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Temporalities for, of, and in Planning: Exploring Post-Growth, Participation, and Devolution Across European Planning Reforms

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Abstract

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the acceleration of climate change, many governments are turning to their planning systems to explore how national planning reform can help them address their current crisis. Time across planning reforms appears as a central dimension, building on governments' long-term ambitions to speed planning. While academic normative debates argue in favour of faster and/or slower changes to planning as inherently good or bad, this article draws on a comparative analysis of national planning reforms across three European countries to critically examine how time is being mobilised and with what objective. Through an analytical framework that seeks a more holistic understanding of the planning process, we argue that temporalities in planning are relational. Across the three cases, we can see how the generation of consensus depoliticises the use of time, and it is generally used to advance regressive agendas. We argue that despite ambitions to make planning more responsive and participatory at the local level, planning reforms (a) reduce the influence of public participation while strengthening private property rights; (b) are used to territorialise sectoral, top–down, and long-term agendas with no consideration of the timely and situated concerns and visions of residents and communities; and (c) are underpinned by a pro-growth and rapid urbanisation agenda that ignores sustainability debates.

Keywords

planning reforms; planning systems; planning temporalities; post-growth; public participation

1. Introduction

Contemporary planning became a central function of government across European countries after the II World War. Although with important structural, political, and economic differences, states set planning as a key tool for reconstruction. However, since the 1960s, governments have sought liberalisation through the streamlining of planning, a trend that further accelerated after the 2008 financial crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the deep ecological and social crisis we are living in—caused by accelerated climate change, increasing inequalities, and the emergence of right-wing extremist political parties. In this context, various countries in Europe are turning to their planning systems to assess how municipal planning (and local plans as their main planning instrument) can be transformed to help address some of these issues. Time emerges as a key dimension in these debates, with the mainstream narrative that planning activity should be expedited. Despite apparent broad agreement on the need for such changes, this has opened a period of debate where different assessments of planning systems' deficiencies and opportunities emerge. In the context of the current multiple crises, we query how these time narratives are mobilised across planning reforms and to what extent these are used to advance progressive agendas.

Despite the core role of time and the pervasiveness of speeding and acceleration discourses across international planning reforms (and in other institutional changes), the topic has received limited attention in the academic planning debate. Only in the UK, with a longer history of planning practice, has the topic been studied. Tracing this literature, we can see how early studies adopted a dichotomic approach by debating to what extent planning could be speeded without impacting the quality and extent of public engagement. In 2016, Marshall and Cowell further problematised this issue by querying how time allocation unevenly distributes power between actors and how economic arguments push for streamlining and depoliticisation. Their study built on other works exploring time in different stages of planning, pointed to the need for a more sophisticated analysis of time mobilisation in planning and the role of (de)politicisation and neoliberal ideologies. Other authors have continued exploring this topic by problematising the temporal dimension in urban development by disputing the slow versus speed normative (Dobson & Parker, 2024), as well as showing how the use of time and temporalities in planning is used to advance certain actors' interests at the expense of others (Raco et al., 2018). While the former—the study of time allocation in different stages of the planning process—has been studied through the mapping of larger case-study frameworks (typically with a sector-based focus such as the analysis of infrastructure planning applications), the latter—unpacking the issue from different development actors' perspective—has explored the topic through the in-depth analysis of specific projects and/or urban developments (Arıcan, 2020; Raco et al., 2018). However, in both cases, the state is conceptualised as monolithic, obscuring the role and scope of the municipal scale—particularly in terms of municipal governance and municipal planning. Additionally, there is a lack of international comparative studies analysing commonalities and divergences in the political use of time as a resource. In light of these debates, this study addresses two key questions:

Q1: How are time narratives with a focus on the local planning system mobilised across national planning reforms in different European countries?

Q2: To what extent are these used to advance more or less municipal progressive agendas?

Methodologically, this study suggests reviewing temporal narratives in planning with a focus on the role of local planning authorities (LPA) and municipal planning. It does so through a comparative study of three European countries with very different planning systems and state structures, but where acceleration and the speed of planning are central to current reform narratives. This study, building on the review previously mentioned, advances a methodological framework that seeks to address a gap in temporal planning studies. An analysis of the literature shows how time in planning decision-making has been fragmented, with studies either assessing the plan preparation or production stage (Kitchen, 2007; Nadin & Fernández-Maldonado, 2023), the decision-making or planning determination stage (Booth, 2002; Dobry, 1975; Marshall & Cowell, 2016), and the implementation stage, which has generally been overlooked. Therefore, the proposed framework brings these three stages together (what we call temporalities for planning, temporalities of planning, and temporalities in planning) to deconstruct how the narrative of planning reforms across the three cases is proposing to shift time, tasks, or scope across them. While this methodological approach will reduce the depth of analysis of each case, it will provide a broader perspective of planning restructuring and engage with the wider discourses framing the need for planning reforms, and the diverse strategies articulated to dispute them.

