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A systematic review on mechanisms of public participation in the urban governance of planning

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Abstract

The various policies for the promotion of walking in the urban environment as well as the emerging of its importance in the urban realm constitute one of the essential pillars of the future sustainable city. Although a numerous set of measures and techniques are being encouraged and adopted in the metropolises of Europe and in several other cities around the world, Greek cities continue their "rally" in car-dependency with only a few exceptions that inspire the growing urban complexities.

There are ideas. There are tested methods. But how will they affect our mentality and become our goal? How could future plans be perceived not as overambitious projects or pure aesthetic interventions?

Citizens' participation in urban planning serves a number of goals such as 'the improvement of decision making' which usually is a 'game' with politicians and specialists as the main actors, keeping residents away while excluding important elements on the analysis of planning (Athanasopoulos, Vlastos 2009). Another important aspect is the axis of 'information, education and awareness' for the achievements regarding the goals of sustainable mobility. The later can be achieved through an educational/ pedagogical participation that gives the chance to the citizen to understand planning as a more holistic approach. This will create the 'motivation', within which decision making becomes a familiar concept; decisions are 'theirs' now, treated with respect. Therefore, this allows the authorities to 'avoid unpredictable and uncontrolled reactions', as decision making turns more transparent and valid.

A very critical function, that is achieved by Public Consultation in planning, is the **increase of the effectiveness of the produced policies**. Citizens not only contribute in defining and highlighting the priorities but are also actively involved in the implementation of the plans. Through the various consultation techniques they **define the criteria as well as the conditions** under which plans can be developed. At the same time they weigh cost and benefits, they identify possible obstacles according to their own experiences. There are times though, that special groups (e.g. eco-groups, retailers) are opposed beforehand risking somehow the 'success' of the project, a success that is substantially depending on numerous socio-economical and political factors. In other cases, groups motivated by ambiguous ideas (i.e. retailers, landowners) seem to participate even more actively. The above types of groups should not be excluded as they can add on the consultation procedure for specific issues. Technocrats also add on the value of consultation by providing their expertise and past experience.

The rationale behind this report is the gathering and mainly the understanding of various participatory methods in urban planning which can be adopted by institutional

organizations and/ or urban planners in order to engage the wider public in urban governance.

We explored, identified and gathered a number of consultation methods and techniques varying from the "tested" Planning for Real® to Citizens' Jury, Democs and Charrettes.

We discuss how each of the participatory techniques can contribute to a progressive urban planning and engage groups and individuals in an active decision making for their city. As walking policies have to be developed further and new patterns of mobility are explored continuously, there is the need for the pedestrian to experience practically the transition to the 'Walking and Liveable Community' of tomorrow.

The participatory methods we examined were both traditional and technologically advanced, asking the participants to have a saying in different levels of planning. What makes them different, is the level of involvement that each of them allows to the public and by which standards the outcomes are being used for the public welfare.

Planning for Real® immediately activates residents and forces them to collaborate, very similarly to workshops and charrettes. '21st Century meetings' (New Orleans) make a revolutionary step to a crucial 'bottom-up' planning. 'Consultative polls' highlight the importance of educating the public according to an issue. Other 'quick' internet-based techniques, such as online forums, E-Petitions, encourage for immediate mobilization. 'Open Government Partnerships' and the deriving Greek 'Public Consultation' attempts to address planning as a part of the wider urban governance.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that progress in Greece in terms of urban consultation and participatory planning is minimal with several obstacles to be faced. First of all, the procedure is mainly bureaucratic with a lot of inelastic institutionalized steps which immediately makes it time-consuming and unattractive. Most importantly, residents step back with mistrust when asked to get involved as they are unfamiliar with the wider concept of participation, let alone the fact that with the current economic crisis the civilian is standing critically to the opinions of decision makers.

Throughout our research we developed a pilot implementation to be used in an Athenian municipality, which included the import of a masterplan in Google Earth. Keyhole Markup Language was used in order to "translate" the geographical data from ArcGIS and finally present the interactive masterplan. The accomplishment now creates the basis for any further call for participation and public consultation.

Public Consultation in Athens is typically a long procedure with several stages that have to be approved by Technical Authorities, Municipality and Regional Committees, the Athenian Urban Transport Organization, Traffic Authorities etc. which discourages the public from getting involved.

By providing the platform for instant viewing of the development (i.e. the masterplan in Google Earth maps) more people are aware of the proposal navigating themselves to the suggested new urban environment.

As the project is now in progress, our next steps deal with ; the recording of the suggestions, the assessment of the proposals and the production of alternative scenarios to be again on public consultation.

Conclusions

No matter for how long, each of us is walking daily..Hence, planning is addressed to anyone. Nowadays, pedestrians seem powerless and vulnerable against the dynamics of mechanics. The only way to gain back their/ our dignity is by finding prime solutions. Planning should take into account all possible pedestrians, both the young and healthy and those with any mobility difficulty- in any case the latter won't drive so they are bounded to Public Transport and Walking. A city that is friendly to them is immediately becoming a 'Liveable and Walking Community'.

Nevertheless, the obvious solutions- improvement of infrastructure and road safety- is not enough. Walking enhancement and promotion comes together with dense urban areas, well-distributed public transport stations and a range of activities to attract the pedestrian.

Some of the planning policies originally bounded with walking, that usually come up for public consultation are; decreasing the size of urban blocks in new masterplans, densifying of businesses and activities to reduce walking times, improvement of infrastructure and street furniture, traffic calming, systematic one-way routes, increase of pedestrian crossings etc.