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Why governance will make urban design better. Dealing with the communicative turn in urban planning and design

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Designing and planning cities are profoundly political activities. There are no purely value-free or 'technical' solutions to urban problems: all decisions in urban development are political decisions insofar they must involve choice, negotiation, friction and divergence and occasionally agreement that enable action. The figure of the neutral and unbiased planner or designer who has ready-made solutions for urban problems is a fallacy. In this article, I explore the concept of governance and its implications for urban planner and designers, enabling them to connect spatial strategies and designs to an understanding of the political economy of places. This ought to enable spatial planners and designers to assign specific roles to different stakeholders involved in specific plans, projects and interventions, hence improving the suitability of their proposals, increasing support and facilitating implementation. But this is not enough: I also argue that planners and designers must reach out to different types of knowledge and get away from their own expert communities in order to gather relevant knowledge that will allow them to perform their tasks better. Including non-expert knowledge in planning and design processes helps produce more relevant, valid knowledge and counteracts what Foucault called the discourses of the expert agents. Expert discourses are an integral part of existing structures of power (and sometimes, of oppression). They muffle non-expert voices that are outside power structures and often cannot find channels to be heard. When heard, they are often disqualified. By constructing knowledge in a networked way, including 'non-expert' voices, planners and designers could perhaps escape excessively one-sided or biased positions, hence making their proposals more relevant and realistic.

Keywords: governance, knowledge, politics of the city, role of planners and designers, planning foundation

1. Bringing politics back to design and planning studies

In his carefully crafted critique of the 'Smart City' concept during the conference 'New Urban Languages' (DASTU, Milan, June 19-21, 2013) the Swedish professor of social and cultural geography Ola Söderström claimed that big data modelling (in the fashion proposed by the advocates of the Smart City concept) does



not tell us how to govern our cities, because it seems to exclude the political dimension. Söderström claimed that we still need politics in order to steer decision-making in complex democracies. In a summarised way, the essence of his talk was ‘we need to bring politics back to the centre of the discussion on how to manage our cities’.

Frank Ekardt, professor of urban sociology at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, speaking at the same conference, suggested that we must pursue a *renewed kind of politics* where not only the self-proclaimed ‘expert’ voices are heard; we need to understand the power of multiple narratives and step out of exclusive expert knowledge to be able to incorporate other innovative and diverse knowledges into decision-making processes.

Following on their steps, I put forward the idea that we must bring politics back to the centre of the discussion on urban development, while acknowledging the very essence of politics, that is, the variety of points of view and objectives that must be coordinated in order to enable action.

In order to do so, I would like to discuss the role of planners and designers in complex democratic arenas, where communication, negotiation and consensus seeking seem to be crucial. In other words, I would like to discuss how urban planners and designers can step out of their expert knowledge and incorporate other kinds of knowledge in their doing, while acknowledging that planning and designing are eminently political activities.

But why should we ‘bring politics back to the debate’? And what is the role of planners and designers in doing so?

In order to explore possible answers to those questions, we must firstly acknowledge the emergence of governance as a concept that helps us understand the political economy of places and the architecture of relationships that guides actions in urban development. My hypothesis is that understanding current governance and designing new governance structures will help us deliver better spatial plans and designs. Secondly, I propose we explore the connections of the idea of governance and urban planning and design. In the concept of governance, we can find levers that will help us redefine our roles as urban planners and designers in the realm of politics. But what is governance?

2. What is Governance?

It is widely acknowledged that “(...) sustainable development requires concerted attention to social, ecological and economic conditions” (Magis and Shinn, 2009). In other words, the understanding has grown that “for sustainability to occur, it must occur simultaneously in each of the three dimensions” (economic, social and environmental) (Larsen, 2012). This holistic conception of sustainability informs us that urban planning and design must also work towards democracy-building and the delivery of social, economic and environmental justice, which are essential conditions for social sustainability. In order to understand governance systems and improve performance of urban planning and design in delivering social sustainability and spatial justice, we must acknowledge the normative and the descriptive dimensions of governance.

In the normative dimension, the great sectors of society (civil society, public sector and private sector) ought to be in ‘positive tension’ simultaneously applying and suffering pressure from one another. In doing so, they keep each other in check, providing mechanisms to guide and check their actions and to promote mutual accountability. The underlying argument is that societal forces keep each other in check, compelling actors to be accountable to each other. This relationship is dynamic, as actors continually find new positions in relation to changing objectives and newly formed coalitions of interest. It is possible to understand this model in relation to actions or sectors in urban development, where actors might coalesce around objectives but will disperse once those objectives are attained or when their focus changes.



