

---

# Open Planning: Rethinking the Urban Planning Process in the Digital Space

Richard KOECK, Erin P WALSH

University of Liverpool

This pilot study is part of a three-month pilot project under the guise of the CX Exchange Programme, consisting of a core academic team from the University of Lancaster and University of Liverpool as well as Liverpool Vision and creative industry partners, Stardotstar Ltd (Manchester) and Red Ninja Ltd. (Liverpool). Our interdisciplinary team has expertise in public art, visual arts, architecture, urban planning, locative media, and geo-spatial information systems. Working within the remit of the CX Exchange Programme cluster '*Democracy & Innovation*', we have formed the rationale for the study presented here – *Open Planning: Rethinking the Urban Planning Process in the Digital Space* – which commenced only recently and is part of an on-going investigation at the time of writing this paper.

With over 460,000 planning applications recorded in 2012 in England alone (DCLG National Statistics 2013), the planning system plays a key role (and has great consequences) in the shaping of our urban landscape, the places where we work, live and socialise. This does not only illustrate the enormous need for an efficient and well-managed process, but also highlights the potential to make a sizeable contribution to how 'democracy' and 'innovation' are implemented in everyday practices and ultimately shape the places in which we live.

Our research aims to highlight that there is an important connection between people, place and digitality; an area that we believe is still underexplored in the context of urban planning in England. We believe that much creative potential and innovation lies in critical spatial investigations into 'how' we engage with, shape, and relate to urban and digital public space. The aim of our project is therefore to find answers to three key research questions: (1) how can the current planning system be simplified?; (2) how can we increase the speed with which planning applications are submitted and dealt with?; and (3) how can we empower people along this process?

*Keywords (3 max): planning application, public consultation, digital tools*

## Introduction

---

Our cities and towns are continually changing, through the process of the planning system; developments are presented, communicated and decided upon, each decision having a physical and social impact. With over 460,000 planning applications recorded in 2012 in England alone (DCLG National Statistics 2013), the planning system plays a key role in the shaping of our urban landscape, the places where we work, live and socialise. Today the planning system is primarily a decision making process with three main players, the Government (national & local), the Market (commercial requirements) and Civil Society (individuals and community groups) ([Douglass and Friedmann, 1998](#)). It has come under much pressure in recent years to; deliver Government objectives, process an increased volume of applications, coupled with a continued shortage of skill and resources, along with an ever increasing public awareness who actively seek to engage with the process (The Killian Pretty Review, 2008).

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have stressed the need to simplify the planning system and in 2012 introduced the policy '*Making the planning system work more efficiently and effectively*', with core criticisms being that the process can take too long and in part is poorly managed. The efficiencies and effectiveness outlined by the Government include for a series of measures to see a '*Speeding up of the planning process*', by way of relaxation of planning policies and introduction of pro-development policies and reduction of planning guidance which according to DCLG consists of over 6,000 pages. Government thinking on the need for simplification and speed was also cited as the rationale for the introduction of the Localism Act 2011, with the main objective of the Act to disperse

decision making power more widely and in particular to empower citizens and local communities to play a recognised role in the shaping of their cities and towns. The Government recognises that empowering citizens and local communities in the planning system goes hand in hand with the need for speed and simplification of the planning process (The Killian Pretty Review, 2008). And with more and more data being held digitally as part of the planning process, we see an emerging and substantial opportunity to respond to these challenges. Our research focuses broadly on the themes ‘Democracy and the Planning System’ and ‘Innovation and the Planning System’, with a particular emphasis on three research questions: (1) How can the current planning system be simplified?; (2) how can we increase the speed with which planning applications are submitted and dealt with?; and (3) how can we empower people along the process? Certainly, the sharing of information within the planning system is one of the drivers of our thinking behind the empowerment of citizens and local communities. And while at first glance such questions seem to be driven by a desire to introduce new efficiency measures somewhat disconnected from ‘place’, our rationale is clear. The basis of our research lies also the belief that there is an important connection between people, place and digitality; and that much innovation potential lies in critical spatial investigations into ‘how’ we engage with, shape, and relate to urban and digital public space. In order to test our hypothesis, we have designed a pilot study with representatives of the three main players within the planning system; Local Government (Liverpool City Council), the Market (private developers & agents) and Civil Society (Engage Liverpool) ([Douglass and Friedmann, 1998](#)) which is further discussed in the following.

