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Citizen Involvement in the City Planning Process
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Critique of Contemporary Citizen Participation Processes in the United States

INTRODUCTION

In San Francisco, two of the most controversial measures to be voted this November 2013 are called Propositions B and C, in which voters will decide if it is worth it to raze a waterfront parking lot and private tennis club, and replace them with over a hundred luxury condos costing each one five million dollars apiece. Stakeholders vary, and the participation process they are involved in has put an emphasis on two different 'gangs' : Mayor Edwin M. Lee supports the project as it would increase tax revenue for the city ; yet, many residents are opposed to it as it would obstruct public views of the water and engender more expensive niches for a city that, to them, should instead prioritize affordable housing.

This dispute could have taken place a century ago. What is special about this contemporary controverse is how it calls for participation processes. They are now indeed considered central in the achievements of urban planning projects that are truly sustainable. As a matter of fact, public participatory processes are a core mechanism that leads to the implementation, development and final application of planning projects. Of course, there are specific projects which differ in terms of nature, scope, and detail from one state to another, but the trend is clearly established now at a national level, and we truly witness a shift in terms of volume of resources engaged in the process.

Recent research has shown that the most successful public participatory processes were the ones engaging the larger variety of stakeholders affected by plans or proposals (Iacofano, 1990 ; Lowry et al., 1997 ; Burby, 2003 ; Iacofano, Lewis, 2012). We can therefore suppose that a critique of contemporary citizen participation processes should underline the teleologic trajectory participatory planning has engaged in, leading to an irrevocable bettering and increase of initiatives at a national level.

This trajectory is in fact more complex than this. In the past 50 years, scholars and planners have witnessed three shifts in citizen involvement processes, which can be considered landmarks in the evaluation of participatory planning in general. From "maximum feasible participation" (Economic Opportunity Act, 1964) of the residents of areas involved in projects under the Kennedy Administration, to its insider critique as "maximum feasible misunderstanding" (Lowry, 1969) and now what we can call a compromise as "maximum feasible influence" (Iacofano, Lewis, 2012), the evolution of participatory planning is not linear and calls for a deeper critique : what can we assess from

today's citizen involvement processes in America ? If a new shift had to be called for, what would it be, and which new challenges would it undertake ?

I. A key mechanism in today's American urban planning

We could argue that citizen involvement processes are somewhat linked to the oldest American tradition for the local people themselves to organize when facing an issue and 'deal with it' locally. Yet, this explanation would be too determinist a reason if we did not invoke the history of past planning projects, their outcomes and their failures, to explain how participatory processes became central. Wheaton, in 1969, wrote that "there are enough cases in which the planners have been wrong and their solutions irrelevant to create the necessity for review of their judgments and the public acceptance of those judgments"[1] (p. 241). This led the federal government to abandon its multimillion dollar planning assistance in 1981, and called for renewed processes.

If we try to enumerate advantages to be found in participatory processes in design and planning, we find that they prove to be time and money savers, and that they bring to the table valuable local expertise. As in the technique of mental maps, we find out that citizens possess "ordinary knowledge" that can help ensure that policies proposed in plans reflect local conditions and values, especially in the case of issues that concern broad public interest, such as transportation improvements, neighborhood revitalization or issues that are less technical such as housing.

Iacofano and Lewis[2] have distinguished five different situations which call for the use of public participatory processes in the United States. If the three first situations are more classic in the tradition of urban planning, the two others express a rising interest at a national level for the advantages offered by participatory processes regarding new challenges brought by contemporary projects.

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[1] Wheaton, W.L.C. (1969) The Federal Role as an Incentive to Local Development. In M.H. Hufschmidt (Ed.), Regional Planning : Challenges and Prospects (pp. 238-259). New York : Frederick A. Praeger

[2] Iacofano D., Lewis N. (2012) "Maximum Feasible Influence : The New Standard for American Public Participation in Planning", Journal of Architectural and Planning Research

1. Public mandate : in order to test a public policy, as part of the democratic process ;

2. Political necessity : when politically powerful individuals, groups or organizations can be opposed by the empowerment of local citizens, which in the end leads to sustained participation in government ;

3. Moral imperative : as a theme of procedural and spatial justice, it calls for ethical, even philosophical consideration, as it strengthens the sense of place and ownership ;

4. Desire to achieve a technical advantage in planning : by acquiring data on user needs, more chances are the project will fit better in local context ; this is made possible through technological tools of communication ;

5. Need to resolve conflict : mediation in itself as a way to prevent the obstruction of project finalization.

II. What obstructs the way to fully developed participatory processes in all fifty states

Yet, obstacles are here to block the way to fully developed citizen involvement processes. We chose to mention two of these obstacles, which constitute major contemporary issues in participatory planning. Many participatory processes are considered only symbolic, rather than substantive (Lowry et al., 1997 ; Burby, 2003). One evident reason is the lack of interest participants have expressed during participation processes, a situation which cannot always be prevented by a system of financial compensation for participants. Another reason lies in the administrative culture of the US which emphasizes centralization of power and bureaucratic rationality in government decision-making. As a matter of fact, many administrators believe that citizen involvement processes increase cost and waste of time, leading to individualistic controversy rather than general consensus. This belief is still hard to deconstruct.

Moreover, a second obstacle would be that these types of processes sometimes result in the increasing of existing inequalities. Not everyone has the same capital to bring to the participation process. When the stakeholders vary too much in terms of geographic locations, or professions and interests, it results in failed situations where certain players are marginalized or excluded. Uneven distribution of power, leader manipulation, and obstructionist individuals working as "agents provocateurs" can completely obstruct the participatory process that is taking place.