The problem with this model is that of accentuated power asymmetry. Not all actors have an equal voice in the political arena and there will be those whose views or wishes are not taken into account. Often, actors are disqualified because of their lack of expert knowledge. This is described by Michel Foucault as a tool for the legitimisation of existing power structures, through the construction and reinforcement of truths that reinforce and legitimise those structures. Those who are within those structures are considered 'competent' to express their views, mostly because they have the formal (accepted) training to do so, or because they have the political influence that makes their voices heard.

These are what Foucault called 'speaking subjects' or competent subjects. Foucault defined discourses as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (Foucault, 1977). Expert discourses are an integral part of existing structures of power (and sometimes, of oppression). They muffle non-expert voices that are outside power structures and which often cannot find channels to be heard. When heard, they are often disqualified because they come from non-experts or people whose knowledge is not recognised as valid knowledge. There are various instances of knowledge that is not recognised as such, i.e. the knowledge of the oppressed about the mechanisms of their oppression, the knowledge of children about what they need to grow and learn, the knowledge of women about the ways in which cities should be organised to make the lives of families better. By constructing knowledge in a networked way, including 'non-expert' voices, planners and designers could perhaps escape excessively prevalent or biased positions, hence making their proposals more relevant and realistic to those they are intended to.

This normative dimension of governance contrasts with a descriptive or explicative dimension, where these relationships must be described in relation to real practices. In the explicative dimension, we must find real relationships between actors that influence decision-making. This is necessary if planners, designers and other agents of urban development wish to effectively shape the attention and steer the actions of a myriad of actors towards acceptable or desired outcomes.

Governance systems appear within the framework of formal and informal institutions and the rule of law. The rule of law provides the framework for the public sector, the private sector and civil society to exist in certain forms and in certain relationships with each other through formal institutions. But the recognition has grown that formal institutions are only a part of what constitutes the architecture of social and political relationships. A large part of this architecture is constituted by informal institutions, as defined by Ostrom (2005) which are a result of norms-in-use based on culture and tradition. These aspects help us explain informal institutions, but also behaviours like patronage, nepotism, corruption and ingrained practices. In short, they help us explain governance structures 'in practice'.

The understanding of this architecture of socio-political relationships implies the recognition that planners cannot 'enforce things by decree' and designed blueprints are ineffective in the long run. Instead, urban plans and designs must take governance networks into account in order to shape the attention of the public and of policy makers, help them define priorities and courses of action and influence the actions of a multitude of agents who are located across levels of decision making and of organization (multilevel governance) and in different networks of agency (network governance). Moreover, actors need not necessarily be embedded in hierarchical institutional structures, but scattered in formal and informal institutions, which brings us back to the necessity to include non-expert and non-institutional voices in decision-making circuits.

In other words, governance refers to 'the emergence of a policy-making style dominated by cooperation among government levels and between public and non-public actors and the civil society, where there must be sustained co-ordination and coherence among a wide variety of actors with different purposes and objectives from all sectors of society' (Papadopoulos, 2007). This entails a multilevel dimension and a networked dimension. Multilevel governance 'Involves a large number of decision-making arenas,



differentiated along both functional and territorial lines and interlinked in a non-hierarchical way' (Eberlein and Werwer, 2004). Network governance is the arena where policy making and implementation are 'shared' by politicians, technocrats, experts, dedicated agencies, authorities, semi private and private companies, the public, NGOs, etc which constitute networks of intertwined relationships and of policy and decision making across levels, territories and mandates (Papadopoulos, 2007).

This is rather distant from spatial planners and designers' former stance of superciliousness of professional knowledge, which resulted in prescriptive, normative and mostly inflexible plans and designs. In short, the awareness that urban planners and designers are inserted in and must understand complex systems of governance has grown, and this has unveiled new roles for planners in spatial development in relation to multi-level and network governance where deliberation, bargaining and compromise are the central elements in effective policy-making (Sehested, 2009).

It seems sensible to assert that understanding multilevel and network governance will strengthen the quality and effectiveness of decisions taken and designs made, because these will undoubtedly enjoy a higher degree of output legitimacy, their content is likely to be more appropriate, they are likely to be better accepted by target groups, and they will probably be technically more adequate and ethical. In short, decisions and designs are likely to be more politically and technically realistic (Papadopoulos, 2007).

However, this understanding implies the recognition that governance systems are never perfect and the ways they are understood and dealt with have a deep effect on the quality of our democracies. Papadopoulos (2007) points at a possible deficit of democratic accountability of governance structures. Among other shortcomings, Papadopoulos points at the weak presence of citizen representatives in governance networks, their lack of visibility and distance from the democratic arena, their multilevel nature which makes their understanding and management an almost unworkable challenge and last but not least, the prevalence of 'peer' forms of accountability, the expert voices or speaking agents described by Foucault, which hamper democratic debate.

