

The Future of Planning

John Bednarz Jr.

At one time libraries may have been involved in planning merely as part of more encompassing endeavors. But they have since come to recognize that they can move “into the future in an assertive manner” only if they undertake programmatic efforts to respond to the exigencies of a rapidly and independently changing environment.¹ This change has been accompanied within the profession by the transition from a traditional to a strategic model of library planning, which implies the acceptance and use of a general systems model.²

Systems

The concept of “system” has a long history. It appears in Aristotle, for instance, for the first time, in Book 2, chapter 4 of the *Generation of Animals* (740a20). The context here is the dispute between Aristotle and Democritus over what becomes distinct in animals first, their external or their internal parts. Democritus holds that it is the external parts, while Aristotle takes the opposite view. What is important for the history of the concept of system is that Aristotle uses the word “συστηματος” (systematos) to designate the *organism* in relation to its *internal* parts.³ According to this interpretation, a system is the relationship not only of the parts to one another, but also of the parts to the whole. The focus here is exclusively internal, and there is no reference to an environment at all.

The authority exercised by Aristotle’s interpretation was not really challenged until theories of equilibrium emerged in the nineteenth century.⁴ The equilibrium approach to systems still maintains a general whole/parts context, but it introduces the concept of the environment as a source of disturbance for the system, “i.e., loss of organization, or a change in the direction of the dissolution of the system.”⁵ In this sense, the relationship between the system and its environment is one-sided and negative for the system. In other words, the environment merely intrudes to upset the system’s (natural) state of equilibrium. And the system has to try to return itself to this state. There is only one “order” for the system. Everything else is disorder for it. And the disorder is expressed by disturbances of its equilibrium. And even though there is the introduction of the concept of the environment in equilibrium theory, the focus is still firmly fixed on the internal relationship of the system’s parts. The system in this sense is closed to its environment; and systems are nonadaptive. Adaptation can occur only when the system is open to its environment.

For open systems, though, the interdependence of system and environment is something normal. Open systems maintain themselves through processes of exchange with their environments in order to create and to preserve their boundaries. In the language of cybernetic systems theory, systems change in order to bring their own complexity into a relationship of correspondence with that of their environment. And this means nothing more than that—as systems encounter new and different environmental situations, they have to develop ways of responding to them. These new ways of responding to an ever-changing environment occur as system structures. And so as systems accrue structures, they become more complex; that is to say, they become capable of successfully responding to a larger repertoire of environmental situations, events, states. Of course, no system can ever approach the complexity of its environment because the environment is by definition everything other than the system. But by increasing its complexity (by adding system structures) a system can interact with larger segments of its environment. It thereby also increases its selectivity to those aspects of the environment by which it is affected.

The transition from the theory of open systems to a cybernetic systems theory concerns the way in which environmentally open systems change as a result of changes in their environment. As in the case of environmentally open systems, they define boundaries and preserve themselves through interchange with their environment. Only now, the cybernetic interpretation is understood as a process of increasing complexity and selectivity. This development of the concept of system can therefore be interpreted as a trend. Because libraries find themselves today in rapidly changing, unpredictable environments, their programmatic efforts must be designed to cope with these environments. Their efforts in this direction are expressed most directly in strategic planning.

Reflexivity

Strategic planning has been distinguished from traditional approaches in two ways: (1) a future orientation, and (2) the ability to respond to the exigencies of a rapidly changing, uncertain environment.⁶ And while it is certainly true to say that “a plan is concerned with the future,” at the same time, planning is more than just mere “thinking ahead,”

John Bednarz Jr. (jabjnr@yahoo.com) is an MLS graduate of Rutgers School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies.

mere “preparation, a deliberation about future action.”⁷ Because if this were the case, it would be a “phenomenon accompanying human behavior as such,” and impossible to distinguish from everyday human behavior.⁸ Planning means deciding about decisions; and this means that it is a two-level process. It specifies the decision premises of future decisions.

Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson are clear about what is meant by decision premises. According to them, “Close examination of the premises that underlie any administrative choice will show that they involve two distinct kinds of elements: *value elements* and *factual elements*.”⁹ In an earlier source, Simon introduces decision premises as the “units of analysis” because these are the only ones, in his words, that “leave room for rational calculation in behavior.”¹⁰ On the other hand, he believes that roles and even decisions are “too gross” to do this: roles because “the performer of the role cannot be a rational actor, he simply acts his part,” and decisions themselves because, “Many individuals and organizational units contribute to every large decision.”¹¹ Value elements include objectives, efficiency, and personal values, while factual elements include skills, knowledge, and information.

By contrast, planning is what Luhmann calls an instance of a “reflexive mechanism.”¹² For him reflexive mechanisms are future-oriented operations because they are applied to themselves in such a way that they make it necessary to exercise the same operation subsequently. Besides deciding about decisions, prominent examples of reflexive mechanisms include the learning of learning, the normalization of norms, the exercise of power over those in power, and the exchanging of exchange possibilities. Characteristic of reflexive mechanisms is that they are accompanied by what Luhmann calls a “performative enhancement” (*Leistungssteigerung*). For example, “Learning to learn promises a performative enhancement only when everything to be learned later does not also have to be learned.”¹³ Or, in the example of the exercise of power over those in power, “their power is not destroyed or has to be taken over, assumed, but remains in effect and can be transferred to a successor.”¹⁴ In the case of deciding about decisions, the performative enhancement expresses itself in the fact that “binding decisions are made, but these decisions do not render subsequent deciding unnecessary, or completely determine its substantive content. Instead, they leave its content more or less open so that decisions will have to be made again.”¹⁵ This performative enhancement introduces flexibility into planning insofar as it means not only that everything does not have to be decided all at once (at the beginning) but also that room is created by this very process for decisions to be made later in the light of changed circumstances.

Flexibility becomes necessary when environments are not static. This becomes readily apparent when flexibility is distinguished from mere adaptability, which “implies a singular and permanent adjustment to a newly formed environment.”¹⁶ Adaptability works well in a stable envi-

ronment. But when “subsequent environmental states are just as likely to reverse or to reshape the previous state as they are likely to reinforce it again,” mere adaptability is inadequate.¹⁷ Flexibility is required in the case of a rapidly and independently changing environment. And planning produces this flexibility through its reflexivity.

But while planning involves the specification of decision premises, “by no means is every specification of decision premises referred to as planning.”¹⁸ And the reason for this is that planning does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, “[p]lanning occurs only when there is the definition of a decision-problem and the specification of its solution.”¹⁹ So planning in its full sense is the specification of the decision premises for future decisions directed toward the solution of a defined problem.

Yet despite all attempts to satisfy the conditions of planning, “[i]t is well known that all planning is inadequate.”²⁰ Focusing on a problem is necessary because it defines the relevant decision premises. And there are always indefinite numbers of value and factual elements available to serve as decision premises. The way in which planning adds clarity to this indefiniteness is by reducing the number to those that are relevant to a specific problem. Even so, the reason for the inadequacy is the very fact that planning can specify only the *premises* of what will occur in the future, not the occurrences themselves.

The Future

What is the future and how do plans use it? It seems unnecessary to say with Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson that “[a] plan is concerned with the future,” and yet this observation repeatedly appears in the literature on planning.²¹ And so, in order to reach a full understanding of the way in which planning occurs, the future will have to be addressed. For saying that a plan is concerned with the future is not simply saying that the future affects it.

The future forms part of a much broader concept of time, which throughout history has appeared differently as part of this concept. For instance, in the case of the chronological concept of time, the future appears as “the series of dates which come after the present.”²² This concept quickly encounters the problem of the continuity/discontinuity of time, because it entails that “the future will begin where the present ends.”²³ But since another point can always be inserted between any two points, the problem remains of ever getting to the future from the present, especially when time is experienced as discontinuous.

