Editorial

Reframing collaborative planning theory and practice

Ana Perić[1,2,*]

[1] School of Architecture, Planning and Environmental Policy, University College Dublin, Ireland
[2] Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade, Serbia

* Correspondence: Email: ana.pericmomcilovic@ucd.ie.

1. Introduction

Collaboration has long been a central tenet of planning theory and practice, grounded in ideals such as inclusionary participation, undistorted communication, and consensus-building through reasoned argumentation among diverse stakeholders. The common denominator of these ideas is understanding the essence of planning activity as extending beyond the tenet of instrumental rationality and the technocratic approach ingrained in the rational comprehensive planning paradigm to genuinely embrace democracy as a core value.

The scholarly roots of urban planning focused on the involvement of non-experts in the field can be traced back to the 1960s with influential works like Arnstein's [1] 'ladder of citizen participation', which challenged top-down approaches and emphasised public engagement. The model of advocacy planning also introduced the plurality of interests, particularly highlighting the needs of disadvantaged social groups [2]. Furthermore, Habermas's theory of communicative action [3,4], revolving around the 'power of good argument' and 'undistorted communication' among diverse stakeholders with various interests, and Giddens's acknowledgement of the importance of agency (people) alongside structure (institutional framework) in social and political processes [5], made a cornerstone for various approaches ingraining democratic principles in planning. Emerging from these principles, the collaborative planning paradigm—dominant in the 1990s and early 2000s—emphasises participatory planning with consensus as an ultimate goal of a planning process [6–12]. Scholars such as Fainstein [13] and Forester [14,15] have further explored the concepts of justice, power dynamics and deliberation in planning processes. Recent scholarly debates focus on co-production, co-creation and co-design in planning processes and place-making. These approaches emphasise the collaborative involvement of

citizens, planners, and other stakeholders [16], moving towards an understanding of planning as a 'governance of place' [17].

In practice, public deliberation and negotiation have gained prominence for addressing practical planning challenges, especially at the local level—in cities [18]. Effective collaboration mechanisms include bottom-up informal initiatives, direct action by affected communities, and the expertise of non-governmental and community organisations [19,20]. Often relying on experiential learning rather than expert facilitation [21], these initiatives acknowledge local values, cultural beliefs, customs, and residents' experiential knowledge, all of which are valuable for participatory governance [22]. Although effective public engagement usually happens informally, i.e., without being ingrained in the planning system [23], participatory democratic innovations have succeeded in influencing space and society, even in flawed democracies [24].

In summary, noticeable progress has been recently made—in terms of both advanced theoretical foundations on collaborative planning and evidence on how collaborative planning principles can work in practice. However, core obstacles remain in effectively translating these collaborative planning principles into tangible and long-term outcomes that can induce a genuine transformation of urban governance. Democracy-based approaches often falter when a minority of actors possess unilateral advantages, such as land ownership, decision-making legitimacy, or economic dominance [25,26]. Similarly, formal procedures mandating broad stakeholder participation and consensus-based decision-making have often proven ineffective. Ultimately, the pursuit of democracy in urban planning inherently requires an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from urban studies, sociology, political science, and other fields. Briefly put, collaborative urban planning has been challenged from several angles in recent decades. From the academic point of view, contemporary scholars contest its theoretical foundations, while implementing democracy in planning practice is experiencing an alarming erosion.

Observed through the theoretical lenses, there is considerable criticism over the collaborative planning tenets broadly revolving around the following: The idealistic nature of enabling everyone to express their own needs and interests equally [27], consensus as the 'death of difference' [28], and collaboration as a smokescreen to the actual decision-making [29]. More precisely, Swyngedouw [30] argues that collaboration often serves as a post-political process, effectively depoliticising decision-making in the pursuit of consensus and masking underlying power dynamics, which leads to a declarative rather than genuine collaboration. Flyvbjerg [31] explicitly criticises the tenet of undistorted communication, pointing to strategic, deliberate misinterpretations within planning processes, hence inducing power imbalances. Mouffe's [32] approach encourages debate, negotiation, and compromise without necessarily aiming for unanimity, suggesting that collaborative planning processes can become more democratic and inclusive by embracing rather than suppressing disagreement. Finally, Purcell [33] indicates that truly democratic urban planning may require more confrontational strategies to challenge entrenched power structures. These critiques collectively highlight the complex challenges facing collaborative urban planning, from the masking of power dynamics to the limitations of consensus-based approaches in addressing systemic inequalities.

