed that connect an understanding of the future of places with decisions affecting them, and link the formulation of broad directions to the conditions required for their implementation and review.

Strategic spatial planning has gained renewed prominence in planning scholarship and practice, particularly since the 1990s, as an approach that reconsiders how the futures of cities and regions are shaped and how collective action is organised to realise them. This development has involved building planning capacities that accommodate multiple actors and bring their knowledge and interests into a process of formulating directions and identifying areas for intervention. In establishing the foundations of this approach, Albrechts highlighted selectivity, integration, visioning, relationships between actors and an orientation towards action. These characteristics connect the study of strategic spatial planning to the logic of decision-making as much as to the content and outputs of plans (Albrechts, 2004, 2006).

This development also involves reconsidering the concept of place within planning thought. Understanding a city or region requires attention to functional relationships, networks of movement and exchange, and interdependence, alongside administrative boundaries and internal characteristics. Healey demonstrated the importance of a relational conception of place in analysing spatial strategies and the resulting attention to interactions connecting locations and actors across multiple scales (Healey, 2004). This perspective helps explain issues whose functional extent may exceed the jurisdiction of the planning authority, including daily mobility, the distribution of employment opportunities, service networks and environmental pressures.

However, the variety of contexts in which the term strategic spatial planning is used raises questions about its content and boundaries. What makes planning strategic? What gives it its spatial character? How do these two qualities combine into an integrated logic of analysis, choice and implementation? These questions become particularly important when general features, such as a long time horizon, sectoral comprehensiveness, participation or the presence of maps, are treated as sufficient indicators of the approach. Such features must be examined in terms of their interrelationships and their influence on identifying critical issues, appraising alternatives and directing resources.

Conceptual clarification also requires distinguishing between different levels of planning classification. Urban, regional and national planning refer to spatial scales at which various approaches may be adopted, whereas sectoral planning refers to a substantive domain. A master plan or structure plan is a document and instrument whose function depends on the planning system concerned. Strategic spatial planning is examined here as an approach that organises the understanding of spatial transformations and the choices made about them. Comparisons should therefore recognise the nature of each category, examine possibilities for overlap and complementarity, and identify differences in the subject matter, processes and outputs of planning.

Arabic scholarship includes contributions that examine the spatial dimension of strategic plans and seek to identify its terms and develop models of strategic spatial planning (Al-Jarallah & Al-Ribh, 2015, 2016). These contributions provide a foundation for a critical review of the concept and its application. Assessing conceptual clarity in this literature nevertheless requires organised analysis that distinguishes theoretical definitions, operational criteria and evidence of application. The study therefore treats possible conceptual confusion as an issue to be investigated, while allowing for the identification of clear conceptual distinctions and locating ambiguity only where the evidence supports it.

The research problem concerns the need for a framework that brings together the intellectual premises, foundations, concepts, dimensions and methods of strategic spatial planning and translates this conceptual grounding into criteria for comparison and diagnosis. This requires moving beyond general definitions to specify relationships between understanding place, selecting priorities, involving actors, arranging implementation, and enabling learning and review. It also requires distinguishing the defining characteristics of the approach from the normative objectives pursued through it, such as equity and sustainability. Judging whether these objectives have been achieved requires evidence independent of a plan's title or declared directions.

In this study, conceptual clarification for Arabic scholarship means developing a critical treatment that specifies terms, relationships and criteria in Arabic, draws on international and Arabic contributions, and recognises the particularities of Arab institutional and planning contexts without assuming their homogeneity or constructing a concept separate from international theoretical advances.

Accordingly, the study aims to clarify the conceptual foundations of strategic spatial planning, undertake carefully specified comparisons with related planning approaches, instruments and scales, and develop a diagnostic framework for examining its presence in research and planning documents. It uses a selective critical integrative review and comparative conceptual analysis to produce a proposed diagnostic framework and rules for its application. Measuring the prevalence of ambiguity and validating the framework fall outside the study's scope. The intended contribution is to provide criteria that help researchers and practitioners interpret differences and overlaps and assess how far the concept is translated into examinable procedures and decisions.

The paper proceeds from a literature review and identification of the research gap to the methodology and the conceptual grounding of the components and processes of strategic spatial planning. It then develops comparisons and the diagnostic framework, presents conceptual findings, and discusses their theoretical and practical implications, while specifying the limits of inference and requirements for subsequent empirical research.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

2.1. Research Questions

The study addresses the following main question:

What conceptual and operational foundations and characteristics constitute strategic spatial planning, and how can they be translated into a comparative and diagnostic framework that clarifies its distinctiveness, overlap and complementarity with other planning approaches?

Six subsidiary questions follow

1. What intellectual and theoretical premises and foundations underpin strategic spatial planning, and where do the perspectives that explain it converge and diverge?
2. What do the 'strategic' and 'spatial' components mean, and how do they combine to form an operational concept that defines the characteristics and boundaries of this approach?
3. What dimensions, processes, methods and outputs embody strategic spatial planning, and how do they relate to priority setting, decision-making, implementation and evaluation?
4. How does strategic spatial planning differ from, overlap with and complement other planning approaches, and how does it relate to spatial scales, planning instruments and documents?
5. What forms of conceptual ambiguity can comparison distinguish, and what criteria can be used to examine them in the literature and planning documents?
6. What criteria and indicators can be derived to construct a diagnostic framework for examining the characteristics of strategic spatial planning in research and planning documents, and what are the framework's rules of use, limitations and validation requirements?

2.2. Research Objectives

The study's main objective is to clarify the concept of strategic spatial planning through a critical treatment for Arabic scholarship and to develop a comparative and diagnostic framework that specifies its characteristics, clarifies its relationships with other planning approaches, and supports assessment of its use in the literature and planning documents.

To achieve this objective, the study seeks to:

1. Analyse the intellectual and theoretical premises and organising foundations of strategic spatial planning, identifying convergence and divergence among the perspectives that explain it.
2. Clarify the meanings of the strategic and spatial components and their relationship, and formulate an operational definition that specifies the concept and distinguishes its defining characteristics from its normative objectives.
3. Identify the dimensions, processes, methods and outputs of strategic spatial planning and explain their relationships with priority setting, decision-making, implementation and evaluation.
4. Develop a systematic comparison of differences, overlaps and complementarities with other approaches, while distinguishing the planning approach from the spatial scale, instrument and document.
5. Derive potential forms of conceptual ambiguity and specify criteria for distinguishing them from legitimate theoretical differences.
6. Construct a proposed diagnostic framework linking criteria to evidence and judgement rules, and define its applications, limitations and requirements for subsequent testing.

