Chapter 5

Local Internet Forums: Interactive Land Use Planning and Urban Development in Neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is shaking up the expertise and production of knowledge in the planning institution. Digital citizens are searching for information from different places, combining formal and informal sources without apology, and are debating and speaking out on matters. Public planning organisations will be fully stretched to adapt their practices and services to meet these demands. This chapter will present the research results of a project that embarked on gathering and combining local information and knowledge on urban planning on Internet forums. Interactive applications were also developed for these forums to support public participation in ongoing land use planning and development projects in the City of Espoo, Finland. The research results demonstrate how fragmented local, place-based knowledge is, how difficult it is to combine informal and formal information in urban planning, and how inaccessible public data systems still are.

INTRODUCTION

Urban planning involves major social interests. For example, in Finland, the preparation of and decisions on land use plans are municipal monopolies, so the connection of land use to governance and political decision-making is strong.

The connection of land use planning to policymaking and governance is also reflected in planning theory, which over the years has focused specifically on the political nature of planning and power relations. The most important theorists in the field have stressed the social and institutional nature of planning. They have emphasised institutional design (Healey, 1997) and the position of the individual
planner as a central actor in the urban planning institution (Forester 1989).

One of the general features in the debate on planning over recent years has been the promotion of communication and collaboration. There is broad support for increased interaction, but there has not been much debate, however, on what effects the increasing use of information and communication technology will have on the content of knowledge and on expertise. The connection between the exercise of power and information has been highlighted (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998), but not whether the strong expert institution would really be willing to open itself up to genuine public debate on what types of cities and environments should be planned and constructed.

The Internet is the most important knowledge building environment in today’s world. “Digital citizenship” includes the idea of the ability of citizens to effectively participate in social activities in real time via data networks (Mossberger et al, 2008). Participation in the production of knowledge in online environments is determined through its members own capacities, interests and objectives (Wenger et al, 2005).

Digital citizens, or at least the “born digital” generation, digital natives (digital natives, Prensky, 2001), expect the same kind of high-quality usability, flexibility and reliability from electronic services provided by public administration as they do from commercial services. Applications like Wikipedia and Facebook have spawned a generation that is not content simply to read articles by others, but which wants to comment on and add to the knowledge itself, both as members of a community or network and as individuals (Foth et al, 2008).

The expansion in expertise and knowledge building is challenging the monopoly position of expert organisations in urban planning as producers of urban knowledge. Planners have to consider their own ways of working and the methods, through which planning information is created, distributed, processed and used (Goodspeed, 2008). The use of the Internet in planning projects has also raised questions concerning the utilization of formal and informal knowledge that has been generated in public online environments (Rantanen & Nummi, 2009).

In this chapter, we will examine urban planning, not from the perspective of the institution, but from the local perspective of urban areas and neighbourhoods and the people who live there. The aim has been to study the use of the Internet in interactive land use planning processes. We ask, with the aid of a few Internet applications that have been developed and implemented, how online environments are shaking up practices in urban planning.

BACKGROUND

Place-Based Urban Planning

Only a decade ago, the placelessness of the information society was hailed with enthusiasm. But as Castells (1996) states, people still live in places. In fact, the opposite has happened to what was assumed: the importance of places has further increased. Information technology frees people to choose the places where they live, work and spend their free time. According to Madanipour (2001), the metropolis of the future will be an integrated region that has various attractive places and space for different cultures. Planning a metropolis requires knowledge based on a “soft” understanding of places and the more detailed incorporation of hard, physical facts (Madanipour, 2001).

A place-based approach builds a bridge between the practice by municipal managers of looking at urban areas and neighbourhoods from departmental silos, and the practice of people living in these areas of looking at cities in terms of experiences. Places are no longer viewed in nostalgic terms of traditional, homogeneous communities, nor as mere locations on a map. They are conceptualized as dynamic locales – with
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