From the practical point of view, implementing democratic urban planning faces multifaceted challenges stemming from both macro-level global trends and micro-level local dynamics. At the macro-level, several global trends and tensions impact democratic urban planning. First, the post-globalisation era shifts focus to place-based approaches that prioritise local identities and community needs, however, bringing complexity to the planning process and challenging the previously

popular 'flow of planning ideas and practices' across national borders as an approach to facilitating the transfer of lessons learned and best practices [34,35]. Second, political shifts, including the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarianism, challenge democratic planning by favouring short-term gains over sustainable development, contributing to 'democratic backsliding' and an 'illiberal turn' [36]. Finally, the ongoing neoliberalisation of urban governance promotes market-oriented practices that prioritise economic interests over democratic participation [37]. This trend increases the influence of financial actors, exacerbating economic inequalities and social polarisation, thereby undermining core democratic principles such as political representation, participation, and institutional trust.

At the micro-level, these macro-forces translate into specific challenges within planning processes. For example, political and financial power dynamics at the macro-level often replicate in local planning processes, leading to disproportionate stakeholder influence. This affects public interest protection in planning, as the public sector becomes dominated by political and financial discourses, diminishing civil society's voice. City governments often fail to create inclusive spaces, marginalising less powerful groups. Undemocratic behaviour is typically associated with elites, as politicians usually align with financially powerful actors rather than the public [38]. Furthermore, despite efforts to promote co-practices in urban planning, participation often remains limited to well-represented groups, failing to achieve true social inclusion. This 'participation paradox' perpetuates existing power structures, disenfranchising the general public, including community groups, ordinary citizens, and marginalised populations [23]. Finally, what is particularly underestimated is the connection of previous sectors to planning professionals. Urban planners frequently find themselves caught between competing interests driven by the authoritarian, populist, and pro-growth agendas of political and financial elites, resulting in planners acting as passive technical experts rather than enablers of change [39]. To address this, both citizens and professionals need to become more sensitive to local, experiential insights, skills, and knowledge [40].

This special issue aims to rethink and reframe how we conceptualise collaboration in planning. Issues of contested interests, dissenting voices, and polarised power geometries call into question the ability to achieve consensus or have an undistorted discourse. Diverse actors bring divergent knowledge systems, values, beliefs and agendas to the planning process. Hence, rather than adhering to idealised notions, this issue places an emphasis on the adoption of a more grounded perspective attuned to the complexities of actor constellations and socio-cultural contexts.

The contributions cut across different empirical domains and geographic contexts but are united by a shared actor-centred approach. Some articles focus on the interplay of tangible factors like formal procedures and intangible factors like ideological orientations in shaping planning cultures and practices of collaboration. Others, starting from the nexus between the general public and professional planners, both seen as objects (and not subjects!) in planning processes under the currently contested legitimacy of planning as a tool to protect the public interest, tend to explore innovative ways of interaction to bridge the gap between the everyday language of people and the professional discourse of policymakers, aiming to improve mutual respect and trust. Finally, some contributions undertake a more holistic approach, viewing planners, residents, politicians and other stakeholders not as passive subjects but as active agents deliberately making places according to their own intentions, knowledge bases and positionalities within broader power structures. Collectively, the special issue offers a more grounded and nuanced understanding of what authentic collaboration entails in the pluralistic realities of planning practice to ultimately inform incremental improvements in both collaborative planning research and practice.

Use of AI tools declaration

The author declares that no Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used in the creation of this article.

Conflict of interest

Ana Perić is an Editor of the special issue for urs and was not involved in the editorial review or the decision to publish this article. The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Arnstein SR (1969) A ladder of citizen participation. *J Am Inst Plann* 35: 216–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225
2. Davidoff P (1965) Advocacy and pluralism in planning. *J Am Inst Plann* 31: 331–338. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366508978187
3. Habermas J (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action (Vol. 1: Reason and rationalization of society)*, Boston: Beacon Press.
4. Habermas J (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action (Vol. 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason)*, Boston: Beacon Press.
5. Giddens A (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge: Polity.
6. Friedmann J (1987) *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
7. Healey P (1992) A planner's day: Knowledge and action in communicative practice. *J Am Plann Assoc* 58: 9–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944369208975531
8. Healey P (1997) *Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies*, London: MacMillan Press.
9. Innes JE (1995) Planning theory's emerging paradigm: Communicative action and interactive practice. *J Plan Educ Res* 14: 183–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X9501400307
10. Innes JE (1996) Planning through consensus building: A new view of the comprehensive planning ideal. *J Am Plann Assoc* 62: 460–472. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944369608975712
11. Booher DE, Innes JE (2002) Network power in collaborative planning. *J Plan Educ Res* 21: 221–236. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X0202100301
12. Innes JE, Booher DE (2010) *Planning with Complexity: An introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy*, London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864302
13. Fainstein SS (2010) *The Just City*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
14. Forester J (1982) Planning in the face of power, *J Am Plann Assoc* 48: 67–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944368208976167
15. Forester J (1999) *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
16. Lee D, Feiertag P, Unger L (2024) Co-production, co-creation or co-design of public space? A systematic review. *Cities* 154: 105372. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105372

