Introduction

The author has his disciplinary roots in planning. Through his experiences as both a planning practitioner and teaching Professor he has come to question the adequacy of traditional planning tools and techniques, based on Scientific Enquiry to provide a viable decision support system for those grappling with complex situations.

The author’s questioning and his search for a better way are the focus of this book. Starting from the premise that there is a better way his explorations take him and the reader across a broad section of intellectual debate during the 20th Century. The author’s thesis is that current support systems for decision-making (planning) are failing because both their epistemology and methodology do not embrace complex situations. Systemic Planning, he contends, is an approach that can in many situations provide a viable decision support system for those grappling with complex situations.

The author’s technique for presenting his argument for systemic planning, as an essential capability for contemporary decision-makers, is to use the work and worldviews of other scholars to pose questions of “how should planning operate in the society each is describing?” By drawing his answers together he formulates a credible argument to support the thesis. In essence the technique works, although it is a challenge for the reader at times to keep up with the parade of luminaries Leleur exposes to the reader.

In Chapter 1 there is an opening examination of how the concept of complexity emerged and developed several meanings, and...
how scientific methods demonstrated an inability to provide tools and techniques to make sense of the situations described as complex. This examination is achieved through reflecting on the writings of many scholars including Weaver (1948), Boulding (1956), Holland (1998) and Waldrop (1992) to arrive at a description of three archetypes of complexity labelled *Detailed, Dynamic and Preference*. The author then moves to identifying categories of problems where current planning fails. His questioning of Stacey’s (1993) work is particularly useful to his argument as he seeks to create a new path, by addressing Stacey’s contention that no individual or small group can be in control of an organization’s long-term future. The chapter concludes with a review of a number of system thinkers’ scholarship which Leleur uses to establish his claim that “systemic thinking is seen to hold the potential for improving planning and decision making under certain conditions” (p. 18).

The difficulty facing the reader with Leleur’s technique of eliciting his systemic planning principles and methodology in this way is, do I (the reader) know enough about the quoted authorities to either follow or understand the logic of this journey? For those well versed in the fields of study referenced their reading journey will be a relatively smooth and logical progression. However, for others it may be more like driving on a road full of potholes.

In Chapter 2 the examination is of the evolution of systems science and how it can be studied in three waves, with the third wave incorporating an approach to complexity. The author claims, “...this approach contains various new perceptions of systems thinking that are important for the ideas presented about systemic planning and the new societal conditions for planning” (p. 31). Leleur’s new perspective, adding complexity to systems thinking, is summarised in a table he has adapted from earlier work by Jackson (2000) and Alvesson and Detz (1996) (p. 47). It is a useful contribution to the current debate on “social complexity” in the business environment.

Chapter 3 introduces two other fields of thought pertaining to Systemic Planning and which impact on the “new societal conditions for planning”: communication and future oriented action. Starting from Habermas and citing his theory of communicative action Leleur formulates a methodology for planning that is informed by communication, learning, and Stacey’s insights about causality. From this methodology a range of competencies required by the systemic planner are described.

Chapter 4 is devoted to identifying the societal conditions in which systemic planning will out perform systematic planning. Drawing heavily on Luhmann’s ideas as developed by Qvortrup (1998), Leleur describes a hypercomplex society as an emergent environment for planners and decision-makers. Two issues of great concern to planners – ‘power’ and ‘conflict’ – which the authors sees as becoming more invasive to the planning system in the hypercomplex society, are also addressed in this Chapter. His examination of cognitive dissonance as a theory with a contribution to make here is poignant evidence of Leleur’s practitioner background.

The challenge the author has set for the reader in cramming his thesis and argument into a 118 pages is significant. Certainly he gives a holistic picture of his understanding of systemic planning. However the detail of the supporting argument is often presented too briefly, where further details could have been given for the uninitiated reader. The book has a strong internal logic with frequent indicators for the readers to re-orientate themself to the core focus. However, the absence of strong editing causes unnecessary distractions through language and grammatical ambiguities.

This book provides the reader with an insight into an alternative approach to planning that can address the challenge faced by all decision makers attempting to make sense of complex situations. Recognizing that the book does not claim to be the last word about systemic planning, it will stimulate debate about the role and function of planning and the competencies required by planners in today’s highly connected global society.