The findings in this article do not show total convergence across the three cases (given legal, political, and historical structural factors that prevent radical reconfigurations of planning and local planning in particular) but instead show the hybridisation of strategies to address those speed narratives guiding planning reforms. Two key contributions emerge from the findings of this article. Firstly, in this study, we have identified common temporal strategies including front-loading and back-loading but also by-passing and downscaling. While the first two appear not to reduce overall timeframes but merely offer certainty and increased flexibility, the second two can more clearly be seen as regressive by eliminating the planning power of LPA and/or by fragmenting and isolating issues that ultimately impede broader considerations. This shows why temporal discourse cannot be analysed and interpreted in isolation at different stages of the planning process (Marshall & Cowell, 2016) but should be explored as a relational phenomenon. This framework provides an opportunity to examine how certain elements of the planning process gain or lose temporal space by considering their purpose and assessing their impact at each stage. Through this lens, it becomes evident that the fragmentation of participation in current reforms weakens its influence on shaping the urbanisation process. Finally, this study also discusses how reform narratives have shaped the debate by emphasising certain stages of the process, at the expense of others. In this regard, the research considers that depoliticising the post-permission stage cedes control to market forces. Secondly, changes in time across the three cases are not solely attributable to neoliberalisation forces—a topic that has been extensively explored in the existing literature. Instead, these changes can be understood through how narratives (de)politicise temporal shifts, often presenting them as technical issues while building consensus around three key dimensions. First, in the context of the housing crisis and the pressing need for infrastructure, planning reforms prioritise accelerating processes to facilitate growth. Second, the critique is not aimed at state incompetence broadly but focuses specifically on the role of municipalities. These reforms subtly undermine municipalities—not by explicitly removing their competencies but by framing them as inefficient, burdened by "red tape," and sparsely resourced. This critique often comes with implicit threats to local control rather than supportive measures. Third, state-led planning continues to position itself as inherently aligned with the pursuit of the "common good," framing its objectives as balancing development needs with broader societal interests. By doing so, it downplays the diverse voices of citizens and communities and the importance of meaningful consultation and engagement.

Finally, this article highlights important research agendas that should explore lobbies and the role of international actors in advancing neoliberal strategies. Additionally, it calls for a more detailed understanding of how narratives are homogenised beyond formal EU policies (Dühr et al., 2010).

2. Literature Review

The current acceleration and increased time-speeding narratives around the planning process are not new, and these build on (or are, to a certain extent, a continuation of) previous debates. These acceleration concerns have targeted different stages of planning (from plan adoption to decision-making) and different sectors (from major infrastructures to housing). However, the longevity of these debates varies across European countries. While in the UK, with the most established planning history, acceleration debates attracted attention as early as the 1970s (Ewing, 1972; Marshall & Cowell, 2016), other countries such as Spain have only more recently—since the 2000s following the 1990s devolution of planning powers to regions—been brought to the focus of planning debate (Alonso Timón, 2019). In Poland and other post-soviet countries, the research around planning reforms primarily focuses on matters of localism and liberalisation (Kolipiński, 2014; Nadin et al., 2018; Nowak et al., 2022), but also on temporalities managed at the local level, with individuals able to actively influence planning timeframes (Grzelak, 1997; Radziejowski et al., 2010). Responding to those time-speeding pressures and narratives, political and academic debates focused on the introduction of managerial tools such as procedural streamlining, the introduction of fixed time schedules, and the curtailment of public engagement. Time was, therefore, framed from a management and efficiency perspective (Booth, 2002), and primarily as a facet of performance management (Allmendinger, 2011). In that context, more critical approaches focused on trying to find the right balance between speed and democratic legitimacy (Flinders & Wood, 2015; Mironowicz & Ciesielski, 2023). As argued by Agamben (2005), those speeding debates frequently re-emerged, pushed by contextual events. After the 2008 financial crisis, narratives in the UK primarily focused on cost and efficiency. These discussions revisited the role and function of the Keynesian state, as we will explore next. In contrast, during this period, discussions on planning temporalities in countries like Poland gained prominence in various professional forums. Legalists and public sector managers played a leading role in seeking time efficiencies within rigid bureaucratic procedures (Dąbrowski & Piskorek, 2018; Kolipiński, 2014; Kolipiński & Szulczewska, 2010; Mironowicz, 2024; Mironowicz & Ciesielski, 2024). In the Spanish case, the post-2008 crisis shifted the focus to how planning had contributed to the real estate and financialisation crisis, with little attention given to temporal issues (Delgado Jiménez, 2011). This article explores how this long-term narrative is re-emerging in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Planning scholarship has (unevenly across countries as we have glimpsed earlier) recognised and demonstrated that despite the efforts of neoliberal narratives, which portrayed time efficiency as a technical and managerial issue, planning temporalities are fundamentally politicised. This line of inquiry sought to advance the debate by moving beyond the often-binary political discourses calling for either "quicker decisions" or "more public engagement" (Marshall, 2002). At an early stage, studies focused on the empirical analysis of how time was mobilised/used across different planning stages. From plan preparation (Kitchen, 2007) to planning decision-making (Booth, 2002; Dobry, 1975). On the latter, Marshall and Cowell's (2016) UK study of temporalities in the decision-making of large infrastructure developments shows how despite the adoption of planning reforms to speed the planning process, these failed to fundamentally change the length of decision-making. Instead, they demonstrate how time allocation is redistributed within the decision-making planning stage. By doing so, they argue time is used as a resource and deployed

strategically in the urban planning process. They suggest that its allocation has distributive implications among actors in the development process, exercising a balance of power between them. Furthermore, they advance a hypothesis of how neoliberal discourses sought the depolitisation of time.

The politisation of time in planning has more recently re-emerged in academia linked to normative debates of speed and slow planning (Dobson & Parker, 2024). This scholarship contends that the "speed" of decision-making processes and planning approvals is but one of many factors shaping the built environments of cities—challenging previous normative views that posted the damaging effects of unsustainable and "rapid" urbanisation (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Airey & Doughty, 2020; Halbert & Attuyer, 2016). Time, in this context, is framed as a resource within the development process—much like capital or labour—and, as such, represents a source of both power and control. Raco et al. (2018) expand the discussion beyond normative debates on speed, problematising planning by highlighting the complex interplay of actors within the property development sector. They argue for a nuanced understanding of how time operates as a resource, emphasising the need to examine the social and power relations within the sector. This requires acknowledging the diversity of "systems, structures, and cultures at play, each characterised by its own temporal politics" (Raco et al., 2018, p. 1190). However, a critical flaw in much of this scholarship is its implicit treatment of the state as a monolithic entity, which fails to capture the multiplicity of temporal logics, conflicts, and negotiations occurring within and across state institutions themselves.

