



Problematizing resilience: Implications for planning theory and practice



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ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes the introduction of the concept of resilience into the planning domain from three main starting points: 1. The nature of the events which are said to require resilience; 2. The different nuances in meaning that resilience assumes according to those different events, and 3. The theoretical and operational problems the concept entails. The paper sustains that: 1. The quest for a resilient behavior or a resilient answer, and the claim to improve urban and territorial resilience do not find the same justification in every kind of event; 2. Multiple sub meanings are embedded within one interpretation of resilience that leave the concept open to rather large margins of ambiguity, which emerge considering its operationalization; 3. The concept seems to fit and to be appropriate within different paradigms, planning traditions and policy frameworks. Its alleged 'neutrality' is one of the main reasons of its pervasiveness, but also of its ambiguity, showing latent controversial implications, which are progressively emerging in critical planning theory.

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Introduction

Etymologically, resilience derives from Latin *resilire*, and specifically from the prefix 're-', which suggests going 'backwards' or 'counter', added to the verb 'salire', which means 'to jump' and shares its root with the Greek ἀλλομαι – a verb whose meaning is 'to spring back' and 'to rebound' but also, significantly enough, 'to withdraw'.

The word has a very long history, which can be traced back at least to the 1st Century B.C. But unlike what has been argued in an interesting excursus (Alexander, 2013), the first occurrence of the word can be found in the poem *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, where it conveys the specific meaning of being forced back by a resisting surface, as in Book 4, 323ff, with reference to the action on Nature, similar to the 'bouncing back' of an image from a mirror: *Nature so compels/all things to be borne backward and spring off (resilire)/at equal angles from all other things*. Although the term has been used with different meanings and within different semantic contexts since it appeared for the first time, recurring in essays or poetry about Nature (Lucretius, Pliny the Elder, Ovid), as well as in political dissertations (Cicero), and in technical essays (Vitruvius), it refers to the notion of rebounding in its most common use. This capacity is described in the field of Mechanics as the power or ability of a body or a material to return to its original state after being altered, due to the potential energy that has been stored through modification from a previous state.

The main characteristic of this physical quality is that of 'bouncing back', and of using the same solicitation which caused the alteration (as for elastic power) to return to previous conditions.

An important shift of meaning results in transferring the concept into systems theory, as occurred in modern times primarily through the work of Crawford Stanley Holling. Holling (1973, p. 14) defined resilience as "a measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables" in various ecological systems-related examples. Since then, the term started to run through almost all the disciplines and languages concerning individuals and institutions, as well as cities and territories. Its multidisciplinary and its adaptability within dynamic systems and complexity theories make the concept attractive (Garschagen, 2011). So resilience has been frequently redefined and extended by heuristic, metaphorical, or normative dimensions (e.g., Holling, 2001; Ott & Döring, 2004; Pickett et al., 2004).

Zolli and Healey (2012, p. 16) sustain that resilience touches and affects a variety of sectors (from business planning to social development, from urban planning to national energy security), and propose it as "a powerful lens through which we can view major issues afresh" in a recent and widely – debated publication.

Resilience Alliance (<http://www.resalliance.org>) states that resilience has three defining characteristics: (1) the amount of change a system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure, (2) the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, and (3) the ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation

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(<http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/resilience>; see also: Resilience Alliance 2007a, 2007b). However, it has been noted that the first one is the most widely-employed (Carpenter & Brock, 2008). Indeed, while particularizing an already established definition, which sees resilience as the capacity of a system to respond to change or disturbance without changing its basic state (Walker & Salt, 2006), Zolli and Healey (2012, p. 126) define resilience as the ability of people, communities, and systems to maintain their “core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances”, with the key factors being agility, adaptation, and the ability to face change in flexible ways (Chapin, Folke, & Kofinas, 2009).

This interpretation cannot but recall a broader claim to flexibility, “the watchword with respect to labour markets” (Harvey, 2005; Sennet, 1998), a cornerstone of the current neoliberal agenda.

A Thomas Bernhard novel came to my mind, *The loser* (whose German and Italian titles – respectively: *Der Untergeher*, and *Il soccombente*-, sound highly appropriate for this reflection) when starting to consider resilience in its translation into social sciences and specifically into the planning field. The novel speaks of a person who was not at all resilient, who just suffered from the casualties and adverse situations life reserved him, a victim. But a victim of what: of his own weakness, of external events, or both? Do causes (still) count?

Wertheimer had to commit suicide, I told myself, he had no future left. He'd used himself up, had run out of existence coupons. (...)

