

BOOK REVIEW

New Approaches to Urban Planning: Insights from Participatory Communities

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*New Approaches to Urban Planning:
Insights from Participatory Communities*
Liisa Horelli
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When reading new books on participatory planning I always look for novel, ground-breaking theoretical concepts and original, inspiring case studies. These expectations certainly prove difficult to meet if we take into account all the extensive to-date literature on this subject, and actually I rarely end up satisfied. In this context the book “New Approaches to Urban Planning. Insights from Participatory Communities”, edited by Liisa Horelli, is in many ways astonishing to me. At the first glance it seems to be another review of contemporary planning concepts with some typical empirical examples from neighbourhoods. This impression is strengthened by the front cover (a child with a mobile phone and a row of city-bikes) which seems to be rather accidental, resembles

some low-budget working papers and hardly corresponds with the ambitious and promising title of the book. However, those unfavourable first impressions turn out to be misleading as you read the book: at a closer look it reveals exceptional, thought-provoking, innovative ideas on planning theory and practice.

The main concept of this work is that the current, centralised and top-down urban planning does not recognise the significance of genuine citizen participation, the self-organising nature of the city, the challenges of urban complexity nor the real potential of ICT for community development. Traditional government still steers through norms and policies, whereas the newer forms of governance rely more on monitoring, deliberation and co-governance. The authors honestly admit that this concern is not new, though they address it in a very intriguing and original way.

The book is built on a creative interplay of the following ideas: planning, everyday life, neighbourhood community, glocalisation and ICT. Its characteristic feature, present in all the articles, is a shift from participatory planning

to participatory communities, understood as relational spaces and participatory places that are intertwined with formal, semi-formal and informal networks, hubs and discursive spheres. This leitmotiv is consistently visible through the book.

This collection of articles is subdivided into five parts. The 'Introduction' is followed by Part II 'Setting The Scene' (Chapter 2) that sketches out the broad context of community, discusses what is urban complexity, identifies different types of complexities and recognises the problems that can be solved by urban planning procedures from those that cannot. Part III 'Local Solutions And Practices' (Chapters 3-5) demonstrates local solutions and practices that have been applied in the Herttoniemi neighbourhood of Helsinki. Chapter 3 presents the co-governance model as a deliberative system, stressing the need of communication between the informal arenas of participation and the formal decision-making system. Chapter 4 describes an experiment of time planning integrated with e-planning, which effects in unofficial local co-governance. This involves the mapping of people's everyday spatio-temporal behaviour, as well as a variety of solutions to support the quality of life. Chapter 5 explores the meanings of place and the transformative potential of everyday life. It examines how the neighbourhood of Herttoniemi is constructed and shaped in the inhabitants' experiences of walking.

The fourth part of the book, 'Meeting the Digital Age' (Chapters 6-7) deals with new potentials for change related to digital technology. In Chapter 6 you can read about the public participation in the design of ICT tools and media content – a process that has been neglected in the e-planning and urban planning discourses. Chapter 7 is organised around the notion that everyday life has become increasingly glocal, as daily activities are taking place at several spatial layers. If we are to avoid the risk of local communities losing their identity, we should adopt trans-scalar policies to integrate local with non-local perspectives. Part V 'Conclusions' was for me the most engaging. It sums

up all the book contents in a skilful, clear and understandable manner by proposing the idea of 'Architecture of Opportunities'. I especially like the new definition of planning introduced by the authors: planning is not governance for participants to become involved in, but rather as an endeavour that takes place from the formal, to the semi-formal and informal whether in terms of activities, networks, partnerships, structures or discursive spheres.

The book is accompanied by a very good glossary, giving simple and easy-to-remember definitions of selected terms such as self-organisation, local co-governance, time policy or urban complexity. Useful graphs, schemes and tables (showing for example the problems of urban complexity or the relationships between participation in urban planning and participation in the design of ICT) in the text enrich the book and make it intelligible to the reader.

The book "New Approaches to Urban Planning. Insights from Participatory Communities" by Liisa Horelli and her colleagues proves that the well-known problems and concepts of contemporary planning may be explored and developed in new, unexpected and creative directions. My initially ambivalent view of the book has been eventually replaced with the praise and respect to the writers for their wonderful sense of momentum and excellent writing skills.

There is actually only one thing that I specifically missed in the book. Over a half of the empirical research presented (Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5) is based on one sample settlement: Herttoniemi neighbourhood in Helsinki. Such approach raises several questions on the methodology and the interpretation of final findings. First, is it possible to conduct simultaneously several experiments in one neighbourhood (co-governance, time planning, e-planning, everyday spatial practices) and then describe each of them separately? I am afraid that one community under such an intensive action-research cannot form a basis for separate assessment of particular experiments. Second, is it justified to generalise such research findings and show them as representative to other neighbourhoods?

Those doubts are not explicitly addressed in the book (or I have overlooked such explanations).

Notwithstanding these absences, the new approaches to urban planning described in the book have produced outcomes that reveal new participations, stakeholders, meanings, times and levels, so that the book has strength in its own right. I fully agree with Carlos Nunes Silva who wrote the 'Foreword' to the book, that this work is an important addition to the ongoing

debate in the field of citizen participation in urban planning and that it will be helpful for researchers, students, planners and to networks of self-organized citizens. I would add that despite the limited scope (strongly embedded in the Finnish context) the book will become an important reference for contemporary planning research and it should be widely cited by scholars involved in planning theory and practice. At least I will definitely quote it in my works.

Lukasz Damurski, PhD, is a post-doc researcher and academic teacher at the Faculty of Architecture, Wroclaw University of Technology, Poland, since 2006. His research interests focus on public communication, e-democracy and e-participation in urban planning. He has conducted numerous research projects, including international, comparative studies on urban policy, ICT tools for planning and the role of planners in the public decision-making process, funded within grant programmes from the European Commission and the Polish Ministry of Science. His works – papers and books on various aspects of urban planning theory and practice – are characterised by a wide, political and axiological perspective. Currently he is working on a multi-disciplinary project on local service centres in big cities in Poland.