The theory of modalities escapes this problem by interpreting time as different modes: past, present, and future. In this case, time is either a removal (flowing away) of the past and the positing (arrival) of the present, or the removal (flowing away) of the present and the positing (arrival) of the future. Ambiguity exists here only in the case of the present. The past is always removed and the future is always posited.

In the theory of modalities it is the present that is capable of both. This ambiguity disappears, however, once the past and the future are understood as time horizons of the present. Horizons possess two defining characteristics: (1) they are unattainable—i.e., they recede as they are approached—and (2) they present a zone of indeterminacy that is suffused with intuitive possibilities. Luhmann uses these characteristics to define what he calls the “open future,” *viz.*, a “present future which has room for several mutually exclusive future presents.”²⁴ In this case the present future represents the horizon that is unattainable. This is the future that cannot begin. And the future presents represent a horizon of surplus possibilities.

Future presents are anticipated events that can be sequentialized.²⁵ But as future presents, they are always contingent—that is, “only possibilities [and] therefore can turn out differently than expected.”²⁶ And since contingency is experienced as uncertainty, this means that the reliance on future presents is inherently infected with this problem.²⁷ Uncertainty characterizes what Luhmann calls the technological approach to the future, which he distinguishes from approaches that rely on the present future. For Luhmann, however, “[t]he prevailing conception of the present future seems to be a Utopian one with an optimistic or a pessimistic overtone.”²⁸ That is to say that “[t]he future serves as a projection screen for hopes and fears.”²⁹ While on the other hand, “[p]resent futures lead toward goal-directed planning, namely to the arranging of sequences with the greatest possible potential for satisfying values.”³⁰

The problem here is that even in the case of the most careful planning, even in the case of the most detailed anticipation of events, planners are always deciding what can only be intended or thematized as possible because they are dealing with a future whose horizon constantly changes with the advance of time. That is, planners anticipate future presents as causally (stochastically) connected series of events. This reduces these events, however, to “one chain of datable future presents.”³¹ And with the advance of time these:

anticipations can deceive, either because they refer to something that is not there or not in the anticipated way, or that, after having taken the necessary steps to experience in fact what was anticipated (e.g., after actually having gone there), what was anticipated is no longer actualizable because in the meantime events have distanced or destroyed the possibility.³²

Integrating the Future

A structural relation to time is needed to overcome this problem; namely, a relation differentiating between system and environment, in which a system loses its sensitivity to

anything whatsoever and focuses only on specifics. The system thereby acquires an environment in which what is relevant forms only a part of what is possible.³³ In other words, structure makes it unnecessary for a system to react to environmental changes instantaneously. Systems then do not have to respond to changes in their environment in a point-for-point manner. It also means that through a structural relation to time, present futures are not reduced to one chain of datable events. Instead, “structure establishes . . . an open future in the sense that it provides for the selectivity of future presents.”³⁴

This open future expresses itself as a “limited repertoire of possibilities of choice.”³⁵ As *possibilities*, future presents need not be chosen. But their selectivity (their relation to other specific future presents) will determine the conditions of choices. It is in this sense that “structure makes it possible and even necessary to postpone choices and to use the present future as a kind of storehouse for decisions to be made later.”³⁶ Ultimately it means that planning the future must involve an integration of the present future and future presents, of Utopian schemes and technologies.³⁷ And success or failure in planning will depend on the degree to which these two approaches to the future are integrated.