Accountability refers to the attribution of responsibility and mandate, and the possibility of check by other parties involved. In network governance, it is difficult to attribute responsibility and mandates and eventually difficult to hold anyone accountable because of the 'problem of many hands' in policymaking and implementation. This is because for agents to be held accountable, they must be identifiable as accountability-holders and they must belong to arenas where there is prospect of sanction. Networks dilute responsibility among a large number of actors, making it difficult to attribute responsibility and enforce sanctions.

In representative democracies, we might speculate that elected officers are the ultimate accountability holders and that elections are the ultimate test of accountability: the hanging sanction is non-reelection. But in networked governance structures or arrangements, the role of elected officials is often not central in the decision-making processes. Policy networks are largely composed of bureaucrats, policy experts and interest representatives, who are often only indirectly accountable to citizens and sometimes only accountable to their peers (other experts) (Papadopoulos, 2007). Similarly, plans and designs are likely to be conceived by many hands in governance circuits that do not allow for non-expert participation. Even when a plan or design is assigned to a mastermind designer or planner, it would be incredibly naïve to believe that one mastermind can control all aspects of the design and implementation if there is no coordination of how knowledge is produced and implemented in an inclusive democratic way.

But we should not narrow the issue of accountability to that of democratic control, because other forms of accountability are equally important: administrative accountability, fiscal and legal accountability, for example (Grant and Keohane, 2005). Moreover, decisional procedures in policy networks are often informal and opaque as this facilitates the achievement of compromise. This is what has been described as



the ‘politics of problems’ (problem solving politics) oriented towards a backstage network of knowledge and decision-making, which is preoccupied with finding solutions for practical problems. This is in opposition of ‘politics of opinion’; the traditional politics in the media, party struggles and ideological assertions made to win over the electorate. This is made all the more complex by governance structures cutting across decision levels (e.g. federal states, emerging city-regions, but also international institutions like the UN, European Union and the IMF).

The point here is how to include non-expert knowledge into formal governance circuits, rather than ignoring it. This is an important point, because we must acknowledge the fact that not all knowledge is valid, relevant or desirable. Non-expert knowledge must be inserted into democratic formal circuits of debate, verification and validation, where some sort of consensus seeking is practiced.

In summary, the figure of the mastermind planner and designer is a fallacy. This fallacy, produces distortions in the way urban planning and design are taught in our schools. Future planners and designers are led to believe they have supernatural control over the processes that shape our cities. They are taught to have an irrational belief in the effectiveness of their designs and plans, without any evidence on how they are enacted and implemented in practice. In order to explore these ideas further, I will use the concepts of soft and hard infrastructures, which I borrow from the American geographer Edward Malecki, for whom “public and private sectors, and their interactions, are sustained by soft and hard networks. To be effective, these networks must operate at the global, national, regional and local scales, gathering knowledge via social interaction, that is, through ‘soft’ networks” (Malecki, 2002).

3. Soft and hard infrastructures in the city

Soft and hard infrastructures are expressions open for interpretation. Hard infrastructures are easily understandable as the physical environments and places where life occurs. But what are “soft infrastructures”? An understanding of soft infrastructures could perhaps include cultures, political structures and institutions or the way these things are articulated and bound together by values, rules, traditions and conventions. Together they conceivably form the soft infrastructures that inhabit (and produce) physical space.

My argument is that urban planners and designers must understand how soft and hard infrastructures interact in order to deliver effective plans and designs. They must try to understand how governments (and most specially formal spatial planning systems and spatial intervention practices) interact with civil society and the private sector for the production of space. This is of course what we mean by ‘governance’. Governance is an effective shorthand to express the complexity of interactions between soft infrastructures in the city.

The correlation between hard and soft infrastructures in the production of space is diachronic and mutual. Hard infrastructures simultaneously produce and are produced by soft infrastructures. Space is socially constructed, as Henri Lefebvre so masterly argued in his 1974 book “The production of space”. On the other hand, space influences, shapes and conditions human interactions, as champions of environmental sociology have argued.

The interactions between society and space are complex and to a large extent indomitable, as they cannot be fully understood and managed (at least not with the tools we have currently at our disposal). Moreover, even in times of “big data” and “smart cities”, we must still acknowledge the importance of governments and formal planning as steerers of urban development. We must also acknowledge the role of politics in urban development and accept that urban planners and designers have a political role. Bringing politics back to design and planning studies, as Söderström’s suggests, is crucial in order to avoid the irrational belief some designers and planners seem to have on the effectiveness of architectural and urban designs



and plans to “solve” social conflict; without any real understanding of and without any real connections to large social and economic processes and decision-making structures.