3. Literature Review and Research Gap

The literature on strategic spatial planning addresses interrelated issues, including its nature and characteristics, the conception of place on which it rests, its relationships with institutions and actors, and the connection between strategy formulation and implementation. A review of this literature reveals diverse premises and interpretations. It is therefore necessary to distinguish legitimate theoretical differences in understanding the approach from ambiguity arising when the term is used without specifying its content. The following review examines foundational contributions and selected empirical extensions, alongside Arabic studies directly relevant to the paper's research problem.

3.1. Establishing the Approach and Its Strategic Characteristics

Albrechts (2004) provides a foundational contribution to the re-examination of strategic spatial planning. Bringing together critical planning literature, strategic thinking and European experience, this work identifies components of an approach capable of responding to complex spatial issues. It highlights the importance of developing planning capacity and involving actors in identifying issues and exchanging knowledge, interests and objectives. For the present study, its significance lies in connecting the strategic quality of planning to how the planning process and its directions are organised, as well as to the content of the resulting document.

Albrechts (2006) developed this conceptual grounding by identifying five central characteristics: selectivity, a relational and inclusive character, integration, visioning and an orientation towards action. He compared this normative conception with nine plans in European and Australian contexts, revealing variation between theoretical characteristics and their presence in practice. A central issue follows: describing a plan as strategic does not establish that its defining characteristics have been realised. Its content, process and arrangements for action must be examined.

From this perspective, the present study derives the need to distinguish integration from selectivity. Integration concerns understanding connections between issues and sectors, whereas selectivity concerns identifying priorities for intervention. Planning can thus draw on a broad diagnosis while concentrating decisions and resources on particular issues with significant spatial effects. This distinction provides a basis for the subsequent comparison with comprehensive planning without assuming that the two are necessarily opposed.

3.2. Understanding Place through Spatial Relationships

Healey (2004) examined the concepts of space and place in European spatial strategies and considered how far they incorporated a dynamic and relational understanding of spatiality. She focused on how spatial conceptions are used in institutional work, linking understandings of place to the formulation of strategy and the organisation of cooperation around it. This contribution expands analysis to the relationships connecting places, alongside the characteristics and boundaries of each place.

This reading implies that examining the spatial character of planning requires going beyond the presence of maps or the location of projects. The analytical question is: how have relationships between populations, activities, services and movement networks influenced the definition of the problem and the choice of intervention? The paper adopts this question as a proposed entry point for diagnosing the spatial component, while recognising the continuing importance of administrative and legal boundaries in determining responsibilities and implementation possibilities.

3.3. Schools of Thought on Strategic Spatial Planning

Ziafati Bafarasat (2015) identified three schools of thought on strategic spatial planning: the performance school, the innovative action school and the transformative strategy formulation school. He distinguished them through their positions on stakeholder involvement, policy integration and the promotion of projects, and identified conceptual problems and empirical gaps requiring further research. This classification shows that the term encompasses perspectives with different emphases and that an operational definition must make its theoretical basis explicit.

For the present paper, this contribution helps avoid treating every definitional difference as evidence of confusion. Differences may reflect a clear theoretical orientation. Ambiguity arises, by contrast, when disparate characteristics are combined without explaining their relationships, or when the concept is used without showing its consequences for analysis and decisions. Comparison should therefore accommodate different schools, identify shared characteristics and delimit differences, rather than impose a single formulation on all contexts.

3.4. Participation, Coproduction and Institutional Capacity

Albrechts (2013) reframed strategic spatial planning through a coproduction perspective, showing how the provision of services and the meeting of public needs can be linked to building communities' capacity for cooperation and mutual support. This perspective calls for changes in how professionals conceive, prepare and implement plans, policies and services, with an orientation towards enabling change in more open and equitable ways. Participation, in this perspective, concerns actors' roles in producing planning work and extends beyond recording their opinions at a limited stage.

Extending the empirical focus on institutions, Trygg and Wenander (2022) examined the institutional conditions enabling planners to practise strategic spatial planning for sustainable development in Swedish municipalities. Their study of four municipalities focused on knowledge resources, relational resources and mobilisation capacity. This perspective directs attention to the conditions through which a vision can become action, including available knowledge, institutional connections and the capacity to mobilise effort.

From these perspectives, the paper concludes that evaluating participation and coordination requires evidence of their influence on choices and the allocation of responsibilities. It is also necessary to distinguish the declaration of a normative objective, such as equity or sustainability, from its actual achievement, which requires independent evaluation of outcomes and impacts.

3.5. From Plan Preparation to Implementation and Spatial Transformation

Hersperger et al. (2019) addressed the difficulty of capturing strategic spatial planning as a concept because of its multiple dimensions and its connections with social, political and institutional contexts. Drawing on research in 21 European urban regions, they presented the SPlaMI analytical framework, which links the principal components of plan preparation and implementation and the relationships between them. They also highlighted the need to extend attention beyond planning outputs to their influence on urban transformation.

This contribution establishes a basis for distinguishing a written strategy from its capacity to guide development. Accordingly, the paper proposes that diagnosis should address three connected levels: the content of spatial directions, institutional and implementation arrangements, and evidence of influence on decisions and transformations. Judgement at the third level remains conditional on the availability of implementation and outcome data and cannot be inferred from the document alone.

This perspective also helps clarify the comparison between strategic and operational planning. Projects and programmes translate strategic directions into interventions. The relevant questions concern how they are selected and sequenced, how they connect to spatial objectives, and whether monitoring can redirect choices when conditions change.

3.6. Arabic Contributions to Spatial Analysis and Model Development

Al-Jarallah and Al-Ribh (2015), in their study 'Spatial terms in strategic plans in Saudi Arabia: A content analysis

approach', sought to describe, analyse and evaluate these terms across a set of Saudi strategies. They found clear variation in the presence of spatial terms across the documents examined, comparing them with the Ninth Development Plan and the National Spatial Strategy. Their contribution makes the spatial dimension a subject of observation and comparison and connects conceptual discussion to the content of national documents.

This study provides a methodological basis for extending analysis from the presence of terms to their functions within a document. The present paper proposes complementing that work by examining whether spatial concepts contribute to explaining problems, appraising alternatives and allocating resources. This extension changes the analytical question; it does not in itself judge the validity of frequency analysis for the earlier study's original objectives.

In developing a model, Al-Jarallah and Al-Ribh (2016) combined a literature review with a Delphi survey of 40 experts and proposed a model comprising ten aspects and 32 considerations. The model covers goals and objectives, characteristics, outputs, form, boundaries, the planning framework, institutional and organisational frameworks, methodology, the temporal scope and the spatial scope, with considerations classified by importance. It addresses participation, coordination across sectors and levels, implementation and the review of alternatives. The present contribution therefore concerns organising the evidence used to examine these characteristics and the rules for judging it, while acknowledging that the model had already addressed them (pp. 39, 51–53).

