

Monday, 27 July 2015 16:00

Protests and environmental activism in Europe challenge planners' roles

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I met the demonstrators in San Lorenzo while strolling back to my hotel after a couple of days at the Congress of the Association of European Geographers. One of the tracks was devoted to papers about "contemporary activism" and "reappropriation" of urban spaces.

Revival of activism in Greece

I heard the presentation by Efthimios Bakogiannis from the National Technical University of Athens. She argued that the crisis has stimulated a revival of collective action in Greece. In particular it has highlighted questions about the capacity of urban planning to protect public space.

Efthimios cited the example of Hellenikon Metropolitan Park, the largest publicly owned urban coastal area in Attica. The site was an airport until 2002, and then was used in the Olympics. An [international design competition for a park](#) (<http://europaconcorsi.com/projects/17516-Hellenikon-Metropolitan-Park-International-Competition>) was held in 2005 and won by Serero architects. However, as the Greek debt crisis developed, the land was then privatised, being sold to Qatari investors in 2011 for development. This prompted widespread protests, with an open letter opposing the sale addressed to the Greek government, the "troika" imposing austerity measures on Greece and also to the Qataris. A counter-proposal for a "green" culture and recreation park was put forward. The issue became a catalyst for further protests against privatisation and in defence of the environment.

A 2012 paper by Polina Prentou (http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcourses.arch.ntua.gr%2Ffsr%2F142546%2F2012_aesop_prentou_hel-AV9XahjQ&bvm=bv.51773540,d.ZGU) described the wide range of protests. The Initiative for Hellenikon Metropolitan Park organised a Festival for Resistance and Creativity, and a demonstration in Syntagma Square in March 2012 against the privatization process and the law for the development of the area. The Coalition of Architects issued a statement against the law for the development of Hellenikon area. Twenty Greek artists gave a concert against the privatization plans of the area. There was a "picnic for ungrowth".

Prentou observed the polarisation that was created by the privatization. "On the one side, Hellenikon is treated as a precious real estate asset for development, directly attached to objectives of debt and deficit reduction. On the other, Hellenikon is treated as a city space contributing to the city, which can partially address on-going injustices and set a precedent for alternative development priorities and directions."

What do we want? A cycle network!

Another Greek protest put forward a wide range of demands from cyclists. In a city notorious for its traffic, the Podilates Group lobbied for cycle lanes, and for public transport to carry bikes. They also wanted tax cuts, better safety and better enforcement of traffic regulations. They set out design standards for the proposed [cycle network](#). (http://velo-city2013.com/?page_id=2337&project_id=209).

This protest met with a positive response. The Ministry of Environment and Regional Planning assigned a team to work with this Group. Proposals were incorporated into the strategic plan. The Podilates Group have also held ["Cycling against racism" demonstrations](#) (<http://www.demotix.com/photo/1838537/cycling-against-racism-athens>). in Athens.

"Environmental activism is highlighting ways in which public space is being degraded", said Bakogiannis. "The illegalities of some mega-projects have been exposed. Resistance and negotiation can change projects and plans."

Waterfront development in Bratislava

Branišlav Machala from Charles University in Prague presented a case study of the privatisation of an area in Bratislava on the banks of the Danube. Karloveska Cove was gifted the city a century ago as an area for nature and water sports. However, it is now to be developed for up market housing cutting off public access to the waterfront.

A zoning plan was developed in 2003 by developers that included a "hostel for water enthusiasts". Once permission was secured the land was bought from the city authorities, who were seemingly incapable of holding the developers to what had been a non-mandatory plan. A boatyard had also been promised but has yet to materialise. Trees have been felled.

As in Athens there have been public protests. The planning process in Bratislava has been unable to develop a masterplan or effective strategy for the riverside. Machala said "This property-led regeneration highlights the asymmetric power relations in urban development in many post-socialist cities in Central and Eastern Europe. Investors are active and the public sector is passive in comparison. 'Bluefield' sites such as Karloveska Cove are popular destinations and need multi-scale governance, with planners and other public officials negotiating with developers and listening to citizens."

What is planning for?

These examples of urban and environmental protests are locally rooted and specific. The planning systems, political systems and those delivering the planning service have their own histories, strengths and weaknesses. Opposition to new development is common, as all planners know. However, these various and disconnected protests from different parts of Europe also raise fundamental questions about what planning can do and who it is for?

Once upon a time, long ago, planners everywhere took it for granted that they were working for the common good, however vaguely or repressively that was defined. The evidence all around us is that this is no longer seen as a legitimate role, or if it is, then the power and competence to deliver it has been so eroded that the defence of "the public interest" is passing to activist groups within civil society. If this is indeed the emergent story, then who are the planners?

This blog was first posted on the Planning Resource website on 10 September 2013.

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Cliff is a freelance consultant, researcher, author and trainer. He is the Chair of [the Cockburn Association](http://www.cockburnassociation.org.uk) (<http://www.cockburnassociation.org.uk>).

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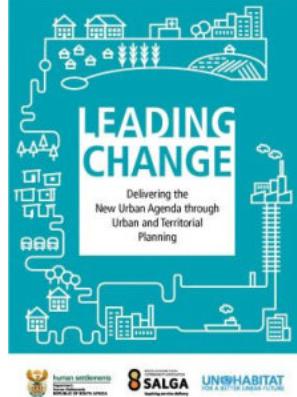
He is a Past President of the [Royal Town Planning Institute](http://www.rtpi.org.uk) (<http://www.rtpi.org.uk>), and of the [Commonwealth Association of Planners](http://www.commonwealth-planners.org/index.php/en/). (<http://www.commonwealth-planners.org/index.php/en/>)

He is a past Chair of [Built Environment Forum Scotland](http://www.befs.org.uk) (<http://www.befs.org.uk>).

He was awarded the [O.B.E.](http://www.debretts.com/people/honours/orders-chivalry/order-british-empire) (<http://www.debretts.com/people/honours/orders-chivalry/order-british-empire>) in

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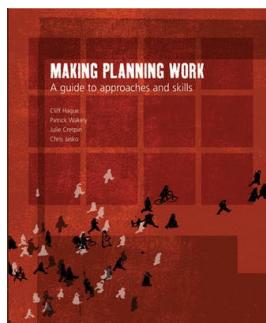
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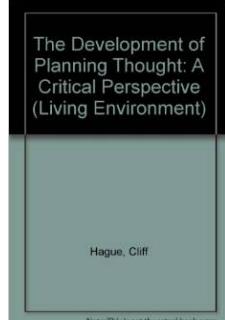
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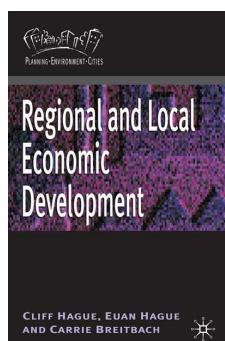
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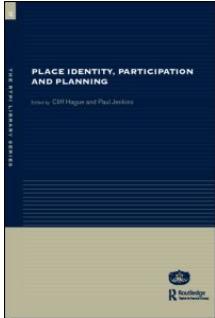
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