A good example of this has been developed by urban anthropologist Elizabeth Greenspan (Harvard University) on the case of New York planning issues : she forged the expression "to manhattanize a city" in order to express the turning of a city into a playground for the wealthiest inhabitants, even as it forgets about the poorest : a pattern of what not to be, NYC has now 'the same inequality index as Swaziland' (according to recent report by Fiscal Policy Institute), and is accused of favoring its one-percenters. Greenspan goes further in the dealing with obstructionist stakeholders and capital inequalities in the dialogue and negotiation processes : in her recent book *Battle for Ground Zero*[3], she shows how stakeholders as different as grieving families, institutions with commercial interests, and politicking bureaucrats have clashed every step of the way, either about security concerns, design details for the memorial, or the role of the office space in the new building of the Freedom Tower. With as many stakeholders as Governor George Pataki, developer Larry Silverstein, Port Authority Director Christopher Ward, planner Daniel Liebeskind, surviving family members and activists, "ordinary" people (tourists, Lower Manhattan residents, members of Occupy Wall Street), the finalization of the building processes appears as a true miracle. This example works as a good epitome for contemporary participation processes in the US, and the opening and ending quotes of Greenspan's account for it stand as an evidence for what citizen involvement in planning has meant recently in national and state governance :

"*Everyone* owned Ground Zero - or, at the very least, they believed they owned a piece of it. So, they fought for their piece. For years. Some are still fighting for it." (...) "This means that it is partly a story about owners and politicians sitting around tables in conference rooms, but it also means it is a story about people in streets, public hearings, and living rooms voicing desires, demands, concerns, and beliefs - and occasionally garnering the attention of the influential men. It is a story about capitalism and democracy. It's a story about those who built the walls and those who wrote on them." (Preface, p. xii)

"The rebuilding of the World Trade Center site was never beautiful. As the years passed, it became progressively more political and dysfunctional, much like the decade itself. But the completion of the memorial marked a turning point downtown, ushering in a sense of optimism and a belief that the project would indeed, eventually, get done. For the rebuilding, an end was in sight." (Epilogue, p. 235).

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[3] Greenspan E. (2013) Battle for Ground Zero : Inside the Political Struggle to Rebuild the World Trade Center, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

III. Path of progress ? A solid grounding in American decision-making since the 1950's

A lot has been achieved since the 1950's. It is true that in all fifty states, state laws require citizen involvement in planning processes, but apart from public hearings, the precise methods used are left to the discretion of the local government. Then, with the variety of local situations in every state, other parameters enter in line : local planners might pay more attention to citizen involvement when their actions are being reviewed by state officials, or when citizens can appeal their actions to quasi-judicial tribunals. Yet, as the authors of *The Inclusive City*[4] put it, administration in Washington, D.C. is addressing more and more fundamental urban inequalities after a long time of *laisser-faire*. It is now engaging in participatory planning in order to tackle economic, social and racial divisions. Yet, the big centralized projects that arise in Washington, D.C. should not make us forget that a trully inclusive city should be built at the local level, where there are not enough examples of successful projects yet to quote.

Now the challenge is how to adapt to the Information Age. This asks for more and more sophistication, as it has completely changed such key components of participatory processes as the amount of information gathered and shared, or the actual patterns of communication and social interaction involved. One example of this can be the increasing use of social media applications. This new shift represents an issue of social justice, as not everyone has the same access to social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, SurveyMonkey, etc.). As Manuel Castells emphasizes it[5], which kind of local projects could fit in the Information Age, how public participatory processes could become electronically connected to be both local and global, all of this is a major field of thinking for contemporary participatory processes in the US.

CONCLUSION :

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[4] Goltsman S., Iacofano D. (2008) The Inclusive City, MIG Communications, Berkeley, CA

[5] Castells M. (1998) "The Education o City Planners in the Information Age", Berkeley Planning Journal 12(1)

The critique of contemporary citizen participation processes in the United States is in fact a critique of good governance and city planning core values, such as open planning, community engagement and spatial justice. It calls for the understanding of how citizen involvement in the city planning process is a core component that changes from the traditional way of dealing with urban projects : the planner or the architect is no longer alone with his *ex nihilo* project, he is not the pale figure of autocratic Frank Lloyd Wright, nor is he cherishing ordered power to the detriment of hearing dissonent voices in the process.

Contemporary challenges in American urban planning call for better local governance, and better involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. Changes took place since the 1950's. They now need to be sharpened and adapted to the renewed challenges the twenty-first century has brought to the table. As Elizabeth Greenspan puts it : "I never did forget my favorite refrain. As the years passed, the words stayed with me, but not without a shift in meaning. The refrain gradually came to mean something grittier, more pragmatic, even cynical, in keeping with the new spirit of the times. "That's America the Re-Build-iful", I would say to myself after another redesign or another round of arbitration or another awkward compromise moved the rebuilding one inch forward while depleting more goodwill. That, alas, is how things get done. "America the Re-Build-iful" acquired an edge. But the refrain's original idealism was still there, buried underneath the layers of cynicism, and that's the other reason the words stayed with me. The rebuilding wasn't, after all, a story only of dysfunction and messiness. It was also a story of public engagement and expression (also always messy), as well as persistence, compromise, and luck. It was a story of how things worked, and how things didn't work, at the turn of twenty-first-century America."[6] (Epilogue).

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[6] Greenspan E. (2013) Battle for Ground Zero : Inside the Political Struggle to Rebuild the World Trade Center, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

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