These two studies indicate two strands of Arabic scholarship relevant to this paper: evaluating the presence of the spatial dimension in plans and developing a model that specifies considerations for strategic spatial planning. However, they are insufficient for judging Arabic scholarship as a whole, which would require a broader sample and explicit inclusion and coding criteria. They are used here as directly relevant contributions on which to build, rather than as a basis for estimating the prevalence of ambiguity in Arabic literature.

The International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning help situate the discussion within a broader system of policy, governance and implementation (UN-Habitat, 2015). Their Arabic version is used as a supporting institutional reference, distinguished from peer-reviewed studies. Availability in Arabic does not make the guidelines evidence of trends in Arabic research or of uniformity in Arab planning practice.

3.7. Critical Synthesis of the Literature

The works reviewed reveal three levels that should remain distinct yet connected: identifying desirable characteristics of strategic spatial planning, explaining its institutional and theoretical diversity, and examining its presence and outcomes in practice. This distinction avoids reading a normative definition as a confirmed description of all plans or treating variation in practice as evidence that the concept is absent.

The following table summarises the contributions of the principal perspectives and the questions derived from them for this paper.

Table 1: Literature perspectives and their implications for the comparative and diagnostic framework.

Perspective	Representative references	Main contribution	Question derived for this study
Strategic characteristics	Albrechts, 2004, 2006	Grounding selectivity, integration, visioning and an orientation towards action	How can these characteristics be verified in decisions?
Relational understanding of place	Healey, 2004	Understanding place through spatial relationships and dynamics	How does understanding spatial relationships influence intervention choices?
Multiple schools of thought	Ziafati Bafarasat, 2015	Demonstrating diverse theoretical interpretations of the approach	Where does theoretical difference end and ambiguity begin?
Coproduction and institutional capacity	Albrechts, 2013; Trygg & Wenander, 2022	Connecting planning to actors' roles and institutional resources	What evidence demonstrates influential participation and implementation capacity?
Connecting preparation and implementation	Hersperger et al., 2019	Analysing process components and their relationships with spatial transformation	How can document content be distinguished from actual impact?
Spatial evaluation and model development in Arabic scholarship	Al-Jarallah & Al-Ribh, 2015, 2016	Analysing plan content and developing a model of considerations covering participation, implementation and review	How can the presence of concepts be linked to their operational functions?

Source: Compiled by the author from the references listed. The questions in the final column are analytical deductions for this study.

Comparison also requires references that explain the other approaches within their own literature. The study therefore draws on Lindblom's distinction between the rational-comprehensive model and successive limited comparisons as two logics of decision-making, rather than descriptions of all urban planning practice (Lindblom, 1959). Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organisations is used to define the subject and organisational scope of organisational strategy (Bryson & George, 2024). Faludi informs the treatment of planning performance and its relationship with decisions: attention to the function of plans in decision-making predates the framework proposed here (Faludi, 2000).

3.8. Research Gap and Position of the Present Study

The reviewed literature has made important contributions to defining the characteristics of strategic spatial planning, explaining its relational and institutional dimensions, and analysing the connection between plan preparation and implementation. It also includes Arabic contributions to assessing the spatial dimension in strategies and developing models of its considerations. The gap addressed here is therefore the need for a critical synthesis that connects these contributions within a conceptual treatment for Arabic scholarship and translates them into clear criteria for comparison and diagnosis.

Within the literature reviewed, this gap comprises three interrelated levels

First, the conceptual and classificatory level. There is a need to clarify relationships between the premises, foundations, concepts, dimensions and methods of strategic spatial planning and to distinguish its defining characteristics from its normative objectives. This includes clarifying its position within planning by separating the planning approach from the spatial scale, sectoral domain, instrument and document. Such clarification helps determine whether differences between definitions reflect reasoned theoretical diversity or ambiguity in the use of the concept.

Second, the comparative level. There is a need for comparison based on shared, explicit criteria that clarifies distinctiveness, overlap and complementarity with other planning approaches. This requires moving beyond a general contrast between 'traditional' and 'strategic' planning to analyse planning's subject matter, understanding of place, logic of priority setting, actors' roles, outputs, and arrangements for implementation and evaluation. It also requires recognising that categories such as urban, regional and national planning represent scales at which strategic spatial planning may be applied.

Third, the operational and diagnostic level. Conceptual characteristics need to be translated into examinable indicators and evidence, distinguishing between mentioning a concept, explaining it, using it to construct choices and decisions, and providing evidence of its implementation. This also requires distinguishing the evaluation of a scholarly study, a plan document, and practice and its outcomes, since each calls for different evidence.

In light of these levels, the study develops a conceptual treatment for Arabic scholarship that incorporates international theoretical advances, clarifies how the concept is expressed and used in Arabic literature, and recognises diverse institutional and planning contexts. It assumes neither a separate Arab concept nor uniform Arab practices. Its aim is a clear treatment that can support research, education and planning evaluation.

The intended contribution links conceptual grounding, systematic comparison and operational diagnosis within one framework. The study explicitly compares its framework with earlier ones to define the nature and limits of this contribution. Estimating the prevalence of ambiguity in Arabic scholarship and validating the instrument remain tasks for subsequent research, rather than prerequisites for the conceptual findings presented here.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design and Scope

This is a critical comparative conceptual study based on a selective integrative review of foundational, interpretive and empirical literature. It seeks to reorganise the concept and derive criteria for comparison and diagnosis. Its unit of inference is the conceptual argument and its relationship to the evidence on which the source relies. The study does not present a comprehensive systematic review, a bibliometric survey or findings from coding a representative sample of Arabic scholarship.

The analysis produces an operational definition, terminological and classificatory clarification, a comparison of the logics of approaches and the functions of instruments, and a proposed diagnostic framework. Examples in the analysis are hypothetical illustrations of reasoning, rather than field cases or tests of the framework's validity.

4.2. Reference Base and Use of Sources

The conceptual grounding draws on Albrechts, Healey and Ziafati Bafarasat to identify characteristics, conceptions of place and schools of thought, and on Hersperger et al. and Trygg and Wenander to examine plan preparation, implementation and institutional capacity. The two studies by Al-Jarallah and Al-Ribh are used as directly relevant Arabic contributions without generalising their content to Arabic scholarship as a whole. The comparison is supplemented by Lindblom, Faludi, Bryson and George, and an institutional reference available in Arabic issued by UN-Habitat.

These sources were selected for their direct relevance to definition, decision-making logic, implementation or evaluation; the final reference list contains 13 sources.

This number does not indicate comprehensive coverage of the field. The review drew on available texts, publishers' pages and scholarly repositories, including the full text of Al-Jarallah and Al-Ribh (2016), particularly its methodology and the model in Table 5, to identify the model's components, areas of overlap and the limits of the proposed contribution.