### **Democracy and Urban Planning: On Site Seeing and Understanding**

---

The Planning System in England was first formalised as a statutory requirement in 1909 with the introduction of the Housing, Town Planning & c. Act. The concept of urban planning as a discipline concerned with the development of cities and towns originated long before the statutory recognition, evident in the planned Roman, Medieval, Georgian and Victorian settlements and townscapes that characterise much of England today. However, the notion of developing and planning for the benefit of citizens as a vehicle for social and democratic reform was developed in the latter part of the 1800s and turn of the twentieth century with theorists like: Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), the Lever Brothers development of Port Sunlight, Cheshire (1887), Sir Leslie Patrick Abercrombie (1879 – 1957) and Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), developing ideals based on common good, importance of the natural and historic environment, and the need for social reform in the urbanisation of cities and towns. It was the town planner, social theorist, conservationist, biologist, educationist and ecologist, Patrick Geddes who pioneered a sociological approach to the study of town planning and the concept of seeing ([Meller, 1994](#)). Geddes went beyond the realm of theory and into action with the purchase of a Camera Obscura in 1892 located in a Gothic building in Edinburgh, renaming it the ‘Outlook Tower’. The ‘Outlook Tower’ was aptly named as Geddes believed that from the tower citizens could look out at Edinburgh and ‘see’ the city and wider landscape that surrounded them; in this sense the notion of ‘seeing’ was a means of education and empowerment to aid appreciation and decision making ([Meller, 1994](#), [Goist, 1974](#)). Geddes advocated of the ‘Outlook Tower’,

*“...for its own sake and as an evidence of what is so often missed by scientific and philosophic minds, that the synthetic vision to which they aspire may be reached more simply from the aesthetic and the emotional side, and thus be visual and concrete. In short, here, as elsewhere, children and artists may see more than the wise.”* ([Geddes et al., 1949](#))(p.320).

The critical importance of ensuring empowerment to citizens in the shaping of our towns and cities is as much relevant today as it was in the time of Geddes’ ‘Outlook Tower’, and the

introduction of the Localism Act data reconfirms that there is a social, economic and time imperative to actively inform and empower citizens and communities of the changes proposed via the planning system,

*“Trying to improve people’s lives by imposing decisions, setting targets and demanding inspections from Whitehall simply doesn’t work. It creates bureaucracy. It leaves no room for adaptation to reflect local circumstances or innovation to deliver services more effectively and at lower cost. And it leaves people feeling ‘done to’ and imposed upon, the very opposite of the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives. (Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, 2011, p.01)*