17. Schmitt P, Wiechmann T (2018) Unpacking spatial planning as the governance of place: Extracting potentials for future advancements in planning research. *disP–Plann Rev* 54: 21–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2018.1562795

18. Hendriks F, Lidström A, Loughlin J (2010) *The Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

19. Piletić A (2021) The role of the urban scale in anchoring authoritarian neoliberalism: A look at post-2012 neoliberalization in Belgrade, Serbia. *Globalizations* 19: 285–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1882817

20. Yuan Y, Chen Y, Cao K (2021) The third sector in collaborative planning: Case study of Tongdejie community in Guangzhou, China. *Habitat Int* 109: 102327. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2021.102327

21. Ataöv A, Kahraman ZEH (2009) Constructing collaborative processes through experiential learning: Participatory planning in Kaymaklı, Turkey. *Habitat Int* 33: 378–386. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2008.11.001

22. Atkinson R, Zimmermann K (2018) Area-based initiatives—a facilitator for participatory governance?, In: Heinelt, H. Author, *Handbook on Participatory Governance*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 267–290. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785364358.00019

23. Bragaglia F, Janin Rivolin U, Berisha E, et al. (2024) How is urban co-production conveyed in European cities?. *Eur Plan Stud* 32: 1613–1631. https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2024.2339933

24. Fiket I, Markov Č, Ilić V, et al. (2024) *Participatory Democratic Innovations in Southeast Europe: How to Engage in Flawed Democracies*, London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003426103

25. Knaap G, Nedovic-Budic Z, Carbonell A (2015) *Planning for States and Nation States in the U.S. and Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

26. Knieling J, Othengrafen F, Allmendinger P, et al. (2015) *Soft Spaces in Europe: Re-negotiating Governance, Boundaries and Borders*, London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315768403

27. Huxley M, Yiftachel O (2000) New paradigm or old myopia? Unsettling the communicative turn in planning theory. *J Plan Educ Res* 19: 333–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X0001900402

28. Hillier J (2003) Agonizing over consensus: Why Habermasian ideals cannot be 'Real'. *Plan Theory* 2: 37–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095203002001005

29. Ruming K (2018) Post-political planning and community opposition: Asserting and challenging consensus in planning urban regeneration in Newcastle, New South Wales. *Geogr Res* 56: 181–195. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12269

30. Swyngedouw E (2009) The antinomies of the postpolitical city: In search of a democratic politics of environmental production. *Int J Urban Reg Res* 33: 601–620. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00859.x

31. Flyvbjerg B (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511810503

32. Mouffe C (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso Books.

33. Purcell M (2009) Resisting neoliberalization: Communicative planning or counter-hegemonic movements?. *Plann Theory* 8: 140–165. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095209102232

34. Albrechts L, Barbanente A, Monno V (2020) Practicing transformative planning: The territory-landscape plan as a catalyst for change. *City Territ Archit* 7: 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-019-0111-2

35. Healey P (2012) The universal and the contingent: Some reflections on the transnational flow of planning ideas and practices. *Plan Theory* 11: 188–207. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095211419333

36. Bächtiger A, Dryzek JS (2024) *Deliberative Democracy for Diabolical Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009261845

37. Savini F, Aalbers MB (2016) The de-contextualization of land use planning through financialisation: Urban redevelopment in Milan. *Eur Urban Reg Stud* 23: 878–894. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776415585887

38. Davies J (2021) *Between Realism and Revolt: Governing Cities in the Crisis of Neoliberal Globalism*, Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3818743

39. Othengrafen F (2010) Spatial planning as expression of culturised planning practices: The examples of Helsinki, Finland and Athens, Greece. *Town Plann Rev* 81: 83–110. https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2009.25

40. Özdemir E, Tasan-Kok T (2019) Planners' role in accommodating citizen disagreement: The case of Dutch urban planning. *Urban Stud* 56: 741–759. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017726738