4.3. Stages of Conceptual Analysis

The analysis was organised into four connected stages: identifying the meanings of the term and its level of classification; grouping its characteristics into premises, foundations, dimensions and processes; comparing the logic of choice and the functions of documents and outputs; and translating the resulting synthesis into diagnostic questions, evidence and judgement rules. Table 2 summarises the analytical dimensions used to construct the argument. It is not a coding guide applied empirically to a sample of plans.

Table 2: Dimensions of conceptual analysis and their outputs.

Analytical dimension	Analytical output
Meaning and level of classification	An operational definition distinguishing the approach from scale, sector and document
Premises, foundations and dimensions	An account of the relationship between spatial understanding, choice and institutions
Processes and methods	Linking tools to the decisions they support
Comparison of the logics of approaches	Reasoned distinctions without generalisation to all practices
Evidence and limits of judgement	A diagnostic framework, rules of use and circumstances in which judgement is not possible

Source: Developed by the author to organise the conceptual analysis.

4.4. Structuring the Comparison and Deriving the Framework

Comparison was conducted at two levels. The first addressed the logic of approaches through criteria concerning problem framing, relationships between ends and means, alternatives and priorities, time and uncertainty, knowledge and actors, and outputs, implementation and evaluation. The second examined the relationship of the approach to sectoral domains, organisational units, spatial scales and regulatory documents. Separating these levels prevents the approach from being equated with a scale or instrument, while recognising that a single plan may combine more than one logic.

Diagnostic questions were derived by linking each characteristic to its role in decision-making and the type of evidence needed to examine it. Textual evidence was then distinguished from evidence of practice and impacts, and descriptive rules were established for assessing evidential adequacy. Comparison with earlier frameworks specifies what has been retained and what has been reorganised. Conceptual coherence alone is not taken to demonstrate superiority or empirical validity.

4.5. Limits of Inference

The strength of the findings rests on clarity of reasoning, consistency of classification and traceability to the references. Limitations arise from the selective literature base, uneven access to texts, limited coverage of Arabic scholarship and differences between institutional systems. Consequently, the study does not establish the prevalence of ambiguity, measure planning effectiveness or demonstrate the validity and reliability of the framework. Conditions for testing it and reviewing its rules are presented in the discussion as a separate research agenda.

5. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Foundations of Strategic Spatial Planning

The theoretical framework synthesises three related perspectives: a strategic perspective explaining priority selection and the direction of action, a relational perspective explaining place through its structure and relationships, and an institutional perspective explaining how decisions are formed and implemented in settings involving multiple actors. These perspectives are linked to a process perspective connecting strategy preparation, implementation and evaluation. This synthesis is an analytical choice made for this study to clarify the concept and derive criteria for comparison and diagnosis, while recognising the diversity of schools of thought on strategic spatial planning.

5.1. Position within the Planning System

Addressing the concept requires identifying its level of classification. The study treats strategic spatial planning as an approach to organising the understanding of spatial transformations, making choices and directing collective action. Urban, regional and national planning refer to spatial scales at which this approach may be adopted, while sectoral planning refers to a substantive domain. Master, structure and regulatory plans perform functions that vary between planning systems.

This understanding implies several possible relationships between strategic spatial planning and other categories. They may differ in their decision-making logic; the approach may be applied at a particular spatial scale; or its

directions may be translated through a regulatory instrument or implementation programme. Strategic spatial character is therefore examined through the features of the process and the content of choices, with due regard to the document's legal and institutional function.

Table 3: Strategic spatial planning within levels of planning classification.

Classification level	Question addressed	Examples	Relationship with strategic spatial planning
Planning approach	How are issues understood and choices made?	Rational-comprehensive; strategic spatial	Basis for comparing planning logics and processes
Spatial scale	At what scale does planning occur?	Urban; regional; national	A scale at which the approach is applied
Substantive domain	Which issues or sectors are involved?	Transport; housing; health; environment	A subject for integration and spatial appraisal
Document or instrument	How are directions expressed and decisions regulated?	Structure plans; land-use regulation	A means that may embody some characteristics of the approach
Programme or project	How are choices translated into interventions?	Service programmes and infrastructure projects	A setting for implementation and assessing consistency with the strategy

Source: Analytical classification proposed for this study.

This classification is a terminological convention for comparison, rather than an exhaustive account of the meanings of urban and regional planning. Each also denotes a professional and intellectual field with its own subject matter and institutions. An organisation is a unit of accountability and action, whereas a sector is a substantive domain that may extend across multiple organisations and scales. Any document should be interpreted in terms of these meanings within its planning system before comparison.

5.2. The Strategic Premise of Choice, Selectivity and Action

The strategic component rests on the recognition that resources and institutional capacities are limited and that spatial issues differ in importance, effects and scope for intervention. Planning therefore requires identifying critical issues, developing and appraising alternatives, and sequencing interventions in relation to a vision of a place's future. This interpretation draws on Albrechts's treatment of selectivity, visioning and an orientation towards action as central characteristics of strategic spatial planning (Albrechts, 2004, 2006).

The study understands selectivity as the reasoned choice of issues and interventions capable of influencing the trajectory of development. Such choice requires explaining why an issue receives priority, how it relates to other issues, which alternatives were considered, and the expected effects of allocating resources to it. In this sense, selectivity complements a broad diagnosis of economic, social and environmental relationships.

A future vision provides direction when it offers a basis for appraising choices. Its operational value becomes clear through the decisions it informs: which activities receive priority, where interventions are concentrated, and how responsibilities and resources are allocated. The study therefore concludes that a long time horizon is insufficient to define strategic character, which also depends on the clarity of choice and its connection to action.

5.3. The Relational Premise of Place as Locations and Relationships

The relational perspective understands place through the relationships connecting populations, activities, institutions and resources, alongside the characteristics and distribution of locations. Healey highlighted the importance of this understanding in analysing spatial strategies, drawing attention to dynamics and connections that may extend beyond contiguous areas and administrative boundaries (Healey, 2004).

Accordingly, the spatial component of the proposed framework comprises two complementary levels: spatial structure, including the distribution of populations, activities, services and infrastructure; and spatial relationships, including flows associated with movement, work, services and resources, as well as interdependence between places.

This distinction matters when defining a planning problem. Limited access to a service may be related to its location, the transport network, operating hours, the distribution of users or overlapping responsibilities among the relevant organisations. The problem is therefore understood through the relationships between these elements, and intervention is selected on the basis of that diagnosis.

This conception does not negate administrative boundaries, which continue to shape jurisdiction, funding

and accountability. It does, however, require examining how well the functional extent of a problem matches the jurisdiction of the responsible authority and identifying coordination arrangements when spatial relationships cross organisational boundaries.

5.4. The Institutional Premise of Multiple Actors and Collective Capacity

Spatial choices are made in settings involving government bodies, private actors and local communities with different interests, knowledge, resources and powers. The institutional perspective therefore explains planning as a process shaped by the rules, procedures and relationships governing these actors' participation and influence on decisions.

