Communication-Oriented and Process-Sensitive Planning Support

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ABSTRACT

The complexity of the planning context has raised criticism against public participation for being a rigid top-down endeavour which does not recognize the different communicative needs and necessary working modes in the engagement of broad publics and collaborative small groups. Consequently, the problem is how to improve public participation so that it becomes more sensitive to the variety of communicative activities and knowledge needs involved in the design of urban planning processes. The aim of the article is to present and discuss, on the basis of two small case studies in the Finnish context, a revised model for a process-sensitive planning support system (PSS), with examples of several digital tools. The authors argue that besides broad public participation, more collaboration is needed to converge the diverse knowledge of planning in two-way communication and co-working settings which enable the analysis and design of living environments.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, Communicative Action, E-Planning, Participation, Planning Support Systems (PSS), Public Participation, Types of Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Urban planning is part of Western democratic systems in which public participation is widely accepted as one of the cornerstones. Public participation is embedded in several European planning legislations in order to strengthen equality and justice in the production of our living environments. Currently, but especially in the future, urban planning will take place in a sequence of digitally assisted collaborative situations, where the need to work together with people from diverse backgrounds and with heterogeneous knowledgebases grows dramatically. Concurrently with the rise of the information society and the availability of digital tools, new arenas of participation have emerged. Also, the increasing number and diversity of stakeholders have made visible the varying ways of working and
types of knowledge related to planning issues. Consequently, public participation has turned out to be a challenging endeavour especially when it has been organised as a rigid top-down endeavour in which important decisions have been taken before the participation begins. Despite the application of many digital and non-digital enabling tools, the participants rarely have a real impact on the final outcomes (Staffans et al., in press). In addition, public participation does not sufficiently recognize the self-organization of citizens and the everyday practice which are parts of civic engagement transforming the urban environment (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Wallin, 2019).

Our research problem is, how to improve public participation so that it becomes more sensitive to the variety of communicative and contextual activities involved in the design processes (Eräranta, 2019).

We regard participatory planning as a matter of both professionals and laypeople who are involved as stakeholders in the specific case. Contrary to the modernist era, when planning professionals were considered the prime holders of knowledge within the planning domain (Sandercock, 1995), the emphasis has slowly moved to knowledge producers outside the planning organization, to groups who are not professionally trained planners (Rydin, 2007). Consequently, it is important to understand the kind of knowledge that can be co-produced in the different phases of planning, as well as how the stakeholders are able to work together.

The careful design of the planning process and collaboration in groups have become central to the comprehension and managing of communicative planning (Innes, 2013; Newig et al., 2012; Vente et al., 2016; Eräranta, 2019). One of the challenges is, how to combine the participation of a broad public that produces several types of knowledge, with the collaboration of a selected group of actors that enables the convergence of knowledge in the systematic gathering, managing and processing of information throughout the planning process. As Rydin claims (2007, pp. 55-56): “It is much more difficult than often acknowledged to generate agreement between actors whose knowledge of an issue is rooted in different experiences.” Consequently, there is a need to better understand, how and with whom we are working with, when striving to co-create good living environments.

As we have been working for a long time with the above described questions, the aim of our article is to present and discuss, based on two small case studies in the Finnish context, a revised model for process-sensitive planning support (Staffans et al., in press), which will enhance the flow of various communicative actions during the planning process.

The research questions are:

1. Does the model enhance the design process in terms of integrating the broad public with the specific small groups or in terms of diverging and converging knowledge?
2. What kind of digital and non-digital tools or a planning support system (PSS) does the revised model provide to improve communication-oriented and process-sensitive participatory planning?

We argue that besides broad public participation more collaboration is needed to synthesize the diverse knowledge of planning in two-way communication and collaborative settings, which will enable the analysis and design of living environments.

Next, we will describe the theoretical framework including the original model after which the methodology for the empirical cases, their analysis and comparison will be presented with consequences for the revision of the model. The authors conclude by discussing the answers to the research questions.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework of the article comprises the epistemological background and a description of the planning support system necessary for the model.
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