

Book Review

Urban Planning in the Digital Age

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Urban Planning in the Digital Age

Nicolas Douay

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The Internet, and all the digital technologies associated with it, affects the practice of urban planning, as previous technological changes have also impacted in the way cities were planned and managed. In the book 'Urban Planning in the Digital Age' Nicolas Douay deals with the challenges with which urban planning processes are confronted due to the increasingly extensive use of digital technologies. The aim is to present an analysis of the effect of the use of digital technologies on city actors, urban planning methods and processes. And for that, Nicolas Douay raises one main research question - 'What is the impact of the use of digital technology on urban planning methods, actors and processes?' - and formulates four hypothesis about the evolution of urban planning styles due to these digital technologies, arguing that in every city there will be a combination of the characteristics considered in each of the four hypothesis, thus making urban planning in all cities an hybrid of the uses that can be made of the new digital technologies.

The first hypothesis admits the return of an expert-based urban planning with the domination of technical actors in urban development, which may give an additional impetus to the revival of rational planning, now in the form of sustainable urban development. The second hypothesis admits that urban planning is under the pressure of an extension of the urban capitalist sphere in the sense that private actors find new markets due to the development of the digital economy and in some cases, as for instance Uber and Airbnb, will have a substantial impact on the management of cities. To some extent this can be seen as a continuation of the privatization of the city, which Nicolas Douay finds somehow associated with strategic planning that has been introduced gradually in public administration and in spatial planning since the 1980s.

In the third hypothesis, the author admits that citizens will search for alternative urban planning, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by these new digital technologies to address urban issues, as in the past through social movements. In the fourth hypothesis considered, Nicolas Douay admits that this digital revolution will open up urban planning institutions in the sense that digitization of urban planning processes allows the circulation and opening of public data and at the same time

creates through this open data new forms of dialog between the different actors and stakeholders in the city. Implicit in this hypothesis is the idea that the practice of urban planning by public actors will change as a result of the participatory planning instruments and the new spaces for discussion and deliberation created by the new and emerging digital technologies in the field of urban planning and urban policy more generally. In this case, Nicolas Douay sees this evolution as a continuation of the communicative paradigm in planning whose aim is to reach consensus through the interaction of a significant large number of actors, a process that digital technologies can make more effective.

The book comprises four chapters, each related to one of the four hypotheses. The first chapter, 'Algorithmic Urban Planning: The Return of Experts' (pp. 1-36), deals with methods and questions the possibilities of a revival of an expert-based urban planning based on the advent of Big Data, expressed by visualizations and modelling, a turn back to some of the premises of the traditional model of rational planning. This new trend raises the same sort of criticism. Nicolas Douay identifies at least two, one based on the Marxist critique of rationality, seen as a concept that does not question society or the capitalism system, while at the same time it may be dominated by economic forces. The second kind of criticism, related to the approach of communicative rationality, underlines the need of citizen engagement in the planning process, which is absent in this more technological and rational perspective of planning.

In the following chapter, 'Uberized Urban Planning: Extension of the Area of Urban Capitalism' (pp. 37-65), the aim is to discuss the effects of the digitization of cities on private actors, and to examine how these new digital economy actors, such as GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon) or NATU (Netflix, Airbnb, Tesla, Uber) impact on the city and on planning processes, and how public planners can react and in that way still control the management of the city according to a general public interest. The emergence of these new actors and the extensive use of digital technologies renewed the interest and to some extent is redefining the nature of strategic spatial planning that has been adopted in most cities since the 1990s. Similar criticisms can thus be raised to this revival of strategic planning, namely the more importance given to the market logic on the city development strategies than to the public interest.

Chapter 3, 'A Wiki-Urban Planning: Searching for an Alternative City' (pp.67-103), focuses on citizens and civil society, questions the legitimacy of public authorities and discusses the emergence of alternative models. Indeed, the digitization of the city is being followed by the development and expansion of a plurality of actors, the new digital economy actors examined in the previous chapter but also the citizens. The aim of this chapter is thus to explore the effects of the digitization of the city on civil society actors engaged in the planning process. Along the chapter Nicolas Douay discusses how these technologies reinforce civic mobilization and how do the use of digital technologies by common citizens challenge the legitimacy and the ability of public actors to plan and manage the city. These new developments somehow continue the previous communication approaches applied in planning since the late 1980s or early 1990s and are therefore subject to the same sort of criticism, namely the fact that planning is affected by power relations and therefore the impact citizen engagement can make depends on how institutions deal with that, a point Nicolas Douay addresses in the following chapter.

In 'Open-Source Urban Planning: The Renewal of Planning Institutional Practices' (pp. 105-143), the last chapter, Nicolas Douay examines and discusses the means and opportunities provided by digital technologies for the renewal of planning methods and participatory planning tools and practices too. The aim of the chapter is thus to examine the effects of the digitization of cities on urban planning institutions, on how planning institutions are developing new contacts with citizens and the civil society in order to develop new forms of legitimacy along ideas already present in the collaborative planning paradigm.

In conclusion, Nicolas Douay shows along the book that the widespread use of digital technologies is translated in multiple local configurations of urban planning, as a result of the diversity of power

relations in each city, and shows also that the ongoing digital transformations will have an enduring impact in the nature and practice of urban planning. The book raises also other issues, such as the need to re-examine the way planners are trained, or issues of digital security. The exploration and critical analysis of the impact of the current digital transition in the practice of urban planning make this book a helpful contribution to our knowledge of urban e-planning development and in that sense it is of interest for readers of the International Journal of E-Planning Research.

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