Albrechts linked the coproduction perspective to reconsidering the roles of professionals and communities in policy and service preparation and implementation (Albrechts, 2013). Trygg and Wenander focused on knowledge resources, relational resources and mobilisation capacity as components of planners' institutional capacity to practise strategic spatial planning (Trygg & Wenander, 2022).

The study derives from these contributions the need to analyse participation through its effects: who participated, at which stage, what knowledge they contributed, and how their contributions affected choices. Analysis must also examine actors denied opportunities to participate and those capable of authorising, funding or obstructing decisions.

Spatial governance is understood here as the arrangements for coordinating decisions about place and allocating responsibilities and accountability across organisations and levels. Implementation capacity depends on the consistency of these arrangements with declared directions and on the ability to mobilise the required resources.

5.5. The Process Perspective Linking Strategy Formulation and Implementation

Strategy requires mechanisms connecting broad directions to decisions, programmes and projects. Hersperger et al. provided a framework linking the components of plan preparation and implementation and emphasised the importance of studying their relationships to understand planning's influence on urban transformation (Hersperger et al., 2019).

The study adopts this connection as a basis for understanding the planning process. Implementation possibilities should inform choices, while implementation experience supplies information for their review. Flexibility is accordingly understood as an organised capacity to modify means or priorities in response to evidence and explicitly identified changes, while maintaining clear responsibilities and reasons for decisions.

The framework distinguishes three objects of evaluation: the quality of directions and choices, the adequacy of implementation arrangements, and realised spatial impacts. Each requires appropriate evidence. An implementation programme demonstrates preparedness for action, whereas judging outcomes requires data on interventions and their effects.

5.6. Organising Foundations of Strategic Spatial Planning

The study derives seven interrelated foundations from the preceding perspectives for use in comparison and diagnosis. These represent a proposed analytical synthesis. Some characteristics are shared with other planning approaches, and their significance arises from how they combine and function within the process.

Table 4: Organising foundations and their operational implications.

Foundation	Meaning in the proposed framework	Examinable operational implication
Relational spatial diagnosis	Understanding distribution, connections and interactions between places	Spatial relationship analysis influences issue definition
Reasoned selectivity	Choosing priority issues and interventions	Reasons for appraisal and the resulting resource allocation are provided
Integration	Addressing connections and conflicts across sectors and levels	Sectoral choices are adjusted in light of their combined effects
A guiding spatial vision	Defining a future direction that organises choices	Interventions are consistent with a clear conception of the place's future
Influential participation	Incorporating actors' knowledge and interests into decisions	The influence of participation on choices is documented
Connection to implementation	Linking directions to responsibilities, resources and procedures	Implementing bodies, instruments and sequencing are specified
Learning and review	Using monitoring to evaluate and revise choices	Review mechanisms draw on information and evidence

Source: Author's synthesis of the theoretical perspectives discussed.

5.7. Analytical Dimensions and the Distinction between Characteristics and Objectives

The preceding foundations specify how planning is organised, whereas dimensions define the domains through which a spatial issue is examined. In this study, these comprise spatial and functional, economic and social, environmental, institutional and political, and temporal dimensions. The distribution of benefits and burdens is examined across these dimensions to identify how choices affect places and social groups differently.

The economic dimension concerns the locations and connections of activities and opportunities; the social dimension concerns needs, access and unequal benefits; the environmental dimension concerns resources, constraints and reciprocal effects; the institutional dimension explains capacity, jurisdiction and accountability; and the temporal dimension connects current interventions with future trajectories of transformation.

The study analytically separates the characteristics of the approach, normative objectives and realised outcomes. Participation and integration, for example, can be examined as process characteristics, whereas equity and sustainability are objectives requiring definitions and indicators. Assessing their achievement requires impact data. This separation makes it possible to evaluate practice without inferring success from its label or declared objectives.

5.8. Operational Definition and Proposed Explanatory Model

On this basis, the study defines strategic spatial planning as:

An institutional process for guiding the transformation of places and their relationships, based on integrated spatial diagnosis, the reasoned selection of issues and priorities, the development of a vision and choices with relevant actors, and their connection to arrangements for implementation, monitoring and review.

This definition combines planning's subject matter—places, their transformations and relationships—with its logic of choice and integration, its institutional conditions of actors and resources, and its continuity through implementation and learning.

The proposed explanatory model holds that planning's influence on spatial transformation is related to the coherence of four components: understanding place, the logic of choice, institutional capacity, and arrangements for implementation and learning. These relationships are used to explain gaps between vision and practice. Extensive spatial knowledge may exist without clear priorities, declared choices without implementation arrangements, or completed projects without sufficient connection to the spatial direction.

Four propositions guide the analysis

1. Strategic spatial character becomes evident when understanding spatial relationships influences the appraisal of choices and the setting of priorities.
2. Translating choices into interventions requires consistency between responsibilities, resources and decision-making authority.
3. Participation and integration are evaluated through their effects on decisions and procedures, with due regard to institutional context.
4. Judging the effectiveness of the approach requires separating process characteristics, output quality and realised impacts.

These propositions are treated as explanatory proposals guiding comparison and diagnosis, open to revision in light of cases and evidence. The contribution to Arabic scholarship consists in clarifying the vocabulary of this conceptual construction, explaining its relationships and examining its relevance to diverse Arab contexts, while maintaining a critical connection with international literature.

5.9. Terminological Clarification for Arabic Scholarship

The study uses makani as the Arabic equivalent of 'spatial', denoting distribution, relationships, connectivity and interactions across scales. It treats majali as a possible alternative whose use must be interpreted within the source, without assuming equivalence across all scholarly traditions. 'Spatial extent' refers to the domain within which locations and relationships are organised, whereas 'place' is used when emphasising a location's characteristics, meanings and connections. These are operational distinctions for this study, rather than linguistic prescriptions that invalidate other usages.

The Arabic term madkhal ('approach') denotes the logic of understanding an issue and organising decisions; manhaj ('methodology') denotes research design and the rationale for its procedures; and uslub ('method' or 'technique') denotes a specific procedure, such as scenario development or multicriteria appraisal. Adat ('instrument' or 'tool') denotes a means of analysis, regulation or implementation, such as a database or land-use controls. A wathiqa ('plan document') presents directions and decisions and should not be equated with the planning process that produced it.

The meaning of 'territorial' varies with context and should not automatically be rendered as iqlimi ('regional') in the sense of a single administrative level. The Arabic title of the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning illustrates the importance of examining a document's content and scales when interpreting terminology (UN-Habitat, 2015). Such clarification supports comparison of functions and arguments rather than reliance on verbal equivalence alone.