Planning temporalities have also been critically examined by anthropological scholars, offering a perspective that diverges from the fragmented approaches often found in planning scholarship. Rather than merely mapping the allocation of time within planning systems, these studies emphasize a more holistic and relational understanding of temporalities in planning practices (Bastian, 2013, 2014). Abram (2014) highlights how the temporal dimensions of governance and planning are not merely technical but are deeply embedded in cultural and institutional logic, often revealing tensions between intended timelines and lived temporalities. Similarly, Abram and Weszkalnys (2011) challenge conventional assumptions of linearity in planning, arguing that the procedural nature of planning systems often operates through overlapping, recursive, and sometimes contradictory timeframes. This anthropological lens moves beyond the segmentation of time horizons in planning to explore how time is actively constituted through the interplay of various actors, technologies, and institutional expectations. In doing so, these studies question the rigidity of linear time and illuminate the contingent, processual nature of planning temporalities, broadening the scope for understanding the multifaceted rhythms and flows of planning as a socio-political activity.

Finally, it is important to note that although there are temporality planning studies outside the Global North, these predominantly exist in the UK. The lack of comparative studies on this topic prevents a deeper understanding of relevance to the planning discipline and other planning systems—see, for an exception, Marshall's (2014) study on planning infrastructure temporalities across three European countries and how underlying neoliberal processes and state restructuring, found across the cases, explained similarities.
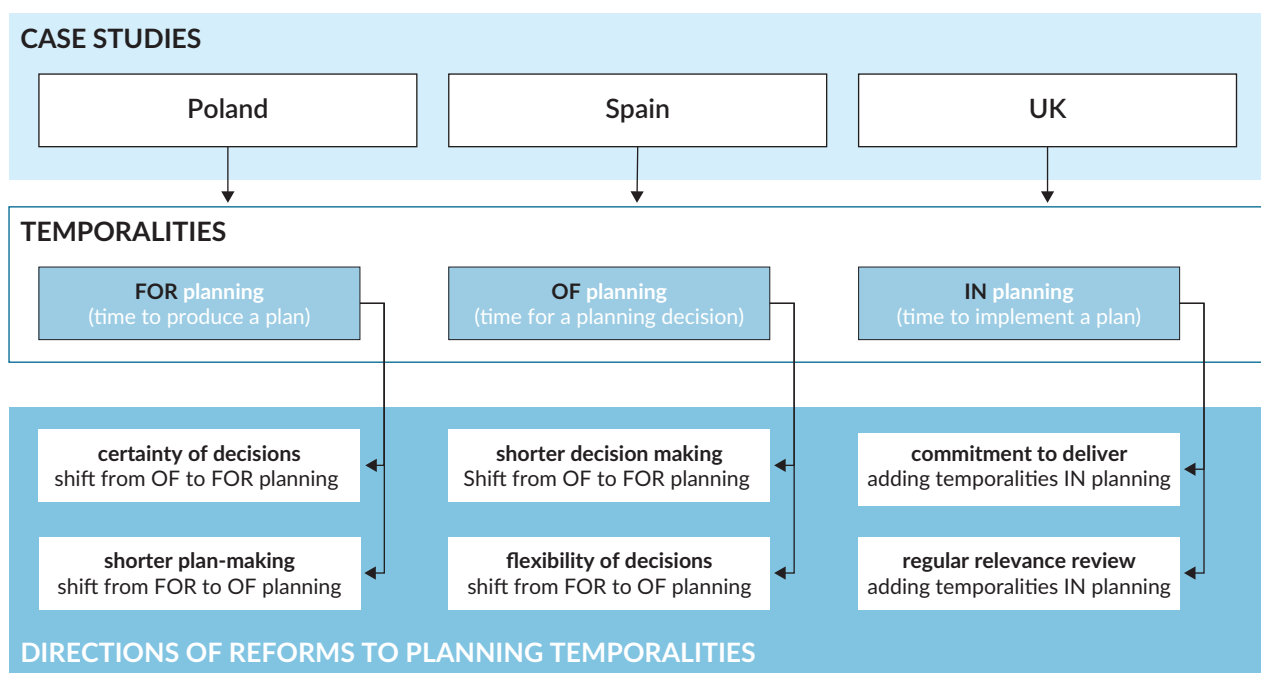
3. Methodology

Considering the debates in Section 1 and Section 2, this article seeks to explore how temporalities are being mobilised across national planning reforms (to address the contemporary environmental, social, and political crises) and to what extent they are being used to advance more or less progressive agendas. We will do this through a comparative analysis of three countries in Europe.

To respond to the questions in Section 1 and, informed by the literature in Section 2, we take three important methodological decisions in this article. First, the fragmentation of time in planning studies needs to be overcome. Previous studies have offered in-depth studies of how time is politicised and allocated within a certain planning stage: the plan preparation or production stage (Kitchen, 2007), the decision-making or planning determination stage (Booth, 2002; Dobry, 1975; Marshall & Cowell, 2016), and the implementation stage (generally overlooked). To address this gap, we propose a framework where the three stages of planning are brought together. While this approach might raise questions regarding the linear assumptions of planning and the lack of depth of how each stage of planning times are allocated, it offers a more comprehensive analysis of the distribution of time. Figure 1 shows the temporalities in each of the three stages of planning: temporalities *for* planning, temporalities *of* planning, and temporalities *in* planning. Temporalities for planning is the first stage of the planning process, which primarily includes the preparation and adoption of plans. The second dimension, temporalities of planning, looks at decision-making and resolution time frames in deciding a planning application. Finally, we will be looking at planning decisions, implementation, and the temporalities involved in that stage (temporalities in planning).

