Chapter 14

Can Urban Planning, Participation and ICT Co-Exist?
Developing a Curriculum and an Interactive Virtual Reality Tool for Agia Varvara, Athens, Greece

Vassilis Bourdakis
University of Thessaly, Greece

Alex Deffner
University of Thessaly, Greece

ABSTRACT

One of the recent main problems in urban planning is to find ways in order to employ practical, very broad and commonly used theoretical principles such as participation. An additional issue is the exploitation of the possibilities of new technologies. The process of developing a flexible three-part (common core, public and planners) curriculum in the case of Agia Varvara (Athens, Greece) in the framework of the Leonardo project PICT (2002-2005) showed that ICT (Information Communication Technologies) can help in participation, mainly because it constitutes a relatively simple method of recording the views of both the public and the planners in a variety of subjects (both ‘open’ and ‘closed’).

INTRODUCTION

One of the recent main problems in urban planning is to find ways in order to employ practical, very broad and commonly used theoretical principles such as participation. An additional issue is the exploitation of the possibilities of new technologies. In relation to the latter, one important aspect is the transformations of urban forms, urban processes and the perceptions of urban life though the technological advances (Fernández-Maldonado, 2004). However, this chapter focuses on the role of new technologies in public participation in planning.

The data are provided by the PICT (Planning Inclusion of Clients through E-Training) project which was a three-year (2002-2005) pilot project co-funded by the Leonardo da Vinci Programme of the European Commission. The project was inspired by the on-going debate about the relationship of people with their cities launched by the initial Charter of Athens (which took place in 1933, see Le Corbusier, 1943/1987) and re-defined by the
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New Charter of Athens adopted by European Council of Town Planners (ECTP) (1998/2003); and responded also to viewpoint that the involvement of communities in public decisions builds social capital and strengthens the civil society. The continuing debate on the participation of the public in official decisions is reflected on European policy, as expressed in the European Spatial Development Plan (European Commission, 1999), Local Agenda 21 and the Sustainable Development Framework of Gothenburg. Consequently, it has been widely accepted, at least in principle, in the European Union, that urban planning is part of the sustainable development process and as such requires consensus building through the engagement of citizens (PICT, 2006).

The chapter focuses on the curriculum developed for the Municipality of Agia Varvara in Athens, Greece. It has a population of approximately 30000 people with a multicultural identity and high unemployment rates. The developed curriculum consists of three parts: a common ‘core’ part that is shared by both planners and the public, and two distinct parts: one addressing the public and the other the planners. Each part consists of several modules, to cater for different learning levels, abilities and interests. The structure is flexible and the whole idea was to have a curriculum with a scientific, and not a ‘journalistic’ curriculum basis that could, at the same time, be simple but not simplistic.

The main objective of the chapter is to demonstrate if one of the main issues of urban governance, public participation in planning, can be helped through the use of ICT at the level of the community.

BACKGROUND

Participation in Urban Planning

There are different views of participation depending on the degree of involvement of the experts and the selection of criteria for the representation of the public. The most recent approach in relation to participation is collaborative planning which aims at fostering communication and collaborative action (Healey, 1997/2005), and especially at fostering partnerships (McCarthy & Lloyd, 2007). Although there is lack of experience of participation, and consequently of participatory culture in Greece, Agia Varvara has demonstrated participatory experiences in the past.

A useful ‘schema of public participation’ is developed by Hampton, who claims that planning authorities should consider the means and techniques of public participation in planning in terms of three separate aims: dispersing information to the public, gathering information from the public, promoting interaction between policy-makers and the public. He identifies two major objectives behind the introduction of greater public participation in planning during the late 1960s: policy-making and decisions can benefit from better information about public preferences and residents’ concerns, and public participation can draw people into a stronger and longer-term relationship with government and enhance their current and future ability to play a significant role in policy-making (Hampton, 1977 cited in Darke, 2000, pp. 391-392).

Hampton builds on a crucial idea from the government’s Skeffington report (1969) that there is no single or simple category of ‘the public’, rather that there are many separate publics - a similar idea, albeit in relation to ‘public opinion’, is expressed by Pierre Bourdieu. Hampton also claims that planners should recognize that the stakeholders are distinguished in: major elites (e.g. local business groups, major employers, Chambers of Commerce, trade unions), minor elites (local interest groups, community associations, action groups, and public as a collection of individuals (Hampton, 1977 cited in Darke, 2000, p. 392).

The existence of equal opportunities constitutes one of the important conditions for success within Local Authorities, and, according to the Equal Opportunities Guide, the concerned groups...