6. Analysis

The analysis translates the preceding conceptual grounding into comparisons and diagnostic rules. Its material consists of conceptual relationships derived from the literature. The example below is hypothetical, and its implications are not attributed to any particular plan or community.

6.1. The Relationship between the Strategic and Spatial Components

The first issue is what the combination of strategic and spatial components adds to the planning process. The strategic component organises choices between issues and alternatives, while the spatial component specifies the relationships and distributions that should influence those choices. They become integrated when understanding place informs priority setting and strategic decisions seek to change its relationships and structure.

A hypothetical example concerning health services illustrates this relationship. Increasing the number of centres is a sectoral direction, and locating them is a spatial decision. Addressing unequal access to services, however, requires analysing population distribution and needs, transport networks, service areas and the capacities of the organisations involved. Alternatives might then include building new centres, improving connections, reallocating resources or providing mobile services. Strategic spatial character lies in the reasoned relationship between the diagnosis, these alternatives and their implementation arrangements.

The study accordingly proposes examining integration through two connected questions: has spatial analysis changed the ranking of priorities, and have interventions been designed to modify specific spatial relationships? These questions distinguish using place in strategy-making from using it to display decisions already made.

6.2. Selectivity and Integration as Complementary Levels of Analysis and Decision

Selectivity and integration are among the characteristics identified by Albrechts for strategic spatial planning (Albrechts, 2006). Considering them together reveals the need to distinguish the breadth of understanding from the focus of intervention.

Integrated diagnosis examines connections across sectors, levels and effects, while selectivity identifies priority issues in light of that diagnosis. Analysis might address transport, housing, employment and services as a system, then select improved connections between residential areas and employment centres as an intervention with multiple effects.

The soundness of selectivity depends on clear reasons for choice, the alternatives rejected and expected distributional effects. Merely limiting a plan to a small set of projects, without explaining their relationships to problems and objectives, is insufficient evidence of reasoned strategic choice.

6.3. Processes, Methods and the Role of Tools

Operational clarification requires examining a tool's function within the planning process. Geographic information systems, SWOT analysis, scenarios and appraisal techniques can serve multiple approaches. Their significance depends on the decisions they support and on how their results are used.

Table 5: Processes, methods and evidence of their strategic spatial use.

Process	Possible methods and tools	Evidence required for analysis
Diagnosing issues	Spatial analysis; network and accessibility analysis; policy review	Diagnostic findings inform the identification of priority issues
Actor analysis	Analysis of interests, responsibilities and resources; interviews and workshops	Actors' roles and their capacity to influence decisions and implementation are explained
Developing futures and alternatives	Spatial visioning; scenarios; conceptions of distribution and connectivity	Options with different spatial effects are presented
Appraisal and choice	Multicriteria evaluation; impact analysis; deliberation	Selection criteria and reasons for preferring an alternative are documented
Organising implementation	Programming interventions; assigning responsibilities and funding	Each intervention is linked to a responsible body, resources and a sequence of action
Monitoring and review	Performance and impact indicators; periodic reviews	Findings are used to revise decisions or implementation arrangements

Source: Developed by the author from the theoretical framework.

This analysis indicates that a list of tools cannot define the approach. A map of service distribution acquires a strategic function when it informs the explanation of inequality and the choice of intervention. Participation

becomes influential when documents or other evidence demonstrate its effects on decisions.

6.4. Comparing the Logics of Planning Approaches

The study compares strategic spatial planning with the rational-comprehensive and incremental models. Including the latter helps distinguish strategic selectivity from merely limiting the scope of change. The two comparator models are presented through Lindblom's analytical distinction, without assuming that they describe all plans or institutions (Lindblom, 1959). The strategic spatial planning column represents this study's synthesis of strategic, relational and institutional perspectives.

Table 6: Comparison of approaches to decision-making.

Criterion	Strategic spatial planning	Rational-comprehensive analytical model	Incremental analytical model
Problem framing	Connects critical issues to spatial distributions and relationships	Defines the problem and objectives before comparing means	Addresses a specific problem from the existing situation
Ends and means	A vision guides choices and is reviewed through implementation experience	Objectives are distinguished first, followed by selection of the most suitable means	Ends and means develop together during comparison
Alternatives and priorities	Reasoned selection with examination of spatial effects	A broad range of alternatives and a search for the optimal choice	Comparison of a limited number of closely related alternatives
Time and uncertainty	Future direction, phased interventions and organised review	Seeks to expand information and predict outcomes	Successive steps informed by experience and correction
Knowledge	Spatial analysis, institutional knowledge and actors' experience	Emphasis on systematic analysis of objectives and alternatives	Emphasis on experience and limited practical comparisons
Actors	Develops shared choices while examining power and capacity	Organises decisions around objectives and appraisal criteria	Compromises and adjustments within existing decision-making relationships
Outputs and implementation	Spatial direction, priorities and arrangements for action	A choice justified in relation to objectives	Successive decisions and gradual adjustment
Basis of evaluation	Influence of knowledge on choice, followed by implementation and outcomes	Suitability of means for achieving specified objectives	Workability of the step and correction of problems

Source: Author's synthesis, drawing on Lindblom (1959) for the rational and incremental models, and Albrechts (2004, 2006) and Healey (2004) for strategic spatial planning. The rows are shared comparative questions, not a scale for ranking approaches.

The central difference concerns the organisation of choice. Strategic selectivity relates to a direction for transforming place, whereas incrementalism is understood through the proximity of alternatives to the existing situation. Nevertheless, a spatial strategy can be implemented through incremental steps, and detailed rational analysis can be used within a selected strategic issue. Rigidity or absence of participation should not automatically be attributed to any comprehensive plan.

Organisational strategic planning shares the spatial approach's concern with developing directions and organising implementation. Its distinctive focus is the organisation, its mission and its capacity to achieve results (Bryson & George, 2024). It is therefore treated as strategic practice with a different unit of concern, rather than an opposing approach. When an organisation leads a strategy for a place, its organisational outcomes must be distinguished from spatial outcomes requiring the commitment of other bodies.

6.5. Relationships with Sectors, Institutions, Documents and Spatial Scales

Relationships with plans and instruments differ from comparisons between approaches: a document can perform a regulatory function while also embodying a strategic spatial direction.

Table 7: Complementary relationships within the planning system.

Category	Main function in the comparison	Relationship with strategic spatial planning
Sectoral planning	Organises a sector's objectives, resources and services	Can be strategic and spatial; its effects and connections with other sectors require examination
Organisational strategy	Organises an institution's direction, capacities and accountability	Contributes to implementation without reducing spatial transformation to one organisation's performance
Land-use regulation	Defines uses and controls under the applicable system	Translates some directions into regulatory rules
Master or structure plan	Expresses the future organisation of a city or region	May embody the approach, depending on its content and preparation and implementation processes
Urban planning	Addresses issues at the city scale	A scale at which the approach is applied
Regional and national planning	Addresses relationships and distributions across broader areas	Scales for application and coordination between spatial levels
Operational planning	Organises activities, responsibilities and resources	Details the requirements for implementing choices
Project planning	Prepares and implements specific interventions	Translates priorities into actions that can be delivered and evaluated

Source: Developed by the author.

