Can e-Planning Make for Better Communities? The Parallel Case of Architecture, Ethics and New Urbanism

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ABSTRACT

Social Engineering (the “possibility of making society”) and physical determinism (influencing or determining human behaviour through space) are two ideas that have been deeply imbedded in modern urban planning from the start. More recently these issues re-appear in the debate on ‘New Urbanism’ as well as in questions concerning contemporary architecture and planning. New Urbanism’s self-conscious concern is to bring urban planning into line with the ethical (including social and political) standards and values that its charter delineates as consonant with what urbanism, democratic values, social justice, and more generally human flourishing require in a contemporary urban environment. It sees the architect’s task as one of interpreting and helping to build, in Giedion’s terms, “a way of life valid for our time.” More pointedly, New Urbanism illustrates Lagueux’s (2004) contention that architecture and ethics are joined indissolubly at the hip. It assumes that, like it or not, and no doubt many architects relish the role, not only is architectural practice inextricably bound to ethical decision making, but design practitioners generally are arbiters and promulgators of value and taste. This article examines problematic aspects of New Urbanism’s assumptions about the relation between architecture, planning and social justice. As a subsidiary or parallel case, the article considers e-planning’s position in these relations. As regular readers of this journal will most likely recognize, e-planning encompasses a range of services including the online lodgment of planning documents, processing of development applications and distribution of information (maps, policies and regulations). The movement promises planners, developers and additional stakeholders in the built environment greater freedoms and efficiencies as they pursue their interests. However, in the realm of values, ‘efficiency’ is not necessarily an obvious or desirable outcome of deliberations over the proper form that communities should take. Rather, the goal of ‘efficiency’ in planning and design through electronic, digital or web-based practices may serve to obfuscate important ethical concerns from the start.

Keywords: Architecture, Community, E-Planning, Ethics, New Urbanism

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INTRODUCTION

As contributors to preceding issues of this journal have suggested, the study and practices of e-planning appears to comprise a relatively new field of inquiry. It is partly an outgrowth of the rise in recent decades of information and communication technologies in urban and regional planning, as well as in related design disciplines. Clearly, this is an important—even seemingly inevitable—development. However, e-planning should also be seen as concerned with a growing body of research into problems that have appeared at the intersection of these rapidly evolving technologies. Thus, it’s concerned with increasingly complex and multi-disciplinary planning and design practices, in relation to the social sciences. This appears to be the view of e-planning found in the editorial preface to the first issue of IJEPR (Silva 2012, i).

In this article, we are particularly concerned to focus discussion on the “social, economic and political” impacts of planning and design practices generally. In addition, we want to examine aspects of the consequences of e-planning for human settlement and values. What are some of the significant underlying philosophical and ethical assumptions—implicit and explicit, ingredient to e-planning? In this regard, while e-planning practices arising in the electronic and digital realms may appear distinct to other analogue or longstanding developmental practices in the non-digital realm (approaches to planning which rely on historical representations for legitimacy, for example, marketing practices which promote a particular lifestyle for residential clients, and others); in terms of their rhetorical and propositional effects, they may not in fact be of a substantially different order. Unsurprisingly, from an ethical and philosophical perspective, e-planning has a history—and one it would do well to acknowledge.

This is the implication of David Brain’s view on design and planning decision-making with which we begin our article.¹ Behind seemingly prosaic, instrumental or procedural (privileging means over ends) services and functions of e-planning, there is a myriad of value (ethical) judgments connecting the field with important issues of education, environment, gender, ethnicity, health and housing (to name a few key topics of social and ethical inquiry encouraged among contributors to this journal).

Take the additional example of ‘community,’ the focus of research, rhetoric and ethical propositions for a number of planning movements. Buchanan (2012, 6) sees potential for “e-research” to identify ways that new communities of users and beneficiaries of planning and design practices are not only formed by electronic and digital media, but are also enabled and constrained by these media. This is a reasonable and appropriately measured claim. Anttiroiko (2012, 16), goes further, however, seeing digitalisation and other “social mega-trends” as changing “the very fundamentals on which community life and related governance processes are based.” (He admits the movement “may be more pronounced in rhetoric than in reality.”) While particular digital technology such as smartphones and the social media that rely on them can indeed be useful to gather community responses and sentiments towards particular planning and design projects (Bishop, 2012: 32), there is no guarantee that responses will be informed, that they will be acted upon by government and corporate planning agencies in any meaningful way, or that the outcomes of this mode of community decision-making will be equitable and just. Thus, at the heart of e-planning’s relationship to important issues governing human integrity, wellbeing and happiness, there are value propositions about what makes for community, as well as speculation on how good planning and design can bring it about.

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