Wertheimer was always and only the loser. I've always been the weak one, absolutely the weak link, so Wertheimer. (...)

The two of us, Wertheimer and myself, had had to give up to make room for Glenn. At the time I didn't find this thought as absurd as it now seems to me, I thought. But Glenn was already a genius when he came to Europe and took Horowitz's course, we were already failures then, I thought. (...)

[T. Bernhard, *The Loser* [*Der Untergeher*]]

The concept of resilience entered into the planning domain with different orientations. Although most of the attention is still focused on environmental issues, and a large part of explorations are dedicated to the reduction or mitigation of environmental risks such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and global warming, we are witnessing a rather impressive increase of the fields where the concept is used.

This leads to a considerable semantic extension, with problems of clarity, certainty, and understanding what sense and meaning the concept actually assumes in policy discourses, as well as in its translation into practice.

As often occurs for mainstream concepts, and as many scholars promptly noted (Davoudi et al., 2012), resilience risks being reduced to a buzzword: if we want to keep resilience as a useful notion, we need to correctly and specifically narrow the concept and its use. However, in my view this is not the primary problem. Instead, I consider its political meaning to be of the utmost importance. While it is often presented as a politically neutral approach, resilience demonstrates an inherently conservative nature.

A comparison with sustainability, provided by Redman (2014), helps to clarify this. As Redman perceptively observed when considering ‘sustainability-transformation’/‘resilience-adaptation’: “The current political arena favors adaptation because it works to maintain the established order and address near-term problems. Citizens and their elected officials are more comfortable with adaptation because it appears less radical than transformation, which involves uncertain outcomes and the associated costs of system restructuring. Consequently, resilience approaches are popular in today's political arena”.

However, fundamental limits to resilience thinking emerge insofar as the transformation of a system (in its current ecological, social, or economic characters) may be required or desirable; and also insofar as there are systems (such as criminal organizations) that prove to be highly resilient, but most definitely undesirable.

Furthermore, resilience tends to consider very different events (a flood, a war, a social upheaval) as essentially equal, without distinguishing what is unexpected from what is contentious or unwanted. Since resilience thinking envisages all possible events in abstract terms, this offers proof of its analytical/descriptive origin, unlike sustainability, which “rigorously integrates normative values and anticipatory thinking into a scientific framework (Clark & Dickson, 2003; Swart, Raskin, & Robinson, 2004)” (Redman, 2014).

The shift from an analytical perspective to a normative one is not straightforward. On the contrary, the subtleties and ambiguities that resilience brings together emerge from this shifting between different levels.

For example, ascertainment of the resilient behavior of a community after an unexpected event does not necessarily mean that all communities must be resilient, nor that they must be resilient whatever event they experience, nor that they must be resilient in the same way as the one observed, and even less obvious is the definition of how resilience should be pursued. Clearly, it is not just an extension of the meaning, but a move from a phenomenological outlook to an ethical and political perspective.

Above all, it is not yet clear if resilience should become a paradigm – and to what extent it could influence planning as a discipline with a normative approach.

In this paper I problematize the introduction of the concept of resilience into the planning domain from three main starting points: 1. The different nature of the events that would require resilience of urban and territorial structures, and/or a more resilient planning; 2. The different nuances that the concept assumes when referring to various events, and more specifically when moving from an analytical to a normative perspective; 3. The theoretical and operational problems the concept entails – that also includes the different meanings and implications arising from considering the aforementioned differences. The paper argues that: 1. The quest for resilient behavior or response, and the claim to improve urban and territorial resilience do not find the same justification in every kind of event or, in other words, not each kind of event justifies the claim to resilience; 2. Multiple sub meanings are embedded within one interpretation of resilience which leave the concept open to rather large margins of ambiguity that emerge considering its operationalization; 3. The concept seems to fit and to be appropriate within different paradigms, planning traditions and policy frameworks. For this reason, despite a conservative approach, it ranks as a ‘neutral’ interpretive and operational concept and (because of that) it tends to hide the political nature and political meaning of choice, contributing to the de-politicization of the issues at stake and of the related decisions.

Brief references to current planning practices addressed to environmental (seismic) risk prevention and mitigation in Italy are provided to reinforce the argument, showing how recourse to the concept of resilience can be interpreted within and through different theoretical frameworks, also indicating further directions of research.

About the different nature of events that would require the resilience of urban and territorial structures. [Do causes count?]

Resilience became an object of planning research starting with a consideration of the different interpretation of the concept rooted

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