These relationships show that functional distinctiveness can coexist with institutional complementarity. Depending on context, spatial directions require regulatory instruments, investment decisions and operational programmes. The strength of their relationship depends on their consistency and on mechanisms for resolving conflicts and updating decisions.

6.6. Potential Sources of Conceptual Ambiguity

Conceptual grounding and comparison identify potential forms of ambiguity and criteria for examining them, without treating these as demonstrated findings about their prevalence.

Table 8: Potential forms of ambiguity and criteria for their examination.

Potential ambiguity	Problem	Examination criterion
Equating strategic with long-term	Reducing the logic of choice to duration	Priorities, alternatives and reasons for decisions are present
Equating spatial with maps	Reducing relational understanding to a presentation medium	Spatial analysis influences problem definition and intervention choice
Equating integration with collecting sectoral plans	Failing to address conflict and interdependence	Choices change as a result of coordination across sectors
Equating participation with holding meetings	Inferring influence from attendance alone	Participants' influence on choices is documented
Equating strategy with a project list	Insufficient explanation of how interventions relate to the desired transformation	Projects and their sequencing are consistent with the spatial direction
Contrasting strategic with urban or regional	Comparing an approach with a spatial scale	The classification level and nature of the relationship are clear
Inferring success from sustainability and equity objectives	Confusing intention with outcome	Indicators and evidence of impacts are available

Source: Analytical propositions proposed for testing.

6.7. The Proposed Diagnostic Framework

The framework organises diagnosis into three connected domains: problem framing and choice, capacity for collective action, and implementation and learning. Impact evaluation is treated separately as a subsequent level requiring independent data.

Table 9: Diagnostic framework for strategic spatial planning.

Domain	Diagnostic question	Appropriate evidence
Spatial diagnosis	Has understanding distribution and relationships influenced issue identification?	Spatial analyses explicitly linked to problem definition
Strategic choice	Has there been reasoned appraisal of alternatives?	Selection criteria, alternatives and reasons for priority
Future direction	Does the vision provide a basis for decisions?	Consistency between the spatial conception and interventions
Integration	Have relationships and conflicts across sectors and levels been addressed?	Documented alignment decisions and negotiated adjustments
Participation and institutional capacity	Are actors' roles, influence and capacities clear?	Evidence of participation, responsibilities and commitments
Implementation	Are choices linked to responsibilities and resources?	Programmes, funding, implementation instruments and schedules
Learning	Does monitoring enable the review of choices?	Indicators, review mechanisms and corrective decisions
Impacts for subsequent evaluation	Is there evidence of spatial transformation?	Independent outcome data and explanations of change; these are not required to determine the character of a recent plan

Source: Developed by the author from the analysis.

The framework is used to produce a reasoned description of each case, recording missing evidence and inapplicable criteria. Its domains should not be aggregated into an overall score before the justification for weights and their relationships has been examined. Nor is a lack of impact evidence sufficient to deny strategic spatial character to a recent plan, although it limits judgements about effectiveness.

Using the framework requires first identifying the object of judgement. For a theoretical study, conceptual precision and argumentative coherence are examined; for a plan document, written choices and commitments; for practice, decisions, funding and implementation; and for impact evaluation, changes and alternative explanations. A theoretical source should not be penalised for lacking implementation data outside its subject matter.

Table 10: Rules for describing evidence when using the proposed framework.

Evidence status	Judgement rule	Permissible conclusion
Sufficient for the specified judgement	Explicit evidence connects the characteristic to a decision or procedure within the object of examination	The characteristic is documented in this respect and within the source's limits
Partial	A characteristic or procedure is mentioned without explaining its connection to a decision	There is an indication requiring further evidence
Conflicting	Supporting and contradictory evidence coexist without an explanation of their relationship	Judgement remains unresolved; the conflict requires explanation
Not reported in the text	No evidence is found after examining the specified document	Documentation is absent from the source; absence in practice is not established
Unclear or unavailable	Expression is ambiguous or relevant documents are missing	Judgement is not possible for a specified reason
Not applicable	The criterion lies outside the source's purpose or the plan's stage	The criterion is excluded with an explanation

Source: Operational rules proposed by the author; not empirically tested.

For example, declaring an intention to 'improve access to services' provides partial evidence of a spatial priority. Evidence of choice becomes stronger if the document explains inequalities in access, intervention alternatives and reasons for preferring an option. Demonstrating actual improvement requires independent monitoring data and does not follow merely from the completeness of these textual elements. If the implementation budget contradicts

the declared priority, the evidence is recorded as conflicting until the discrepancy is explained. This is a hypothetical operational example, not a test of the instrument.

6.8. Position of the Framework Relative to Earlier Contributions

The following comparison attributes components to their sources and specifies how this study reorganises them. It compares purposes and levels of analysis; it neither establishes the proposed framework's superiority nor claims to cover all published frameworks.

Table 11: Comparison with earlier contributions and specification of the proposed contribution.

Earlier contribution	Basis drawn upon	Additional organisation provided by this study
Albrechts (2004, 2006)	Strategic characteristics and the connection to action	Translates characteristics into decision-related questions while specifying levels of comparison
Healey (2004)	Understanding place through its relationships	Links spatial diagnosis to evidence of appraisal and choice
Faludi (2000)	Importance of the relationship between planning and decisions in evaluation	Separates the identity of the approach from the adequacy of evidence on implementation and impact
Al-Jarallah & Al-Ribh (2015)	Analysis of the presence of spatial terms in plans	Examines the function of a term within the argument and decision
Al-Jarallah & Al-Ribh (2016)	A model with ten aspects and 32 considerations, including participation, coordination, implementation and review (Table 5, pp. 52–53)	Links characteristics to questions, evidence and judgement rules, and separates document, practice and impact without retesting the model or its importance classifications
Hersperger et al. (2019), SPlaMI framework	Relationships between plan preparation, implementation and context	Adds a classificatory perspective and rules governing the limits of judgement appropriate to each source type
Trygg & Wenander (2022)	Knowledge, relationships and institutional mobilisation	Requires specific evidence of capacity and commitment within the object examined

Source: Author's analytical comparison with the references listed. For comparison with the 2016 model, see the full text, particularly Table 5, pp. 52–53.

Accordingly, the study does not claim to have discovered selectivity, spatial relationships or connections to implementation and review. These are established in the literature and in the model of Al-Jarallah and Al-Ribh (2016). Its specific contribution is to organise this knowledge within a treatment for Arabic scholarship that combines terminological clarification, levels of comparison, evidence types and judgement rules. This organisation can be debated conceptually; its value as a repeatedly usable diagnostic instrument requires independent validation.