Secondly, this study offers a new perspective beyond the empirical test of narratives versus reality, but more on disentangling how those narratives problematise time. This raises some key questions: How can narratives and contra narratives that point to different problematisations of time be unpacked? More importantly, how can the sources and methods be equally weighted in such different contexts? In this study, the methods have been the document analysis of acts, official reports, and stakeholders' responses to reforms (which include a variety of press and formal responses when available), and interviews with key informants that complete and contextualise the document analysis (Table 1).

Finally, this study conducts the above research through an international comparative analysis of time narratives. Considering the comparative literature existing on European planning systems, we have designed

Figure 1. Methodology of comparative research temporalities in planning systems.

Table 1. Methods per country.

	Poland	Spain	UK
Interviews	Independents planners (2) Local government officers (2) Developers (1)	Independents planners (2) Local government officers (2) Developers (1)	Independents planners (2) Local government officers (2) Developers (1)
Document analysis 1: Acts	Spatial Development Act 1994 Spatial Planning and Development Act (Ministry of Development and Technology, 2023) Change of the Spatial Planning and Development Act and Other Bills (Ministry of Development and Technology, 2023)	Ley del Suelo de España de 1956 Ley de Reforma de la Ley de Suelo de España de 1975 Ley del Suelo de España de 1990 Ley de medidas liberalizadoras en materia de suelo y de Colegios profesionales 7/1997 Ley del Suelo de España de 2007	Town and Country Planning Act 1947 National Planning Policy Framework 2012 National Planning Policy Framework 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023
Document analysis 2: Official reports and responses to Acts	Office for Parliamentary Analysis (Office for Parliamentary Analysis, 2023) State of Spatial Planning in Boroughs (Śleszyński, 2022) Information on the Results of the Inspection: Spatial planning and development in Poland on the Example of Selected Cities (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2022) Central Office for Statistics (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, n.d.) Official Representation to The Draft Planning Reform in Poland (Association of Polish Cities, 2023) Official Review of the Proposed Planning Reform in Poland From 26/05/2023 (Association of Polish Urbanists, 2023)	Manifiesto Asociación Española de Técnicos Urbanistas (2023, 2024) Sesión Modificación de la Ley de Suelo estatal (Ecologistas en Acción, 2024)	UCL response to the White Paper (Clifford et al., 2020) Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) Local Government Association (n.d.-a) Local Government Association (n.d.-b) Planning Inspectorate (2024)

a sample of countries that incorporate (a) different state models, (b) three main planning traditions, (c) planning praxis, and (d) different degrees of devolution. As per Table 1, Poland represents a combined procedural and substantive model of planning, with a regulatory praxis, and a devolved system of four tiers. Other similar countries are Germany and France, which inspired the post-Soviet planning reform in countries such as Slovakia and Bulgaria. Spain, on the other hand, is a Mediterranean state with a Napoleonic planning system, highly regulated, and with devolution to regions and local government (although with weak local

financing capacities). Other countries like the Spanish case are Italy, Portugal, and Greece. Finally, the UK represents the Anglo-Saxon residual state, with a liberal and procedural system and a planning praxis of negotiation and decision-making precedents. In this case, the devolution to LPAs is weak. Through this framework, we not only recognise how underlying structural and cultural factors influence/problematise the perception and use of planning temporalities but also seek to uncover convergence or separation of planning approaches between the three countries.

Overall, given the holistic temporal framework and the international comparative dimension, we do not attempt to provide a detailed discussion of each case but to identify common trends and/or differences that point to (a) how temporalities have been modified (or planned to be) and (b) with what ultimate purpose (Table 2).

Table 2. Characterisation of planning systems in three countries.

	Poland	Spain	UK
State model	Post-soviet and neoliberal inspired decentralised self-governance	Mediterranean	Residual
Planning system	Two distinct hierarchical layers: procedural and substantive	Napoleonic: Mix of substantive and procedural	Procedural and purpose-driven
Planning praxis	Regulatory	Regulatory	Negotiation
Degree of devolution	Three tiers: national, regional, and local. There are two levels of planning regulation at the local level: for the whole borough and for specific areas.	Three tiers: devolution to regional and local	Two tiers: national and local, with the regional level added in metropolitan areas

4. Reforms in Context

Before we comparatively analyze the three reforms along the dimensions of temporalities *for*, temporalities *of*, and temporalities *in* planning, we briefly set the context in each country concerning its recent planning history.

4.1. Poland

Over the past 50 years, Poland has undergone three significant planning reforms. The first reform, the Spatial Development Act of 1994, addressed fundamental changes in the socio-economic system and the decentralisation of planning powers. The second reform, the Spatial Planning and Development Act of 2003, established a new hierarchy of planning and introduced instruments allowing for flexibility at the local level. The most recent, third iteration of the planning system, the Change of the Spatial Planning and Development Act and Other Bills of 2023, aims to ensure comprehensive governance of development at the local level.

The spatial planning reform of 1994 in Poland was an integral component of the system transformation from a centrally planned to a market economy. The new approach to urban planning departed from integrated centrally planned blueprints by separating physical components from socio-economic ones, introducing a

two-level system of planning with Study of Development Conditions and Directions (Tier 1) defined a general spatial structure at the policy level, and Local Spatial Development Plans (Tier 2) with very detailed development regulations for a specific area. Decisions on building permissions were issued based on the verification of a project's compliance with the Local Spatial Development Plans.

Subsequent 2003 and 2023 reforms aimed to refine this neoliberal planning system, which exposed the inability to find consensus about spatial development at the local level. The hierarchical dependence between state, regional, and local planning was re-introduced to ensure strategic public investments were included at the local level. Planning processes became more formally structured and regulated with each reform. Temporalities became matters of administrative processes.