Problems in planning usually emerge when one of these approaches supplants the other. On one hand, a limited focus on the present future, to the exclusion of future presents, multiplies contradictions because it does not provide mechanisms for coping with unavoidable surprises. But on the other, a “purely technological focus on future presents and on a management of contradictions in succession is itself a Utopia,” because “[a]ny refinement . . . of technological forecasting and control will make future presents only more surprising because it multiplies defeasible assumptions about the present future.”³⁸ Utopian planning may be more straightforward because it depends on “wished-for behavior.” But it fails “to explain how this wished-for behavior will or can be brought about.”³⁹ At the same time, a one-sided technological approach is vague because of what Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson call an “over-confidence in planning,” involving “detailed blueprints for an undefined future event.”⁴⁰

The example Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson use is that of the Industrial Mobilization Plan of the Army and Navy Munitions Board, which was initiated in 1930 in the event of war and periodically updated, with the last revision in 1939. When war finally broke out it was not used; the reason Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson provide for this is not a lack of intelligence or cooperation among the people in charge of mobilization in 1942 but because “the blueprint did not fit the political, economic, and strategic conditions that actually prevailed in 1942 and which could not possibly have been predicted in 1939.”⁴¹

In the library setting we can see how this played out if we consider the rapid change in library technologies over the past decade. The change from paper abstracts

and indexes to the online databases that are used in virtually all libraries today did not occur in one step. In many cases libraries employed CD-ROMs to provide the kind of information resources that are presently found in online databases. The use of such resources involved the purchase of what came to be called “jukeboxes,” that is, multiple CD-ROM players. It also required subscriptions to the CD-ROMs played on them, which had to be updated on a monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, or however often basis. This involved a serious investment on the part of vendors as well as customers. But this technology turned out to be remarkably short-lived. In fact, it was obsolescent at its introduction because online databases were already in development that would replace it within as little as five years. In other words, circumstances had changed in the meantime that libraries adopting this obsolescent technology did not take into account.

As we can see, successful planning results only through the integration of these two approaches to the future: the one to provide present motivation and the other to provide the step-by-step procedure to the attainment of the goal; at the same time not restricting planning to a purely linear interconnection of decisions. And the flexibility—indicated by Riggs—that planning requires in order “to accommodate the rapidly changing library environment” can be purchased only at the cost of leaving room for decisions to be made later and having a future in which to make them.⁴²

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Donald Riggs and Jeffrey Gardner for their kind encouragement and help in writing this paper.

Editor’s note: Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s own.

References and Notes

1. J. J. Gardner, “Strategic Planning in ARL Libraries,” *SPEC Kits, Kit 158* (Washington, D.C.: ARL Office of Management Services, 1989): i.
2. Donald Riggs, “The Systems Approach,” in *Strategic Planning for Library Managers* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx, 1984).
3. Translated as “organism” in: Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, Loeb Classic Series, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1963) and Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 5, trans. Arthur Platt (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1958).
4. The theory of equilibrium has its origins in neoclassical economic theory and is usually associated with the names Carl Menger, Leon Walras, and William Stanley Jevons. Cf., V. Walsh and H. Gram, *Classical and Neoclassical Theories of Equilibrium* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1980), 7.
5. Herbert Simon, D. W. Smithburg, and V. A. Thomson, *Public Administration* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 438.
6. Riggs, *Strategic Planning for Library Managers*.

LA&M ONLINE

Conveniently located
at your desktop now



An outdated e-mail address could keep you from having *LA&M Online* come directly to you.

Please keep your ALA membership profile updated and make sure to include your preferred e-mail address so that LAMA can notify you when your next issue of *LA&M* is available to view or download.

If you're not sure if we have your correct e-mail address, it's easy to check—simply call ALA Member and Customer Service at 1-800-545-2433, and select option 5.