7. Findings

The analysis produces six conceptual findings corresponding to the research questions:

1. Strategic, relational and institutional premises complement one another in explaining the selection of spatial issues and the capacity to intervene. Differences between schools remain legitimate when their theoretical bases are clear. The framework therefore presents an explicit synthesis of these premises, rather than a single definition binding on all planning traditions.
2. The strategic and spatial components are integrated when the interpretation of distributions and relationships influences appraisal and the identification of interventions. The operational definition specifies this connection, while terminological clarification prevents the approach from being equated with its document or any single method.
3. Foundations, dimensions and processes perform different functions: foundations organise the logic of action, dimensions specify domains of examination, and methods support particular procedures. The same tool can therefore be used in different approaches without independently defining the identity of planning.
4. Comparison requires separating the logic of decisions from the unit of application and the instruments used.

Strategic selectivity differs conceptually from comprehensive consideration of alternatives and incremental change, although these can coexist in practice. Sectoral and organisational plans and regulatory documents can also contribute to implementing a spatial strategy.

5. Potential forms of ambiguity were derived concerning time, maps, integration, participation, projects, classification levels and normative objectives. These are diagnostic hypotheses, not evidence of their prevalence in Arabic scholarship or actual plans.
6. A diagnostic framework was developed linking domains, questions and evidence, alongside rules distinguishing sufficient, partial, conflicting and unavailable evidence. Comparison with earlier contributions locates the contribution in the organisation of these relationships for Arabic scholarship. The instrument's validity and the reliability of its judgements remain subjects for subsequent testing.

8. DISCUSSION

8.1. Implications in Relation to the Foundational Literature

Table 11 shows that the framework's conceptual foundations are established in the literature and that this study contributes by organising their use in comparison and diagnosis. Its focus on the connection between knowledge and choice is consistent with the relational perspective and strategic characteristics, and with understanding planning performance through its relationship with decisions (Albrechts, 2004, 2006; Healey, 2004; Faludi, 2000).

The theoretical implication is that breaks within a planning argument can be located between knowledge and priority, priority and commitment, or commitment and implementation. Identifying such a break does not establish the failure of an entire plan. It may reflect the limitations of the available document, the timing of evaluation or an institutional conflict requiring additional sources.

8.2. Theoretical Diversity and the Limits of a General Definition

Ziafati Bafarasat demonstrated the existence of multiple schools explaining strategic spatial planning and their differing emphases on participation, integration and projects (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2015). The proposed operational definition should accordingly be understood as an instrument for this study that accommodates a degree of diversity and allows differences to be made explicit.

This finding calls for caution against broadening the definition until it loses its discriminating capacity or narrowing it so far that it excludes established practices merely because their contexts differ. The framework addresses this tension by focusing on relationships between components and the available evidence, while leaving some characteristics and their degree of realisation open to comparative interpretation.

8.3. Distinctiveness and Complementarity in Planning

The comparison shows that distinguishing strategic spatial planning does not require dispensing with land-use regulation, sectoral planning or projects. These fulfil necessary functions within decision-making systems and can provide means of implementing spatial directions.

The practical issue requiring examination is possible inconsistency between these functions. A vision may seek better accessibility while investment decisions reinforce separation between housing and employment; an environmental priority may be declared without corresponding changes to regulations and programmes. Analysing consistency across levels of decision-making is therefore more informative than classifying documents by their titles alone.

8.4. Participation, Power and Implementation Capacity

The importance of institutional capacity is consistent with Albrechts's coproduction perspective and with Trygg and Wenander's analysis of knowledge, relational and mobilisation resources (Albrechts, 2013; Trygg & Wenander, 2022). The present comparison adds the requirement to connect participation assessment with the distribution of decision-making authority and resources, since opportunities to express views differ from the capacity to influence choices.

Understanding Arab contexts consequently requires analysis of actual arrangements: organisational responsibilities, coordination patterns, funding sources and local communities' roles. These cannot be inferred from a single assumption about all Arab countries or cities.

8.5. Significance and Limits of the Contribution to Arabic Scholarship

The proposed conceptual treatment builds on earlier Arabic contributions. Frequency analysis examines the presence of terms, while the 2016 model organises considerations of the approach and includes participation, coordination, implementation and review. The present framework focuses on connecting these characteristics to diagnostic questions, evidence and judgement rules, while separating evaluation of the document from evaluation of practice and impact. This changes the instrument's function and organisation; it does not retest the Delphi model or its classifications by importance.

The contribution to Arabic scholarship goes beyond translating an international definition by distinguishing terminological levels, rules of use and the limits of judgement about documents and practice. Nevertheless, two Arabic studies cannot adequately represent the field's trends. Engagement with a wider range of Arabic scholarship and institutional contexts remains necessary. Comparison with the full text of the 2016 model clarifies

how it informs the present work without claiming the superiority or empirical validity of the current framework.

8.6. Proposed Uses and Requirements for Subsequent Validation

The framework can serve as a set of guiding questions in planning education, the reading of scholarly studies and reviews of document consistency. It is not an accreditation or plan-ranking scale. Its application should identify the source type, date and scope, attach evidence to every judgement, and state what could not be examined.

Subsequent validation requires selecting well-documented cases, developing a guide with examples for each category and cases of overlap, and testing the judgement rules with more than one analyst while examining reasons for disagreement. A single researcher may repeat the analysis at a later time, but this does not replace testing agreement between independent analysts. Impact evaluation requires monitoring data and explanations of other factors influencing spatial transformation.

Investigating ambiguity in Arabic scholarship requires a separate protocol specifying search platforms, the period covered, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and textual evidence. Any eventual findings would remain bounded by the sample. Separating that research agenda from this paper preserves the distinction between conceptual construction and empirical testing.

9. CONCLUSION

The study has developed a conceptual treatment of strategic spatial planning for Arabic scholarship, connecting its strategic, relational and institutional premises to its processes and tools. It has shown that a useful distinction rests on how understanding place influences choice and implementation, while recognising differences between contexts and schools of thought.

The comparison separates the logic of the approach from its scale of application, substantive domain and document, and demonstrates possibilities for complementarity between spatial strategy, sectoral and organisational planning, and regulatory instruments. The study also presents a diagnostic framework and descriptive rules for evidence, specifying its contribution as a conceptual and operational organisation of knowledge grounded in earlier frameworks.

The study recommends using this clarification in education and the reading of plans, and subjecting the framework to independent testing before employing it for classification or comparative evaluation. The findings remain within the limits of conceptual analysis: they do not establish the prevalence of ambiguity in Arabic scholarship or assume that fulfilling process characteristics guarantees successful development or equitable impacts.

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