

Incrementalism in policy formulation: A case study of London basement policy

1. Introduction

The way of policy formulation has sparked a fierce debate in the post-war period. While comprehensive rationality is regarded as the ideal model of decision making, incrementalist argues the unrealistic side of it, and policymakers should not attempt to reach this ideal (Cairney, 2011). The model of Incrementalism was coined by Lindblom (1963) and is often described as a muddling process in policy formulation. It is to make small adjustments towards the feedback of previous decisions but lacks overriding and clear-cut goals. Therefore, decisions are made under the existing framework and take place through a series of steps (Heywood, 2019). This essay argues how incrementalism has provided a more realistic model than comprehensive rationality by illustrating the domination of incrementalism in the policy formulation process with an example of the London basement policy.

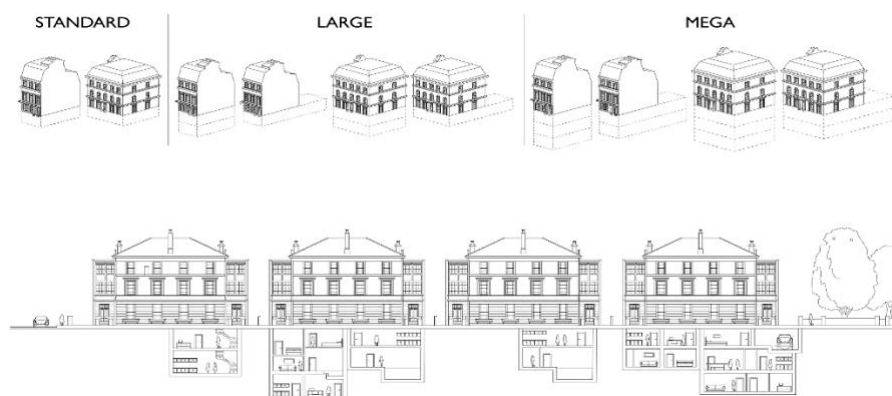
2. Basement development in London

London being a rich city was termed by Atkinson (2021) as the “Alpha City” that has long been occupied by the super-rich. In the rich neighbourhoods around Hyde Park, namely Chelsea, Kensington, and Fulham, the rich are constantly seeking house expansion (Macguire, 2015). Although London has strict planning laws which make upwards or outwards extension nearly impossible, according to the freehold laws, the owner has direct access to the land below his property (The Law Society, n.d.). Therefore, the owners can grant permission for basement construction from their boroughs.

The study of Burrows et al. (2021) identified 7,328 basement developments that granted planning permission across London over a 12-year period. The study classified the basement size into three categories: Standard, Large and Mega (**Figure 1**). Nearly 80% were standard basements, 18% were large basements and 2% were mega basements. These basements are in a high degree of ‘luxification’, equipped with gyms, cinemas, and swimming pools (Baldwin et al., 2019; Burrows et al., 2021).

The construction’s impact on the society can be devastating. The noise and air pollution produced can lead to local health risks. Moreover, poor basement planning may cause structural instability, destabilizing neighbouring properties (Reporter, 2020). Basement construction can also lead to local flooding as underground buildings may disrupt the groundwater flow and water table (McCarthy & Kilgour, 2011).

Figure 1. Schematic representations of London basements.



3. Trade-offs between different actors

In a documentary about basement development, there are two types of actors involved in policy formulation (Landmass London, 2015). For actors such as basement neighbours and

councillors, who advocate for a stricter basement policy, are the ‘expanders’. On the other hand, for actors such as property developers, who do not want further restriction, are the ‘containers’.

Policymakers must consider not only his or her ideals, but also the balancing of power through the legislature and the reaction of interest groups to policy changes. It is about picking policies that suit the goals of one actor over those of another or making trade-offs between one's own goals and those of other players. Therefore, policymakers have to bargain with other actors to reach a high degree of agreement in the political system (Cairney, 2011).