4.2. Spain

Since the first adoption of planning legislation in Spain in 1956, the Spanish national planning system has undergone several reforms. The most relevant ones were approved in 1975, 1990, 1997, 2007, and 2015 (see De las Rivas Sanz & Fernández-Maroto, 2023). We can talk about three stages. The first stage consisted of the creation of a national planning system that moved from the local scale with a narrow coverage to a centralised system that sought to cover the whole country. It is in this reform that the role and scope of local plans are set. The following reform in 1975, although building (expanding and refining) on the principles of its predecessor, initiated a liberalising path, influenced by the EU political context, which further consolidated in the next stage. However, despite its liberalisation trend, there was also an attempt to more clearly establish how capital gains could be captured to the benefit of the community.

The stage between 1990 and the late 2000s saw two major reforms. In 1990, the reform promoted the decentralisation of planning to both regional and local bodies. This reform developed further property rights, land use classification, and implementation stages. It also developed a more complex set of tools and methods for the public sector to intervene in the market. The 1997 reform consolidated the liberalisation of the planning system through a very permissive land classification that sought to classify as much land as possible for urban growth, with the underlying belief that the cost of housing would drop. It further consolidated the liberalisation of the planning system through the enhanced and central role of private actors to the detriment of the public sector. Discourses around the need for this reform also focused on how planning needed to be simplified, as it was seen as an impediment/restrictor to growth.

The reforms in the last stage (2007 and 2015) sought to moderate the liberal approach of previous reforms, influenced by environmental EU guidance. The 2007 reform focused primarily on the enhanced contributions of private developers, both through contributions to basic infrastructure as well as the allocation of 30% of land for more affordable forms of housing. Nevertheless, the new planning legislation continued to be very much focused on growth. A greater path divergence was seen in the 2015 reform, following the real estate crash of 2008. The discourse on the need for reform shifted, focusing more on issues of rehabilitation and refurbishment of the existing city. Nevertheless, the law is seen both as a mechanism of liberalising and providing more flexibility to developers in consolidated areas and as growth-dependent. Finally, in this context, a reform was drafted in 2023 and put on hold due to an intense electoral agenda. The narratives around this last reform are the focus of this article.

4.3. The UK

The UK planning reforms originated with the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, marking a transition from a land use model to the current place-making approach (Allmendinger, 2011; Nadin & Fernández-Maldonado, 2023). For the first time, the central government determined land use, centralising land regulation and providing the government with considerable powers to demolish and rebuild following war damage and blight. Land took on a wider significance, no longer being a preserve of a privileged minority.

Between 1947 and 2012, successive UK governments sought to reform the planning system, and while there was a changing and inconsistent approach to centralisation and the expansion/contraction of planning institutional structures, there was a consistent trend of de-regulation of the planning arena in an attempt to simplify the planning process. This dynamic has continued during the following decades, with governments attempting to manage and control political outcomes through a technocratic process. These trends coalesced in 2012, under the coalition government, which decentralised planning policy via a devolved policy framework. This involved a significant reduction in planning guidance from hundreds of pages to 65 and critically introduced a central national plan that provided the framework for strategic planning policy, known as the National Planning Policy Framework. This tool minimises the role of the local planning system in favour of a centralised process that plays a material role in planning decisions.

The latest reform (the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act) removed numerous socialist principles of the 1947 Act in favour of a more centralising and conformist planning system. Details are in development and could be overturned following the Labour election result of 2024. However, the new government does not appear to eschew neoliberalism; instead, it seems to embrace the strengths of the market, forging partnerships, and ensuring an active government over the free market (Blears, 2003). In this article, we will discuss how the two narratives are conflicting.

5. Temporal Strategies and Underlying Agendas

The analysis of temporal narratives across the three cases reveals two distinct strategies in which time is redistributed between planning stages. In the first two stages (temporalities for planning and temporalities of planning) time is not only shifted across stages but also compressed through additional neoliberal strategies. In the final stage (temporalities in planning) there is a deliberate disregard and depoliticisation of time-related concerns. When examining these shifts, we highlight how narratives are constructed across cases through efforts to build consensus and the strategic (de)politicisation of specific aspects.

5.1. Temporalities for Planning: Back-Loading (But Also Downscaling and Bypassing)

In Spain and Poland, where the planning system relies on a detailed and legally binding plan (see Supplementary File, Appendix 1), reform narratives emphasize the lengthy process of this early stage, which prevents the production of plans with regularity. Meanwhile, in the UK, the five-year statutory plan review period does not appear to be considered a problem in principle, although, in practice, several LPAs retain plans over five years, creating temporal lags (Matos & Herman, 2020). In the former two cases, reform narratives are focused on reducing this early planning stage by in principle, reducing the scope and bureaucracy of the planning process.

As an interviewee argues:

> The complications that currently exist in this early stage make it impossible for municipalities to develop plans. If we want to change this, we must reduce bureaucracy, etc. but also less complex, simpler, setting overall strategies—similar to the English planning system. (Interview 7, 2024)

While the main narrative of making plans more strategic is presented as apolitical and focused on efficiency, some complexities of such reforms are overlooked. As we will see next, actors in both countries have pointed out that certain functions cannot simply disappear. However, narratives (de)politicise the issue and present it as unproblematic, even though time allocation is merely deferred to the decision-making stage. Additionally, these reforms and narratives also aim to "speed up the system" by reducing detail, eliminating planning controls, bypassing regulations, and even downscaling their scope.

