BOOK REVIEW

Good Urbanism: Six Steps to Creating Prosperous Places

Reviewed by Carlos Nunes Silva, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

The book Good Urbanism challenges ideas long established in the field of urban planning and proposes an alternative perspective, when utopian visions of the city seem to have come to an end1. For this reason, this is a book to be commended and one that will certainly prove helpful to students and researchers, in the broad field of (e-) planning studies, and to planners as well. The book has 9 chapters, including an Introduction and Conclusion, and endnotes with useful details. While chapters 2, 3 and 4, deal with ‘process’, chapter 5 addresses ‘content’ (the design of places), with the remaining chapters focused on some of the issues examined in the previous chapters. From chapter 3 to chapter 6, the book includes numerous vignettes, each with detailed descriptions of case studies, and each serving as a prime example of a specific dimension of ‘Good Urbanism’. By learning with these exemplary cases, Nan Ellin developed a new approach to urban planning, organized into six steps – prospect, polish, propose, prototype, and promote. Like other approaches developed and experimented in the long history of urban planning, also this one is a combination of previous proposals, blending new concepts with principles and practices associated with ‘Collaborative Planning’2 and ‘New Urbanism’3.

In the first group of chapters, focused on process, Nan Ellin describes the method. In chapter 2 (Urban Desiderata: A Path Toward Prosperity), describes the six steps toward prosperity, which is followed, in chapter 3 (The Tao of Urbanism: Rendering the Latent Manifest and the Possible Inevitable), by an explanation of how this path toward better places (or prosperous places), described in the previous chapter, make the latent manifest, by building on the strengths of places, on one side, and the possible inevitable, on the other, by raising support and resources to realize the vision. The idea of co-creation, or collaborative production of better places, in all stages of the
methodology proposed, is explored and examined in more detail in chapter 4 (Co-creation: from Egosystem to Ecosystem). As Nan Ellin suggests, co-creation tends to be easier through the use of information and communication technologies, social media, social networks, increasing the opportunities for social interaction and collaborative work, an idea supported by the evidence available, which suggests that citizens connected through the Internet tend to increase opportunities for collaboration in the construction of better places. In other words, ‘Good Urbanism’, like restorative justice, works with others (citizens), to uncover valuable assets, turning them into resources (‘jewels’) that will enrich place and community. And as implicit in the evidence provided in the book, e-Planning enhance and foster restorative urbanism in large communities by making it easier to work with others.

A second section in the book, focused on how to design the urban form, is constituted by chapter 5 (Going with the Flow: the New Design with Nature). Nan Ellin describes how to design the urban form based on principles different from those of modern urbanism (e.g. separation v. mixture of functions, etc.) as well as from those advocated by post-modern urbanism (e.g. how to define what constitutes optimal living conditions).

The last section develops some of the issues addressed in the first part of the book. In Chapter 6 (The Art of Urbanism: A Practice Primer) Nan Ellin offers a guide on how to implement the six steps and makes recommendations on how to communicate effectively. This is followed in chapter 7 (From Good to Great Urbanism: beyond Sustainability to Prosperity) by the description of the main characteristics of this planning paradigm. By moving beyond sustainability toward prosperity, a state or condition with a smaller ecological footprint, Good Urbanism shift emphasis from problems and deficits, as in the sustainability paradigm, to assets, in the prosperity paradigm. While the sustainability paradigm starts with the recognition of a need or problem, and then proposes a solution, the prosperity paradigm starts with the recognition of assets, connecting them in order to effect the intended changes. In other words, Good Urbanism shifts the emphasis from needs to opportunities. In Chapter 8 (Sideways Urbanism: Rotating the Pyramid) Nan Ellin describes how this new planning paradigm operates, neither top-down nor bottom-up but sideways, being therefore different from modern urbanism (mainly top-down) and post-modern urbanism (mainly bottom-up).

The book concludes (Chapter 9 - Conclusion) by summing up the main ideas and characteristics that make up ‘Good Urbanism’ and a good planner. Among other characteristics, Nan Ellin emphasizes the judicious use of information and communication technologies to foster citizen participation in the co-creation of prosperous places/cities.

In conclusion, the ‘Good Urbanism’ paradigm, proposed by Nan Ellin, represents a rupture with the CIAM discourse on Urbanism, and with Modernism more generally, as other post-rational planning approaches did in the past decades, incorporating principles and approaches of neo-modern and post-modern urbanism, with its refusal of the idea of planning as a technical, objective, and politically neutral activity. However, it differs from Collaborative Planning (or Communicative Planning), as the latter places its emphasis on process more than on plan content and ‘urban form’. If ‘co-creation’ and ‘restorative planning’ (‘working with’) are key features of Good Urbanism, linking it to Collaborative Planning and to Post-modern Urbanism, the importance given to plan content (‘urban form’) distinguishes it from these two planning paradigms. By taking for granted that it is possible, through co-creation, to reach “the plan”, a ‘synthesis’ of the fragmented visions and interests present in the community, Good Urbanism, like Collaborative Planning, differs from post-modern perspectives of urban planning (e.g. the “plan” seen as one of many possible “narratives”). In other words, the ‘Good Urbanism” proposed by Nan Ellin is, to a certain point, a roadmap to build radically different visions of the city through co-creation by planners, citizens and
other stakeholders. However, contrary to the urban utopias of modernism, focused on a stable and ideal urban form, taken as the target to be achieved once defined, and contrary to the postmodern visions of what might be an utopian urbanism, Nan Ellin’s idea of Good Urbanism seems to combine both dimensions, plan content (the good city form) and process (co-creation as the new utopia), in which e-Planning, in particular the extensive use of Internet, social media, collaborative computer-based technologies, and 3D visualization technologies in urban planning, have an important role to play in the construction of better places by enhancing citizen engagement in the co-creation process as proposed by Nan Ellin.

