Chapter 10

Public Communication in Urban Planning: Growing Role of Online Applications for Citizen Participation

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ABSTRACT

In most European countries, urban planning is a domain of public administration and as such should be a subject of transparent, democratic decision-making procedures. It bares the growing need for public communication, especially in the context of the rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The Internet strongly influences public decision-making systems, including urban planning. This chapter looks for particular patterns and standards of public communication in urban planning in Poland and Germany by comparing online participation tools and by analyzing three complimentary aspects of e-participation in planning: “transparency,” “spatiality,” and “interactivity.”

INTRODUCTION

Urban Planning and Public Communication

Planning may be generally described as deliberate human action aiming to bring particular order in the space (Zipser, 1983). To fulfill this task, specific power steering spatial processes is needed. And here we reach the institutional aspect of planning.

In democratic countries planning power is exercised by the elected authorities who represent the community and who are obliged to provide spatial order and well-being of their citizens. Those authorities create appropriate institutions and procedures to carry out the duties of spatial management. And the institutions produce and disseminate public
information related to planning. If we present it in the light of classical theory of public communication, we will have the source (planning institutions), the message (planning information) and the audience (local communities) (Oliver, 2010). The only missing element here is the channel of communication. And it cannot be defined without empirical research, giving a good reason to conduct the study presented in this paper.

When applied to spatial decision-making, public communication becomes a process of exchange of information between all the actors (individuals, groups, institutions, companies) interested in the land-use of particular area. The final result of this process is changing the knowledge, opinions and attitudes of all the senders and recipients (see Pawlowska, 2008). And of course, there have been a wide and long-lasting discussion on the ideas of participatory, collaborative or communicative planning (Healey 1997), on the concepts of self-organising cities (Alfasi & Portugali, 2007), on empowerment and dissociation (Albrechts & Denayer, 2001). All this discussion forms a very important background for this research, but it definitely exceeds the capacity of one paper. Therefore let us sum up all those issues with the words of a famous German planner and communication expert, K. Selle: “planning and development in the city and region is communicating. The vehicle called «planning» does not move without communication” (Selle, 2005, p. 393).

**E-Administration and E-Planning**

For the last twenty years we have been witnessing a dynamic development of information and communication technologies (ICT), followed by a constant increase in the number of Internet users. This process has stimulated the introduction and improvement of new forms of cooperation between the government and citizens. Firstly, in the beginning of the 21st century, Internet was used only to inform local, regional or national communities about the location of particular offices and their business hours, the responsibilities of public administration and its structures. Later, the idea of e-administration and e-government emerged, aiming to facilitate the access to public services and to make them available online, soon becoming one of the priorities of contemporary public policy (see, for example, Grodzka, 2007; European Commission, 2010).

A very significant element of public administration is spatial planning—the decision-making process related to land-use. In this article the term “planning” is restricted to the official administrative procedures regulated by the national law and it does not include a wide variety of unofficial, particular, local planning actions taken outside the obligatory legal regulations. Bearing in mind the definitions of e-administration and e-governance we may ask “What about e-planning?” Theoretical basis of e-planning (or cyber-spatial planning) were formed a couple of years ago (see Budhimedhee et al., 2002; Szuba, 2006) and describe it as a process supported by ICT systems, aiming to provide a fluent flow of information between the users of the environment and the planning authorities, with special attention to equal rights of all the actors involved in the decision-making process. Thus the term e-planning tries to encompass the relationship between information and communication technologies and spatial planning.

There are numerous examples of good practice in the use of information and communication technologies, namely the Internet,