In Spain, reform narratives have focused on building broad consensus around the issue that entire local plans can be annulled if a judicial review identifies flaws in the plan-making process or its content. While there is widespread agreement on the problematic nature of this approach, which has led to numerous plans being annulled and forced planning to revert to outdated plans (73% of plans are over 20 years old), this consensus tends to overshadow other aspects of the proposed changes. Additionally, it fails to highlight other problematic factors that shift responsibility onto different state actors. Regarding the first issue, a key aspect that gets obscured is how the proposed legislation limits the scope of public participation by restricting opportunities for "collective action." Only certain civil groups that meet specific criteria would have the ability to challenge a plan or its process. According to major civil society environmental groups, such as Ecologistas en Acción, this change further reduces participation without offering alternatives to an already weakened engagement process (Ecologistas en Acción, 2024). As for the second issue, the Asociación Española de Técnicos Urbanistas (2023, 2024) argues that a key factor contributing to the lengthy process is the requirement to incorporate numerous sectoral plans, making the entire system highly vulnerable to delays. Dominant narratives and the proposed legislation fail to address this issue or critique the role of regional governments, which, instead of supporting LPA in producing plans, act as regulatory enforcers in Spain's quasi-federal system.

In Poland, post-1989 planning practices aimed to address the lengthy plan-making process through two major strategies: reducing the local plan area and bypassing planning requirements. The combination of local spatial development plans serving as legally binding references for building permit applications and their non-mandatory status led to a low rate of local plan adoption. As of 2024, only 31.4% of the country has approved local plans, with 17% of local authorities having coverage below 1% (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, n.d.). The first strategy, widely applied by LPAs, sought to reduce plan production time by limiting the size of local plans to the absolute minimum necessary for development—resulting in 30% of plans covering less than 1 hectare (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2022). The second strategy, introduced in the 2003 reform, established a mechanism to bypass the traditional plan production process. Under this approach, development directions were prepared by a developer or Council officers, reviewed by an independent professional body appointed by the Council, and ultimately adopted by the Council. This bypass effectively functioned as a localised plan for a specific area, informed decision-making processes, and had no expiry date. The process shares similarities with the pre-application procedure in the UK.

The recent 2023 reform introduced a tier of legally binding general plans, similar to those in Spain and the UK, covering the entire area of a borough. However, to streamline the process, these plans are strategic, with

significantly reduced detail and a reliance on quantitative standards—back-loading details to a later stage. There is a presumption that their temporalities can be easily controlled, and Polish LPAs have until January 1, 2026, to prepare them. The general plan dictates where local plans must be developed and where time-bound instruments can bypass them. As a result, planning temporalities vary between areas. Where possible, they have been shortened, although the final planning framework in Poland remains sufficiently detailed to ensure project compliance, ultimately leading to building permit approval.

5.2. Temporalities of Planning: Front-Loading (or Streamlining and Paving the Path)

In Poland and Spain, where local plans are legally binding, the decision-making process is primarily limited to verifying whether a project complies with the established plan requirements (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2). As a result, projects are developed in such detail that, in practice, the main role of LPAs is to confirm a project's suitability for occupancy upon completion. In both cases, current reform narratives fail to adequately consider how the previously discussed "back-loading" will affect this stage.

In contrast, the UK operates a flexible, negotiation-based planning system (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2). Reform narratives in the UK have long emphasized concerns about the length of planning decisions. Unlike Poland and Spain, where the process is streamlined after initial compliance verification, the UK system requires multiple decisions between the planning application and project completion. These include securing planning permission, finalising associated Section 106 agreements, and discharging various conditions through formal decisions (Cerrada Morato, 2019). While reform narratives often highlight inefficiencies in LPAs and the need for additional resources, the proposed reform instead seeks to front-load the system with more detailed plans—potentially resembling Poland's thinner general plans or Spain's general municipal plans. However, the legally binding nature of detailed plans in Poland and Spain underpins their effectiveness, contrasting sharply with the UK's discretionary planning system. Current reforms in the UK show no indication of limiting the discretionary nature of planning or its decision-making processes. As stated by one interviewee:

> The fact that everything can be negotiated at any phase of decision-making [from planning permission to discharge of individual conditions] facilitates developers' capacity to negotiate in their favour conditions [densification, height, etc.] that would not be easily achieved if a detailed plan was binding. (Interview 3, 2024)

This sentiment is widely shared among interviewees. In some collective efforts to prepare masterplans for areas with multiple landowners—such as the South Quay Masterplan in Tower Hamlets—plans were largely ignored during the decision-making stage. According to interviewees, this was primarily due to the irregular timing of implementation for specific sections and competition among stakeholders. Nevertheless, other existing planning tools, such as outline planning permissions, appear to function more effectively. These permissions are typically issued to a single developer and are reinforced by the inclusion of design codes within a legally binding decision.

Contrary to the main reform narrative in the UK, numerous actors argue that the urgency to accelerate planning timelines is justified by the central claim that democratic planning is causing the housing crisis. However, scholars and activists contend that the housing crisis is multifaceted, driven by complex factors

such as "infrastructure investment, the business models and motives of housebuilders, and the lack of funding and capacity for LPAs to build more homes directly themselves (particularly social housing)" (Clifford et al., 2020, p. 2). Growth remains a key underlying consensus shaping planning reform and the debate on planning timelines (Dobson & Parker, 2024).

5.3. Temporalities in Planning: Depoliticisation of the Implementation Stage

Interestingly, in none of the three reform narratives has land banking drawn the attention of the legislature. In all three countries, the time between permission to build and permission to occupy is fully controlled by the developers, with LPAs having very little influence despite their strong growth agendas. In Spain and Poland, a regulatory framework exists to manage the pace of construction—if work is paused for more than three years, the existing permission lapses, requiring a new building control inspection. Moreover, the LPA may order the site to be cleared. However, due to the under-resourced state of LPAs, monitoring and enforcement are rare. In the UK, interviews and sources suggest that this stage of the planning process is frequently manipulated by private interests (see Supplementary File, Appendix 3). As one interviewee argued: "It is striking that in the UK an implemented planning permission, often as simple as clearance of a site with some remediation works, locks it with no time limitations" (Interview 9, 2024).