ENDNOTES


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BOOK REVIEW

Active Citizen Participation in E-Government: A Global Perspective

Reviewed by Carlos Nunes Silva, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

Active Citizen Participation in E-Government: A Global Perspective
Aroon Manoharan & Marc Holzer
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The book Active Citizen Participation in E-Government, edited by Aroon Manoharan and Marc Holzer, offers new insights on recent developments in citizen e-participation worldwide and provides details about the efforts that governments, in different political and administrative tiers, across the world (Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, Middle East), have been developing in recent years to actively engage citizens in governance and decision-making, improving therefore the quality of citizens’ input to the policy process. The diversity of issues and cases examined is reflected in its 27 chapters, written by 57 authors from different academic backgrounds.

Most of these 27 essays examine the way citizen engage in e-government activities and offer a remarkable sample of case-studies from different continents. Among other aspects, they look at the determinants behind the adoption of different modes of citizen e-participation and discuss the challenges faced by governments in the new context of e-democracy, two issues relevant for researchers, students and practitioners in the field of e-planning. Although most of them are focused on case-studies in Europe and North America, other parts of the world are also represented. For example, chapter 13 explores the relation between universal household broadband service and citizen participation in South Africa, and chapter 14 examines e-participation in Botswana. Chapters 15, 16, 18, 19, 23 and 25 deal, respectively, with e-participation cases in China, India, Brunei and Singapore, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey.

From a thematic point of view these essays can be grouped in different sections. Some address, from different perspectives, citizen participation in public e-service deliv-
Chapter 9 deals with the management of interactional performance in e-government, and chapter 24 examines a Portal in Trinidad and Tobago that provides a gateway to access the services of different ministries. Another group of papers (chapters 1 to 4 and 27) deals with accountability, transparency and trust, raising relevant issues for all those engaged in providing information to citizens in different levels of government. The first of these chapters discusses how to communicate highly complex information on performance measurement, followed, in chapter 2 and 3, by the analysis and discussion of transparency issues in e-government websites. Chapter 4 provides a framework to measure the efficiency, effectiveness, and citizen satisfaction with public sector websites, useful in other contexts, while chapter 27 deals with trust associated with citizen’s perception of e-government. A third group of papers deals with electoral and political participation. It is the case of chapters 5, 6, 7 and 17. In the first of these chapters is offered an analysis of online political participation in the 2008 US presidential election, while in the third of these chapters is examined the complexity of electronic voting. Chapter 6 examines how people enter into citizenship through online political participation, and chapter 17 the e-democracy strategies and new media technologies in the recent elections in India.

Other topics within the broad field of active citizen participation are also discussed. The relation between social networks and citizen participation in public affairs is explored in chapter 10 (Social Networks, Civic Participation and Young People), comparing offline with online citizen participation, and the potential role of digital games in the promotion of civic skills in the context of e-government in chapter 8. In some of the chapters, the diversity seems to have been taken too far, as some of them seem to fall on the edges of the main theme of the book–active citizen participation. It is the case of e-procurement examined in chapters 11 and 12.

In sum, the book offers a useful collection of cases and perspectives on citizen e-participation in e-government, broadly conceived, taken from different parts of the world, which is undoubtedly its main strength. Among other aspects, readers will find in these essays ample evidence on best practices in e-government, for instance on how to use performance information to promote government accountability, how ICT can be used by municipalities to increase transparency, or on how to measure citizen satisfaction with information in public sector websites. Useful insights, for all those working in the field of e-Planning, on the link between digital divide and political participation, on how online participation can enhance civic engagement, how social networks and mobile technologies affect citizen participation, or the impact of Internet on civic engagement in rural areas can also be found in this collection of essays. Factors and barriers with influence on the acceptance and refusal of e-participation tools by local governments and other stakeholders in the urban planning process are also examined and discussed in the book. All these challenging issues make it a useful book for all those working in the broad field of e-government and interested to learn more about innovative experiences that might act somehow as references for their own e-planning projects.
Carlos Nunes Silva, PhD, is Professor Auxiliar at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Portugal. He has a degree in Geography (University of Coimbra), a post-graduation in European Studies (University of Coimbra - Faculty of Law), a master degree in Human Geography: Regional and Local Planning (University of Lisbon) and a PhD in Geography: Regional and Local Planning (University of Lisbon). His research interests are mainly focused on local government policies, history and theory of urban planning, urban and metropolitan governance, urban planning ethics, urban planning in Africa, research methods, e-government and e-planning. His recent publications include the books Handbook of Research on E-Planning: ICT for Urban Development and Monitoring (2010), Online Research Methods in Urban and Planning Studies: Design and Outcomes (2012), and Citizen e-Participation in Urban Governance: Crowdsourcing and Collaborative Creativity (2013). He is member of the Steering Committee of the International Geographical Union Commission ‘Geography of Governance’ (2012-2016). He is the Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of E-Planning Research (IJEPR).
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