E-Planning Cultures:
In Search of a Model for Comparative Research

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The widespread use of information and communication technologies in urban planning seems to explain the recent interest for the comparison of e-Planning experiments. The outcomes of these comparative efforts seem to confirm the view that the organization and practice of e-Planning differ among countries, in part as a consequence of the different political and administrative cultures, as had been argued before in comparative studies focused on conventional spatial planning in Europe (CEC, 1997; Newman & Thornley, 1996; Larsson, 2006).

However, as planning history shows, planning paradigms and planning methods tend to move from country to country, from one city to another, creating and sharing, in the different regions of the world, a common vision of urban planning (see, for example, Wright, 1987; Home, 1990; Celik, 1992; Mumford, 2000; Myers, 2003; King, 2007; Arku, 2009; Porter, 2010). The process of globalization and the influence of multilateral organizations (e.g., UN initiatives in the field of sustainable development, UN-Habitat, etc.) have been responsible for the diffusion of planning paradigms and urban planning methods, making the planning profession and the activity of spatial planning more international and more open to external influences. In the case of Europe, for example,

the European integration process facilitated the diffusion of principles, methods and practices in the field of spatial planning among member states. This pattern seems also observable in the development of e-Planning worldwide.

Recent comparative research focused on planning cultures, seen as "*the ways, both formal and informal, that spatial planning in a given multi-national region, country or city is conceived, institutionalized, and enacted*" (Friedman, 2005), opened new perspectives for comparative research in the planning field (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009). In Europe, for example, a closer look at the main planning cultures identified in the literature – British, Scandinavian, German, and Napoleonic – a taxonomy in part influenced by the differences in the political and administrative structure of each country, reveals planning cultures as hybrid forms, suggesting cross-fertilization of planning principles and practices across countries, rather than monolithic sets of principles and practices in each 'planning culture.'

Therefore, it is with no surprise that we see to emerge as an imperative the analysis and comparison of e-Planning experiments in different planning cultures and socio-geographical contexts, as planners and decision-makers, in the different layers of public administration, and

in the different stages of the planning process, use increasingly more information and communication technologies (Silva, 2010).

This issue of the *International Journal of E-Planning Research* (IJEPR) reflects this growing interest for the comparison of e-Planning experiments. The following articles compare different e-Planning cases in European countries, belonging to different planning cultures, or between Europe and Australia, and explore the inter-relationships between e-Planning and the wider institutional, social and political contexts.

In the first article, "Creating Synergies Between Participatory Design of E-Services and Collaborative Planning," Bridgette Wessels, Yvonne Dittrich, Annelie Ekelin, and Sara Eriksén address the relationship between operational design and strategic planning, comparing two exemplars, in the United Kingdom and Sweden, employing a methodological approach useful for future comparative research in the field of e-Planning. The authors address the relationship between operational design and strategic planning, identifying a gap between participatory designs of services and planning processes. One of the cases examined is focused on creating synergy between designing and planning neighborhood-based children's services, in the United Kingdom. The other is focused on the design of Web 2.0 for on-line public consultancy for comprehensive planning and for mobile services for disabled people, in Sweden.

It is followed by another comparative research, this time between Helsinki (Finland) and Sydney (Australia). The purpose of the article by Sirkku Wallin, Joanna Saad-Sulonen, Marco Amati, and Liisa Horelli is to compare the objectives attached to e-Planning and its application in Helsinki and in Sydney, exploring the interrelationship between the planning cultural context and the e-Planning practice. The comparison shows common characteristics and differences between e-Planning practices in the two cities, and in the context, as well. E-Planning in Helsinki and Sydney shares three main common facets, despite the differences

in the planning cultures: the difficulty to bring together the aims assigned to the e-Planning experiments, and the roles, objectives, tools and processes of the conventional and formal planning process; e-Planning tend to break in the formal front wall of the city planning administration; and e-Planning opens up the possibility to reshape existing planning procedures and practices. The main difference seems to be the planning and governance contexts and the way they affect the adoption of e-Planning.

In the third article, "E-Participation in Urban Planning: Online Tools for Citizen Engagement in Poland and in Germany," Łukasz Damurski explores an approach for comparative research of e-Planning, applied, in this case, in the study of e-participation in urban planning in two countries, Germany and Poland. The first country is usually taken, in most comparative studies, as representative of the German planning culture, and the second as one example of the Eastern Europe planning culture. As Łukasz Damurski emphasizes, a simple observation of planning practices in Eastern and Western Europe reveals a considerable gap in citizen participation between post-socialist and more developed European countries, in part a consequence of the continent recent political history. The comparison of the largest cities in Poland and in Germany, based on three aspects – transparency, spatiality and interactivity, – shows that the quality of online participation facilities available is generally higher in Germany than in Poland, although the gap does not seem to be as large as initially hypothesized by the author. In sum, the findings in this comparison do suggest the need to explore and find the proper way to reduce the social and political distance between countries with these different characteristics in order to reduce the remaining gap that still exists in e-Planning.

Wayne Williamson and Bruno Parolin in "Investigating E-Planning in Practice: An Actor-Network Case Study Approach" examine the organizational context in which a form of e-Planning – Planning Support System – was created and implemented within the formal

planning system in three cases in the Australian State of New South Wales. The authors use the Actor-Network Theory as a framework to research and evaluate the social and technical interactions involved in Planning Support System implementation. The case studies examined provide evidence about the level and diversity of resources that are necessary to implement a Planning Support System, and show the types of organizational context responsible for the success or failure of this form of e-Planning.

In the last paper, "E-Civic Engagement and the Youth: New Frontiers and Challenges for Urban Planning," Kheir Al-Kodmany, John Betancur, and Sanjeev Vidyarthi explore how community-based organizations, working in low-income residential neighborhoods in the city of Chicago, employ e-tools and social networking platforms to engage the youth in multiple activities, although, as they emphasize, face-to-face communication, offline-meetings, and other traditional means of interaction continue to be important to ensure effective youth civic engagement.

The empirical evidence collected in these research articles seems to confirm, not only that the organization and practice of e-Planning differ among countries, in part a consequence of different political and administrative cultures, as had been highlighted before by comparisons focused on conventional urban planning, but also that e-Planning tools, methods and approaches move from country to country, from one city to another, creating a shared vision of e-Planning. In that sense, these articles provide a valuable contribution to the emerging field of comparative research of e-Planning culture(s), a theme the *International Journal of E-Planning Research* will continue to address in future issues.

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