As a result, there is a persistent discrepancy between permitted growth and actual delivery in the UK. In the housing sector, for instance, this gap has remained at approximately 20–30% over the past 15 years (Local Government Association, 2021; Terra Quest, n.d.). Stalled construction projects are common across the UK, even in prime locations, particularly following the 2008 financial crisis and Brexit. Landowners often secure the value of their land by obtaining planning permission and then waiting for market conditions to stabilise before deciding on their next steps. A common practice involves renegotiating new designs at a time of their choosing, leveraging the reset of the permission process to establish the physical parameters of the implemented scheme as the baseline for value uplift. In the UK, the relationship between time and profit is particularly pronounced.

The emphasis on planning temporalities—often framed as aspects of public sector bureaucracy (Clifford, 2022), such as plan-making and decision-making in development management—is insufficient to drive meaningful change on the ground. Planning and building permissions do not equate to a commitment to build. None of the reforms examined address the need for closer control over the timeframe between the start of construction and project completion, which remains the least politically charged of all planning temporalities.

6. Underlying Planning Agendas

The framework developed in this article has been useful in demonstrating that temporalities in planning cannot be understood as a unitary or dichotomous issue but rather as a relational one across the planning process. This study of temporal narratives in planning reforms across three European countries (Poland, Spain, and the UK) reveals that, despite inherent cultural and socio-economic differences, all three explicitly aim to promote traditional economic growth, with limiting temporalities in planning to be a major focus of these reforms. The hybridisation of planning techniques—broadening the scope of planning in Poland and Spain while emphasising more detailed coding in the UK—brings the actual outcomes of plans in these countries closer together, even as they uphold the principles of their respective planning systems. None of the three countries shows an appetite for fundamental reform of their planning systems; instead, temporalities are

being managed through market mechanisms or amendments to existing legislation. Moreover, changes in temporal structures across these cases are not solely a result of neoliberalisation forces, a topic widely explored in the literature. Instead, this study highlights how narratives (de)politicise temporal changes—often framing them as technical issues—by generating consensus around three key dimensions.

6.1. Reduced Local Participation

Democratic participation in planning is often viewed as a major cause of delays. As a result, all three cases exhibit some level of restriction on community involvement in planning and decision-making processes. This reduction in public input is counterbalanced by increased certainty: for developers, in securing building permissions, and for landowners, in ensuring the delivery of publicly funded infrastructure. The ongoing tension between public benefits and private property rights continues to shape the extension of planning temporalities.

Pan-local and supra-local investments present planning challenges in all three countries. However, in Spain and Poland, LPAs must integrate such developments into their local plans if they align with adopted policies. By limiting public participation at the local level, these countries significantly reduce planning temporalities, particularly when compared to the UK.

In all three countries, the primary mechanism for incentivising timely decision-making by LPAs is the threat of either automatic approval or the transfer of decision-making powers to a higher administrative level (Cerrada Morato, 2022). In both scenarios, local oversight is effectively removed from the process. Additionally, procedural instruments have been introduced to allow for legal extensions of planning timelines, such as the Planning Performance Agreements in the UK or pauses to supplement evidence in Poland. To maintain control over decision-making, LPAs often resist the transfer of planning powers by actively managing temporalities through engagement with applicants.

6.2. Planning Cultures

In Spain and Poland, LPAs' approach to temporalities in planning is deeply rooted in the presumption that certain public discussions about future development can be curtailed simply because the state, as the guardian and generator of the common good, is presumed to "know better" (Kellokumpu, 2021). Both EU member states have institutionalised hierarchical dependencies between state (EU), regional, and local planning, where higher-level designations are automatically embedded into local plans (Nadin et al., 2018; Nowak et al., 2022). Similarly, the ongoing debate on planning reforms in the UK advocates for strengthening quantifiable development requirements imposed by the state on LPAs—see the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) National Planning Policy Framework draft.

This perception of powerful authorities shaping planning temporalities creates confusion when it comes to actual implementation timelines. The time required to implement plans is generally perceived as excessive (Clifford, 2022; Sager, 2022). Public frustration over delays is often directed at LPAs, despite their limited role at this stage. The private sector remains the dominant developer in all three countries, yet planning reforms in each case have so far avoided addressing the management of planning temporalities.

The managerial approach to improving time efficiency in planning reveals stark cultural differences between the cases analysed. In the UK, de-regulation has historically been the primary means of reducing or bypassing decision-making timelines. In Poland, by contrast, each reform has further regulated decision-making time, with bureaucratic deadlines enforced through financial penalties. However, in all three cases, failure to comply with planning timelines can result in the partial loss of planning powers by LPAs.

6.3. Growth Consensus

By definition, the planning process focuses on the future. However, an analysis of the case studies reveals that planning reforms are primarily concerned with the present, raising questions about whether LPAs are genuinely planning for future needs (Interviewee 2, 2024). The degrowth debate (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; Priewe, 2022; Vazquez-Brust & Plaza-Úbeda, 2021) underscores these tensions. While the Covid-19 pandemic significantly altered the spatial needs of communities worldwide, there is little evidence of increased planning activity in the studied countries that, for example, adjust development scenarios to accommodate these changes.

