



Critical Re-reading of the Rational Comprehensive Planning Approach(CRPP): Foundations,Challenges, and Lessons from Global Experiences

Fatemeh Sheikhi¹, Mohammad Mohammadnejad ^{2*}

¹ PhD Candidate, Department of Urban Planning, University of Art, Tehran, Iran

² PhD Candidate, Department of Urban Planning, University of Art, Tehran, Iran

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Rational Comprehensive Planning, as one of the dominant approaches in urban planning during the second half of the twentieth century, has been grounded in assumptions such as instrumental rationality, the possibility of comprehensive knowledge, the predictability of the future, and the existence of a single public interest. However, contemporary social, economic, and institutional transformations particularly in cities of developing countries have cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of this approach. The objective of this study is to provide a critical re-reading of Rational Comprehensive Planning and to assess its theoretical and practical capacities and limitations in addressing the complexities of contemporary urban conditions.

Methodology: This study employs a critical literature review method based on the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis). Accordingly, classical theoretical works and recent empirical studies related to Rational Comprehensive Planning particularly those published during the periods 1950–1980 and 2020–2025 were systematically collected from reputable academic databases, screened, critically appraised, and subsequently analyzed through conceptual synthesis.

Results and Findings: The findings indicate that the core assumptions of Rational Comprehensive Planning are difficult to realize in practice due to data limitations, conflicting interests, the role of power, social dynamism, and future uncertainty. Global experiences, especially in developing countries, demonstrate that the implementation of technocratic versions of this approach has frequently resulted in a gap between plans and reality, implementation inefficiencies, the expansion of informal settlements, and various forms of social resistance.

The results suggest that the challenges of Rational Comprehensive Planning are not merely related to implementation failures, but rather stem from structural limitations within its theoretical foundations. Nevertheless, revitalizing the effectiveness of this approach is possible through its redefinition and integration with adaptive, participatory, learning-oriented, and context-sensitive approaches an orientation that is better suited to addressing the complex realities of contemporary cities.

Keywords: Rational Comprehensive Planning, Instrumental Rationality, Comprehensiveness, Developing Countries.

* **Corresponding Author Email:** en.mohammadnejad@gmail.com

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

The Rational Comprehensive Planning approach (CRPP) is one of the most significant and influential theoretical paradigms in the history of urban planning. Since the mid-twentieth century, it has been adopted as the dominant model in many urban and regional planning systems. This approach is grounded in instrumental rationality, positivist thinking, and an engineering–technical perspective, and conceptualizes planning as a linear, sequential, and controllable process. Within this framework, decision-making is assumed to occur through the comprehensive collection of data, the formulation of clearly defined objectives, the generation of alternative options, and the selection of the optimal alternative based on technical analysis. Accordingly, it is presumed that planners, relying on neutral and rational expert knowledge, are capable of predicting and steering the future of cities and defining the public interest within a unified and coherent framework.

However, extensive social, economic, institutional, and spatial transformations in recent decades particularly within contemporary urban contexts have fundamentally challenged the validity and effectiveness of these assumptions. The increasing complexity of urban problems, environmental uncertainties, the prominent role of power and politics, the diversity and conflict of stakeholders’ interests, the dynamism of social structures, and the expansion of informal economies have rendered linear, prediction-oriented decision-making processes based on CRPP increasingly ineffective in practice. These challenges are especially pronounced in developing countries, where weak institutional capacity, centralized governance structures, limited availability of reliable data, and low levels of social participation have intensified the gap between formal plans and lived urban realities. In response, contemporary urban planning literature has witnessed the emergence of extensive epistemological, methodological, and political critiques of Rational Comprehensive Planning. This study aims to provide a critical re-reading of this approach by examining its theoretical foundations, structural challenges, and practical consequences, and by offering a comprehensive perspective on the current status of CRPP and the possibilities for its redefinition in the context of today’s cities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and is methodologically based on a critical literature review. Critical review enables the researcher to move beyond the mere collection of sources and engage in in-depth analysis, critical evaluation, and comparative assessment of theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, thereby identifying conceptual and practical gaps within the literature. This method is particularly appropriate for examining overarching theoretical approaches such as CRPP, which possess a long historical trajectory and multiple interpretations.

The methodological framework of the study is structured around the SALSA model (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis) and its expanded version. First, the research question concerning the degree of reliability of Rational Comprehensive Planning and the possibilities for its reinterpretation was formulated. Subsequently, a systematic search of classical theoretical works and recent empirical studies particularly those published during the periods 1950–1980 and 2020–2025 was conducted using reputable national and international academic databases. The collected sources were screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and critically appraised in terms of theoretical quality, conceptual

coherence, and relevance to the research topic. In the next stage, conceptual data extracted from the selected sources were organized into shared themes and analytical patterns. Through conceptual synthesis, the relationships among theoretical critiques, practical experiences, and diverse institutional contexts were articulated. Finally, the analysis focused on identifying the structural limitations of CRPP and extracting key theoretical and policy-related insights.

Results and Findings

The findings indicate that Rational Comprehensive Planning is founded upon a set of core assumptions whose realization in practice particularly within complex urban environments is highly constrained. First, the assumption of achieving comprehensive and value-neutral knowledge is incompatible with the realities of incomplete data, institutional opacity, and future uncertainty. Second, the notion of a singular public interest is difficult to sustain in urban contexts characterized by profound diversity and conflicts of values and interests. Third, instrumental rationality and linear decision-making are insufficient for capturing social dynamics, informal practices, and the pervasive role of power and politics in urban processes. An examination of global experiences, especially in developing countries, reveals that the implementation of technocratic versions of CRPP has often resulted in plans that appear comprehensive in form and content but lack practical feasibility. This condition has contributed to the emergence of a persistent gap between plans and reality, implementation inefficiencies, the expansion of informal settlements, intensified spatial conflicts, and various forms of social resistance. The findings further suggest that these shortcomings are not exceptional cases but rather the inherent outcomes of the structural limitations embedded within the Rational Comprehensive Planning approach.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that the challenges associated with Rational Comprehensive Planning cannot be attributed solely to weaknesses in implementation or management; instead, they stem from deeper epistemological and methodological foundations of the approach itself. Nevertheless, CRPP should not be entirely dismissed. Rather, it can remain relevant under contemporary conditions only if it moves beyond its rigid, linear, and control-oriented form and is redefined through interaction with adaptive, participatory, learning-oriented, multi-stakeholder, and context-sensitive approaches. Such a reconstruction has the potential to reduce the gap between planning and reality, enhance the flexibility of planning systems, and strengthen their capacity to address uncertainty and urban complexity particularly in the context of developing countries.

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Authors' Contribution

This article was conducted jointly by the authors. Both authors actively contributed to the conceptualization, data collection and analysis, and writing of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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