Urban space is essentially the space of politics, as Plato and a host of other thinkers have stated. It is the space of dispute and conflict, but also of negotiation, cooperation and cross-fertilization of ideas¹. All decisions concerning urban development are political decisions, since they must be negotiated among different parties that often hold conflicting views. But here again, the problem of power asymmetry is crucial. Understanding and promoting networked governance might help us tackle power asymmetry, because governance responds to problems of knowledge formation and communication.

As we argued in the previous section, one of the main critiques to formal urban planning and design is that they are discourses of power and control. After all, they are technical discourses conceived by specialists working mostly in bureaucracies at the service of power structures that promote inequality. As we argued before, this creates a bias in the way urban development is conceived and enacted. The voices of those deemed incompetent are not heard and therefore their knowledge is not incorporated in the way cities are planned and designed. Democracy and participation are perhaps the answers to this bias, but in practical terms, governance structures must be adapted or re-designed to accommodate ‘other’ knowledges in the way plans and designs are made. This is the point made by Frank Eckardt in his talk at the conference ‘New Urban Languages’.

The resulting multiplicity of points of view responds to fundamental issues in urban development and in governance structures: accountability and legitimacy. Because decisions are taken in opaque behind-door structures and are protected by the veil of the ‘competency’ of professional planners and designers, they are likely to deliver plans and designs that do not respond to the true needs and wishes of those outside the tight circles of power. In short, decisions are likely to be less effective in delivering desired results (i.e. socially sustainable plans and designs).

Habermas’ theory of practical knowledge identifies human interaction as ‘communicative action’ and describes the political world as a basically communicational world. In this sense, a truly political debate needs to incorporate multiple voices in order to be legitimate and effective. My point here is that urban planners and designers must design processes of participation and incorporation of multiple voices INTO their plans.

We must do that if we want to preserve the public nature of our cities and deliver relevant plans and designs that increase public goods. Despite the increasingly corporate nature of urban development, the city remains essentially ‘public’, even if the public sphere and the public man are under siege (Sennett, 1993). What I mean here is that cities are the product of collective, largely uncoordinated undertakings and they are, in this sense, ‘public’, even when the best results of that collective undertaking remain accessible to very few. In order to make these coordinated undertakings relevant to many, steps must be taken to ensure the inclusion of many voices.

In this sense, urban planners and designers must move away from ideas about the supernatural power of their plans and designs to direct urban development, and develop a more modest and realistic understanding of their roles and capabilities in helping stakeholders achieve their own objectives, while delivering public goods for all.

This should not mean a withdrawal of planners and designers or that urban development should be left to the forces of the market. Rather on the contrary, designing new forms of inclusion and fair procedural justice, to use Fainstein’s concept, implies designing better and more democratic institutions and

¹ As Jane Jacobs has brilliantly theorized in her book “The Economy of Cities”, and new economic geographers have been busy investigating ever since.

improving coordination. My argument here is that urban planners and designers must be aware of their role as possible designers of fairer processes of participation and democratic city-making.

Conclusions

It is my profound belief that the task of urban designers and planners is not only to deliver the plans and designs that will shape the physical world (the hard infrastructures), but we must also simultaneously design the soft infrastructures that will allow those designs and plans to take place effectively and democratically. But what do I mean by the design of soft infrastructures?

I believe that while understanding governance is crucial, it is not enough. Planners and designers must be able to design new relationships between civil society, the private sector and governments *in relation to the plans and designs they wish to propose*. For instance, if a new housing scheme is put forward in the form of drawings and regulations, designers and planners must be able to answer the questions of what, by whom, when and how are these designs going to be implemented. They must try to incorporate non-expert knowledge that is relevant for their actions to enlarge the democratic scope of their actions. Designs and plans must be anchored on a firm understanding of the role of stakeholders and the socio-political context where these plans and designs take place. Designers and planners must understand legal systems and existing forms of partnership and financing. But most importantly, they must also be able to propose new forms of knowledge formation and participation, partnership and financing. This implies a complete overhaul in the way we teach urban design and planning today.

Research is essential. Nothing can be done without knowledge about the context, the issues present and the solutions that have been tried elsewhere. But research is also not enough. Designers and planners teachers and students must also be able to reach out to other forms of knowledge that are not in books, papers and statistics, but in the minds and doings of people, investors, politicians and citizens. There must be a large measure of activism involved in spatial planning and designing, as we move away from the utterly ludicrous idea that expert knowledge alone has answers for the incredible complexities of urban development. Without understanding and acting upon the soft infrastructures of the city, we will not be able to deliver hard infrastructures that work in the real world.

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