LAMA—the right place for library leaders

7. Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson, *Public Administration*, 438; Niklas Luhmann, "Politische Planung," in *Politische Planung*, 2nd ed. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1975), 67.
8. Luhmann, *Politische Planung*, 67.
9. Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson, *Public Administration*, 58.
10. Herbert Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), xxx.
11. *Ibid.*, xii, xxx.
12. Luhmann, *Politische Planung*, 67; Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung I*, 4th ed. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1974), 94-99.
13. Luhmann, *Politische Planung*, 67. Translated from the German: "Das Lernen des Lernens verspricht nur dann eine Leistungssteigerung, wenn dabei nicht schon alles später zu Lernende mitgelernt werden muss."
14. *Ibid.* Translated from the German: "deren Macht nicht zerstört oder übernommen werden muss, sondern einsetzbar bleibt und auf einen Nachfolger übergeleitet werden kann."
15. *Ibid.* Translated from the German: "einerseits schon bindende Planentscheidungen getroffen werden, dass diese Entscheidungen aber nicht das spätere Entscheiden erübrigen oder inhaltlich vollständig determinieren, sondern mehr oder weniger offenlassen, so dass nochmals entscheiden werden muss."
16. E. Evans, "High Technology Maneuvers," *Journal of Management Studies* 28, no. 1 (Jan. 1991): 73.
17. *Ibid.*, 21.
18. Luhmann, *Politische Planung*, 68.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, stw666 1984), 635. Translated from the German: "Es ist bekannt, dass alle Planung unzulänglich ist."
21. Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson, *Public Administration*, 438; see Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 635, and *Politische Planung*, 67. For the case of libraries see, Riggs, *Strategic Planning for Library Managers*, 3; Kathleen Molz Redmond, *Library Planning and Policy Making* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1990), 3; Maurice P. Marchant, *Participative Management in Academic Libraries* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1976), 98; John R. Rizzo, "From the Editor," *Journal of Library Administration* 2, no. 2/3/4 (1982): 1; Charles R. McClure, "Planning for Library Services: Lessons and Opportunities," *Journal of Library Administration* 2, no. 2/3/4 (1982): 9; Edward R. Johnson, "Academic Library Planning, Self-Study, and Management Review," *Journal of Library Administration* 2, no. 2/3/4 (1982): 71; and Maryann Kevin Brown, "Information for Planning," *Journal of Library Administration* 2, no. 2/3/4 (1982): 189.
22. Niklas Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society," *Social Research* 43, no. 1 (1976): 138.
23. *Ibid.*, 139-41; Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1922), sec. 7; Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1972), sec. 8.
24. Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin," 140.
25. *Ibid.*, 143.
26. Niklas Luhmann, "Moderne Systemtheorie als Form gesamtgesellschaftlicher Analyse," in *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 32. Translated from the German: "nur Möglichkeiten sind, daher auch anders ausfallen können, als erwartete wurde."
27. Cf. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 252, "interpreted as information, the system experiences contingency as uncertainty." Translated from the German: "als Information aufgefasst, erfährt das System Kontingenz als Unsicherheit." Here Luhmann relies on Howard Aldrich and Sergio Mindlin, "Uncertainty and Dependence: Two Perspectives on Environment," in Lucien Karpik (ed.), *Organization and Environment* (London: Sage, 1978), 149-70, especially 149-60.
28. Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin," 142-43.
29. *Ibid.*, 143.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 141.
32. Niklas Luhmann, "Moderne Systemtheorie als Form gesamtgesellschaftlicher Analyse," in *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*, 32-33. Translated from the German: "dass die Anzeige täuschen kann, sei es, dass sie auf etwas verweist, das nicht vorhanden oder nicht auf die erwartete Weise erreichbar ist, sei es, dass das Erwartete, wenn man die notwendigen Vorkehrungen getroffen hat (zum Beispiel hingegangen ist) nicht mehr aktualisierbar ist, weil zwischenzeitliche Ereignisse die Möglichkeit entfernt oder zerstört haben."
33. In the same sense as the enacted environment in Karl Weick, *Social Psychology of Organizing* (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1969), 130-31.
34. Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin," 150.
35. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 73.
36. Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin," 150.
37. Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson, *Public Administration*, 448. Paraphrased from: "The task of planning is not merely one of visualizing brave new worlds. It is a task of constructing sequences of behaviors that can be carried out and that will bring the brave new worlds into actual being."
38. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 515-16; Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin," 144.
39. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 106.
40. Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson, *Public Administration*, 448.
41. *Ibid.*, 448-49.
42. Riggs, "The Systems Approach."