

Reflections on the Territorial Spatial Planning Inspector System within the Natural Resources Supervision Framework

WANG Xia'an, ZHAO Yongge, ZHANG Chun, LI Lu, REN Xiaojing

Abstract

The establishment and improvement of the territorial spatial planning system require the integration of effective institutional frameworks and practices from previous, disparate planning systems. As the focus of territorial spatial planning shifts from drafting macro-level blueprints and overseeing plan approvals to optimizing planning systems and strengthening implementation and supervision, it is imperative to reassess the former urban-rural planning inspector system. This paper examines the potential for integrating a territorial spatial planning inspector system into the existing natural resources supervision framework. By enhancing the timeliness, professionalism, pertinence, and localized nature of spatial planning inspection, this integration aims to preserve the vitality of the former system while supporting the goals set by the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee: to refine the urban planning system, deepen reforms in urban construction and governance, foster a smart and efficient urban governance model, and perfect the natural resources supervision regime.

1. Establishment and Effectiveness of the Urban-Rural Planning Inspector System

1.1 Origins and Development

In the early 20th century, rapid industrialization led to disorderly urban expansion and environmental degradation globally. To address this, nations like the UK, France, and the Netherlands established planning inspector systems to ensure consistency between grassroots execution and central objectives, serving as a critical mechanism for professional, impartial supervision. The British system, in particular, influenced China's adoption of similar practices, utilizing "planning inspectors" as executive agents of the central government to review local plans and adjudicate appeals through quasi-judicial procedures.

By 2005, the former Ministry of Construction officially launched the urban-rural planning inspector system in China, characterized by "top-down" dispatching. This system emphasized:

Preventative Oversight: Comprehensive monitoring of planning formulation, review, and implementation to identify and rectify potential violations early.

Institutional Framework: Systematic, on-site supervision conducted by experienced professionals dispatched to cities, ensuring that central directives regarding urban development were strictly followed without disrupting local administrative autonomy.

1.2 Systemic Effectiveness

Evidence indicates that the inspector system was highly successful, preventing over a thousand illegal development cases between 2010 and 2015, notably protecting over 35 million square meters of urban parkland. The system's success was rooted in three core advantages:

Localized Real-time Supervision: Moving from reactive post-event investigation to active, on-site intervention.

Direct Hierarchical Supervision: Ensuring central strategic intent and management objectives were faithfully executed, independent of local interests.

Professional Technical Supervision: Leveraging the expertise of senior planners to provide scientifically grounded advice and oversight.

1.3 Case Analysis

The system's efficacy was demonstrated in numerous instances, such as preventing the illegal encroachment of real estate development on public parks, protecting historical city walls, curbing development in designated scenic areas, and correcting improper siting of utility infrastructure. In these cases, inspectors demonstrated independence by navigating conflicts of interest, adhering to statutory procedures, and providing actionable remediation strategies.

2. Deficiencies in the Current Natural Resources Supervision Regime

While the 2018 institutional reforms transitioned supervision from single-element management to "all-factor" natural resource oversight, the current framework faces challenges in the domain of territorial spatial planning:

Divergent Management Logic: Territorial spatial planning differs significantly from single-resource (e.g., land) management in legal basis and technical requirements, yet current local inspection capacity remains underdeveloped.

Focus on Land over Planning: Many localities continue to equate natural resource supervision primarily with land inspection, leading to a neglect of broader spatial structure, urban character, and heritage protection.

Lagging Discovery Mechanisms: Current reliance on post-hoc satellite imagery comparison or passive reporting limits the ability to provide forward-looking, preventative oversight.

Inadequate Accountability: Unlike land-based cases, territorial spatial planning violations currently lack similarly robust and public accountability mechanisms.

3. Necessity and Recommendations for Integration

3.1 The Value of Specialized Inspection

To strengthen the natural resources supervision regime, the "territorial spatial planning inspector" role must be preserved and modernized. The vitality of this system lies in its ability to offer independent, real-time, and professional oversight that can identify emerging systemic risks—such as unauthorized land use or the destruction of non-renewable natural and cultural resources—before they reach critical levels.

3.2 Strategies for "Embedding" and "Reconstruction"

To integrate this system into the current natural resources framework, the following measures are proposed:

Independent Dispatching: Continue the practice of centrally dispatching inspectors to cities approved by the State Council to ensure institutional independence from local government influence.

Balanced Mandate: Inspectors must balance "oversight, service, and support," moving beyond mere fault-finding to assisting local governments in finding compliant development pathways.

Legislative Guarantee: Enshrine the authority, responsibilities, and procedural requirements of planning inspectors within the forthcoming *Territorial Spatial Planning Law* and relevant department regulations.

Smart and Integrated Supervision: Utilize big data, remote sensing, and intelligent interpretation (AI) to create a "digital/smart" supervision platform, facilitating preventative corrections.

Pilot Programs: Implement phased pilot projects in cities with strong "multi-plan integration" foundations, gradually expanding the system to cover all cities under State Council planning jurisdiction.

References

[1] WANG Xia'an, ZHAO Yongge, ZHANG Chun, et al. Reflections on the Territorial Spatial Planning Inspector System in Conjunction with the Natural Resources Supervision System [J]. *Urban Planning Forum*, 2025(2): 67-73.

(AI 辅助翻译)