All three countries examined are pursuing reforms to enhance the role of planning in managing development. However, issues such as environmental justice, whole-life carbon footprints, and population growth remain in the early stages of evidence gathering. While Poland, Spain, and the UK have all committed to climate change adaptation and aspire to achieve net-zero economies by 2040, a notable gap exists in the discourse on the efficiency of planning processes and their associated temporalities—particularly the timeline between producing planning evidence and implementing plans. How well are plans informed by future needs? Are they adaptable to the rapid pace of technological and societal change?

The consensus on growth remains strong in Poland and the UK. In Poland, however, the current land capacity allocated for housing—primarily for low-density suburban developments—could accommodate nearly twice the country's population, despite its negative population growth (Śleszyński et al., 2020). Similarly, in the UK, national and metropolitan governments pursue a growth and densification approach (Cerrada Morato & Mumford, 2021) and aim to deliver homes for approximately 1 million people annually, even though population growth is less than half that figure (ONS, 2021). Spain presents an exception, as growth pressures do not dominate the discourse on planning timelines. Instead, there is a growing belief that growth as a guiding principle in planning should be reconsidered (Cerrada Morato, 2024, 2025). Consequently, planning efforts focus on revising pre-2008 financial crisis plans to reduce growth expectations.

Further research that cross-references the temporalities for, of, and in planning with the temporalities of growth cycles could offer valuable insights for reforming planning systems. However, the planning reforms currently implemented or under development in the case studies do not advance progressive planning agendas. Instead, they primarily focus on accelerating development. At present, spatial planning efforts seem more concerned with addressing the dysfunctional practices of the past and present rather than building a forward-thinking, adaptive framework for the future.

7. Conclusion

This study critically examined the role of temporalities in planning reforms across Poland, Spain, and the UK, analysing how time is mobilised within planning systems and whether these reforms advance progressive or regressive agendas. The findings reveal a consistent pattern of temporal restructuring that primarily serves pro-growth objectives, often at the expense of public participation, municipal autonomy, and sustainable urban development.

While the study does not suggest complete convergence across the three cases—given the legal, political, and historical factors that prevent radical reconfigurations of planning systems—it does highlight a hybridisation of strategies in response to dominant speed narratives guiding planning reforms. In particular, four key temporal strategies emerge: front-loading, back-loading, bypassing, and downscaling. While the first two strategies do not necessarily reduce overall timeframes but instead offer greater certainty and flexibility, the latter two can be considered regressive, as they strip LPAs of planning power or fragment and isolate critical issues, ultimately undermining broader considerations. This reinforces the argument that temporal discourse in planning cannot be analysed in isolation but must be understood as a relational phenomenon, where different elements of the process gain or lose temporal space based on purpose and power dynamics.

Through a comparative analysis, this study demonstrates that planning temporalities are not neutral but strategically manipulated to shape power dynamics in decision-making. The research identifies three key dimensions of time in planning reforms: temporalities for planning (plan preparation and adoption), temporalities of planning (decision-making and approvals), and temporalities in planning (implementation and execution). Across all three case studies, planning reforms attempt to streamline or accelerate these stages, but largely in ways that benefit private interests rather than fostering democratic engagement or environmental responsibility.

A significant trend observed is the depoliticisation of planning through time management. By framing time as a technical rather than a political issue, governments generate consensus around reducing bureaucratic delays while simultaneously limiting public participation. In Spain and Poland, this is particularly evident in back-loading planning responsibilities, shifting crucial details from the plan-making stage to later decision-making processes. In contrast, the UK prioritises front-loading, where planning policies seek to simplify approval procedures, reinforcing discretionary decision-making that favours developers. Additionally, across all three cases, the post-permission stage remains largely unregulated, allowing private sector actors to dictate the pace and outcomes of urban development. This study argues that ceding control of this stage to market forces limits the state's role in ensuring long-term, equitable, and sustainable planning outcomes.

Despite differences in planning traditions, legal frameworks, and governance structures, all three countries demonstrate a strong growth consensus, where planning reforms prioritise economic expansion over social equity and environmental sustainability. Poland and the UK exhibit particularly aggressive pro-growth narratives, using planning reforms to accelerate decision-making. Meanwhile, Spain, despite revising its planning expectations post-2008, continues to rely on flexible frameworks that ultimately serve market interests. However, the study also finds that changes in planning temporalities are not solely driven by neoliberalisation forces—a topic extensively covered in the literature—but also by how narratives strategically (de)politicise temporal shifts. Three critical narrative dimensions emerge:

1. Framing speed as a necessity: In the context of the housing crisis and pressing infrastructure demands, planning reforms prioritise acceleration to facilitate growth.
2. Municipalities as scapegoats: The critique of inefficiencies is not directed at state incompetence broadly but specifically targets municipalities. Instead of removing their competencies outright, reforms subtly undermine local governments, framing them as inefficient, overburdened by bureaucracy, and under-resourced. This justifies external interventions or transfers of planning power rather than providing meaningful support.
3. State-led planning as the "common good": State planning presents itself as balancing development needs with societal sinterests while downplaying the role of citizens, communities, and meaningful public engagement.

Moving forward, future research should explore the role of international actors, financial lobbies, and EU-level policies in shaping these temporal strategies. Additionally, further examination of how planning reforms interact with broader economic growth cycles could provide valuable insights into how planning systems might better serve public interests rather than perpetuate market-driven urbanisation. This study also calls for a deeper investigation into how narratives around planning temporalities are homogenised beyond formal EU policies (Dühr et al., 2010).

Ultimately, if planning is to serve as a tool for equitable and sustainable urban development, it is not enough to focus on speeding up processes, instead, the underlying objectives, power structures, and long-term societal impacts of planning reforms must be critically assessed. Without a fundamental re-evaluation of how time is managed in planning, reforms risk reinforcing market-driven priorities at the expense of more democratic, inclusive, and forward-thinking urban futures.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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