

# AN ABSTRACT

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**Understanding uncertainty in planning:  
Study of the uncertainties of the population forecasts in  
urban plans in Iran**

Uncertainty is an intrinsic notion in planning that is mostly recognized as the obstacle in the process of planning and achieving its goals. So planning devoted practice and theory to reduce this unpopular notion and take control of reality. But all the tools introduced to tackle with uncertainty have sides of subjective and normative characteristics and use of power in themselves that sometimes the sole reason of facing uncertainty is not enough to justify them and they seem to be insufficient in a way that they produce even more uncertainty. In this case planning can be referred as being in a position of redistributing uncertainty (Marris,1996), but even this meaning has its own limitations: Practitioners may deny or be unfamiliar with the responsibility of its consequences, and also still there is normative and subjective aspects of decision making which can affect the planners' sense of identity and result in their confusion.

Healy figuratively depicts this sense of confusion while describing a project with several stakeholders and conflicting values (figure 1). Ostensibly, it would be helpful if planning had a comprehensive narrative of uncertainty that can actually demonstrate what is happening in the planning practice, both to be a weight of the shoulders of the planners if they are scared of this concept, and furthermore to address a shared concern, and subsequently induce a sense of identity among planners and those who practice planning, or are subject to it.

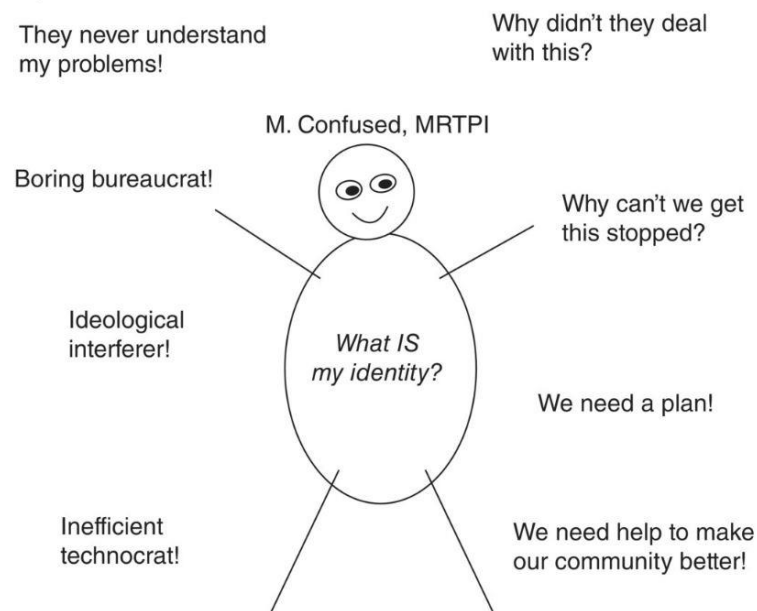


Figure 1 Ambiguity of the planner (Source: Healey,2015)

This research is an interpretive research with a value-oriented approach (Buunk, van der Eidem,2015), which focuses on the definition of uncertainty and the technologies (in terms of tools, different theories, or philosophies) being used against it in planning practice. The chosen context is the planning apparatus of Iran, and the focus of the study is the demographic forecasts in urban plans in the process of conducting, reviewing and approval of the plans. The data were collected with discourse analysis from deep interviews with practitioners and authorities. (table 1)

Shaping an appropriate research design to look at a main quality of wickedness of problems, “*uncertainty*”, was a difficult task. Inevitably the research design brought up the problems of ontology and epistemology, along with perception of time. But initially, another problem needed be solved. When talking about uncertainty it is hard to answer the first response that the critics would not help themselves to use to cast doubt on the whole premise of your communication. They put forth the unsolvable questions of skepticism, the very undeniable attractive confusion that were for so long misunderstood for philosophical questions without bringing any insights. In first step of the research, to open a possible way to get out of skepticism, the concept of “public language” of Wittgenstein was used (Wittgenstein,1969). As the skeptics were talking about the uncertainty of everything, the sole act of talking and use of language was the certainty. (stroll, 2002) With emancipations from this approach the mere possibility of discursive analysis was achievable. This made the first grounds of certainty for the research, or in Wittgenstein words: a “hinge proposition”.

The methodology section of the thesis is important with respect to two different angles; first: finding a research design that can contributes the most to the solidarity of the research; and second: contemplating on how one can approach a question (an uncertainty) and look for answers (certainty) This was an initial demonstration of certainty and uncertainty along with each other with different functions.

In the literature review chapter, the research delves deep into four introduced approaches to uncertainty in the planning theory and one approach in demographic science, and then goes on to compare them with the planners’ crafts of tackling with uncertainties extracted from interviews. These five categories are:

- The technology/ agree-disagree matrix (Christensen,1985)

- Strategic choice (Friend & Hickling,2005)
- Planning as expectation management (Hartmaan,2012)
- Hauntology of urban planning (Gunder,2008)
- Rational and mathematical approach in demographic science (Myers,2001)

After analyzing the meanings that practitioners had for uncertainty and their keywords for referring to certainties, and comparing them to theories, a more inclusive definition of planning was emerged. In this new take on planning, uncertainty does not mean the absence of certainty and an old rival concept, but rather an independent concept that can be present along with it and besides a ground for it. In this definition planning cannot reduce or produce uncertainty, but uncertainty is an inherent characteristic of planning that made it possible to plan in the first place, and it fuels curiosity for further explorations. Within planning, uncertainty has always generated the potential creativity and exercise of power.

At the end, this new definition of planning wrapped around the acceptance of uncertainty is depicted as a metaphoric city, and process of certainty-producing, as buildings in the cities. And planning theories and certainties introduced by plans, like the demographic projections, are just one of the possible certainties (buildings) for the people living in that city. (figure 2)

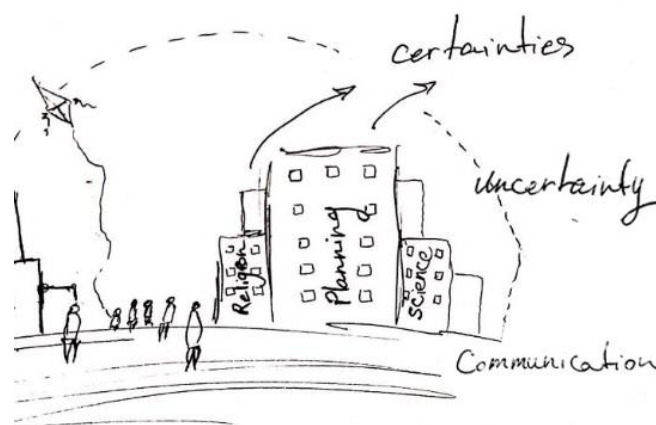


Figure 2 The metaphorical city (Source: author)

In light of what has been said, now the planner can stop running away from uncertainty and use it instead, a state which needs more involvement of self (planners' identities). Thus when we speak of uncertainty in planning we are not referring to the concept of uncertainty, for it is always there, unshakable, and also reliable, on the other hand we are determined and ready to shape a certainty as we asked a question. With such illumination, planners can analyze different certainties of their own or others and gain a powerful viewpoint to infer the reality as uncertain and certain it is.

Table 1 structure of research design

<b>Research context and Research aim</b>	Towards Basic context Theoretical aim
<b>Research purpose</b>	interpretive
<b>Methodological paradigm</b>	Social interpretative, with specification of the epistemology, ontology, and sense of time in interpretative planning
<b>Methodological approach</b>	Qualitative Value-oriented approach
<b>Source of data</b>	Primary source of data
<b>Analysis</b>	Structural context analysis of interviews

## Resources

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