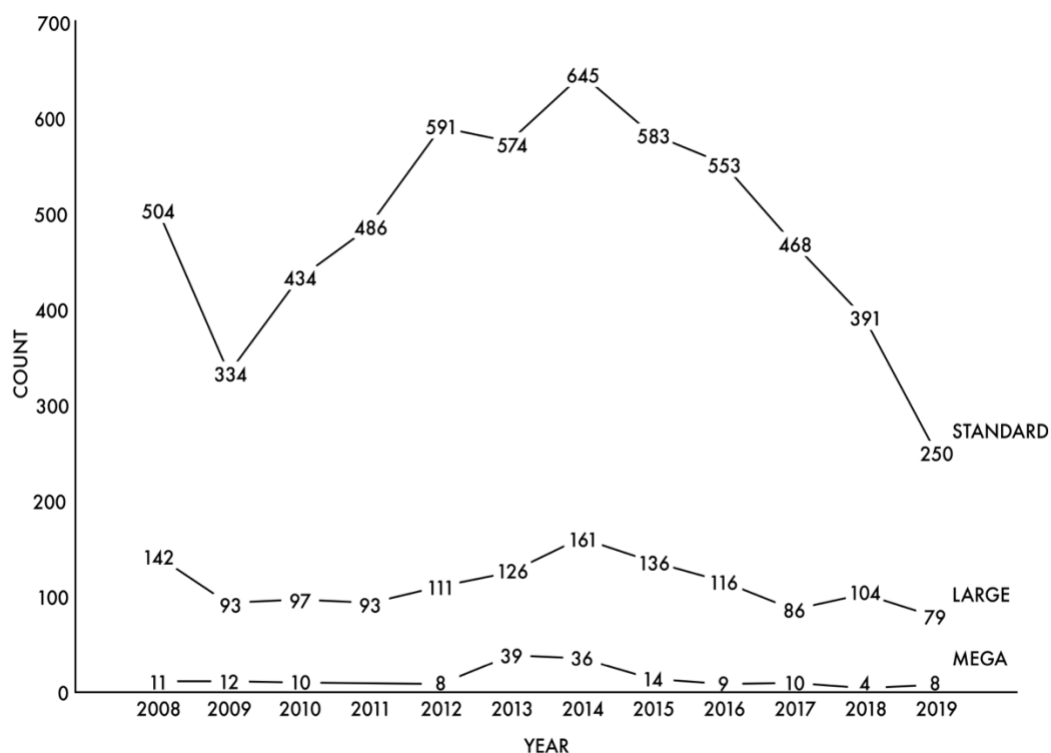
4. Incrementalism in London basement policy

The concern of basement development was first mentioned in ‘The London Plan 2011’ which was drafted by the Mayor of London (updated in 2016) (Greater London Authority, 2016). By 2021, 25 of the London boroughs had implemented supplementary planning policies and guidance about basement development (Burrows et al., 2021).

The first incremental change was the consideration of depth and extension. All boroughs have made policies allowing the excavation of single-storey basements up to 3 meters in depth and the extensions should not exceed 50% of garden space, without radical changes. Islington, for instance, took a balanced approach by stating that basements “should generally not exceed 1 storey in depth, and not exceed 3m floor to ceiling height.” (Islington Council, 2021). Other boroughs such as Haringey suggested two-storey basements will only be considered if the planning passed The Basement Impact Assessment (Haringey London, 2012).

The second incremental change was the permission of the basement application. With the introduction of planning guidance, the number of granted applications has declined since 2014. In figure 2 below, the number of approvals has decreased to 250 standard, 79 large and 8 mega basements in 2019 (Burrows et al., 2021). Successive limited changes are reflected from the declining number of granted approvals.

Figure 2. Number of basement applications of different types approved 2008–2019.



5. By Root or by Branch

Rather than pursuing an incremental change, for a rational policymaker with a keen eye in solving the basement development problem, the best way is to root out the problem by banning any type of basement construction or changing the freehold law. The rational comprehensive model (root method) assumed that policymakers can identify their aims and assess the best way to reach those aims; be able to rank preferences to help 'maximize utility'; all factors and possibilities have been analysed (Cairney, 2011). However, this is an idealized way in policy formulation, with unrealistic assumptions. In reality, policy problems often do not reach a consensus on the cause nor solution, policymakers cannot separate values from facts easily. This model of decision-making often neglects the importance of trade-offs in policy choice, it is difficult to rank their preference as there are different actors involved. In this case study, there are 'containers' and 'expanders'. Choosing the policy to address basement construction will undermine the property rights of the owners. Most importantly, policymakers have their constrained understanding of the likely consequences of their solution. It is not possible to analyse every outcome of every possible solution because of limited resources and time constraints (Cairney, 2011). Therefore, radical changes in policy formation are an idealized solution, and are rarely given serious consideration.

In this case study, the incrementalist strategies (branch method) are adapted for many reasons. Firstly, it suggested that policymakers do not start with articulating their values, ranking their preference, nor seeking the best solution to achieve them. Government can focus on the effects of incremental change and neglect many possible outcomes (Lindblom, 1959). Secondly, taking successive limited changes can reduce the chance of making 'serious lasting mistakes'. The effect of incremental decisions is more predictable and easier to solve. Finally, incrementalism can be a useful tool for policy actors who want to reverse the mistake made in the past policy and establish 'stable expectations in a complex and uncertain environment'

(Jones, 2004). The muddling through approach is a long-term process of negotiation, bargaining and adjustment which may be more democratic (Cairney, 2011). Incrementalist strategies can be used in the basement policy to reach mutual agreement, the process of bargaining and making compromises can make sure that power is not skewed towards any actors at the expense of others.

6. Conclusion

Policy formation is a long process of making compromises and bargaining, and there are different aims and actors involved. In this case study, incrementalism provided a more manageable model by reducing the number of objectives to be investigated (The Texas Politics Project, n.d.). It muddles through the bargaining process with different actors and seeks a solution that is 'good enough' to apply (Cairney, 2011). Therefore, the test of good policy here is not to satisfy a wider political objective but to reach a high degree of agreement in the political system.

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