This study is primarily focused on how the public is informed in the first instance when a planning application is registered. Today the ‘art of seeing’ is not a grand observatory tower but a site notice, notice letters to immediate neighbours, and a local newspaper article (The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2010). It is the initial physical intervention of the site notice that is the focus of this research study. As a statutory minimum all Outline Planning Applications and Full Planning Applications are required to display at least one site note located in a close vicinity to the site in question. Any additional site notice is at the discretion of the local planning authority. These site notices are all but an A4 page with text, tied or cello taped to a lamp post or hoarding, not unlike any other A4 advertisement or notice which may be attached to a lamp post or hoarding. The physical and social change that these planning application notices pertain to, are in many cases far more impactful than what a mere A4 text based message could convey, and are the first and only indication to the public that a development will be taking place at a specific site. The complete absence of imagery or a location map is at odds with a discipline base solely in the physical, geographical and aesthetic realm. In addition the success of the conveyance of information from a site notice depends on three critical contributing factors: (1) an interested party (civilian) happens to pass the notice within the no. 21 day consultation period; (2) the notice is still legible or in situ given it has been exposed to the elements for up to no. 21 days; and (3) The interested party writes down the corresponding application reference number or site address and then either goes to the local planning office to view the plans or alternatively has access to the internet to look up the planning application via the Planning Explorer (web base planning resource) or a local authority website, if it has the facility to display applications on line. The online access to the application is via a URL to a planning data base followed by a series of windows which are search pages to the application, when the relevant application is located the user must then open a series of documents to view plans which are more often than not titled according to references that are arbitrary to the general public. Community Consultation, Collaboration and Engagement are and have historically been a dominant discourse in planning and urbanism theory ([Davies et al., 2012](#), [Quick and Feldman, 2011](#), [Meller, 1994](#), [Carpini et al., 2004](#), [Krek, 2005](#), [Geddes et al., 1949](#)) and it would appear from our research that there is greater scope still to create a more pro-active, informative and responsive system, that notifies the public once an application has been registered omitting the time lapse of getting the notice onto the lamp post.

## **Innovation & Urban Planning: Access to Open Data**

Since the establishment of the Planning System in England the industry has witnessed major advances in innovation, with more recent developments in handheld devices such as smart phone and computer pads as a tool to ‘see’ our cities and urban fabric ([Allen et al., 2011](#), [Hanzl, 2007](#), [Berridge et al., 2003](#)).

The Planning System has been a beneficiary of these innovations, and in particular the Internet has been vital in sharing information with the public. However, the effectiveness of information sharing is dependent on all parties being proactive, in that local government need to ensure that the information is accessible and accurate, whilst on the other hand the public need to have the time, interest and knowledge to access it.

Krek proposes that there is a rationalised ignorance applied by the public when it comes to engaging with the planning system. He's findings suggest that the effort of learning how to use a public participation GIS application is difficult and the cost needed to participate is high (Krek, 2005) and therefore the public make a conscious decision not to engage. Building on Krek's work a research study was carried out by Allen et al. (2011) at the University of Otago, the team examined public participation, innovations and the planning process. They utilised smart phone technologies with an Augmented Reality application and whilst the technologies were interesting in their own right it was the findings relating to participant perception that is most relevant to our current research, they concluded that;

*"...participants had a range of reasons to believe that the project planners would not consider their participation in the urban planning event, but thought that if enough people used the system and if the results were made public, then their contribution would be of more importance. That the prototype system was "nice and simple" to use and "easy to understand" suggests that it may help reduce the rational ignorance citizens have towards participating in urban planning projects described by Krek (2005)" (Allen et al., 2011, p.19)*

In the UK, public authorities and planning offices are increasingly open to the idea of using innovate digital means to share data and engage the public; yet it is still a long way to implement some of Krek (2005) and Allen et al.'s (2011) findings. Our challenge lies in devising a strategy that would allow local councils to work with their large data sets and locative media in such a way that are secure, technologically sound and can be managed, updated and sustained over a long period of time.

## Acknowledgements

---

Special thanks to Liverpool City Council's Planning Manager Grant Butterworth, and GIS Manager Brian Garner, E-Planning Manager Pete Flynn and Business Administrator Gill Bell. A sincere thank you to Matt Biagetti (Liverpool Vision) and Gerry Proctor (Chair of Engage Liverpool) who kindly gave their time and support to the research project. Also, to the community members and developers of Liverpool who have offered their time and experience in helping to develop this research study. Finally, thank you to CX Exchange collaboration team, especially Lara Salinas, Joel Porter, Sebastian Weise and Dan Burnett, who have all had a valuable and varied input to this research study.

## References

---

- ALLEN, M., REGENBRECHT, H. & ABBOTT, M. 2011. Smart-phone augmented reality for public participation in urban planning. *Proceedings of the 23rd Australian Computer-Human Interaction Conference*. Canberra, Australia: ACM.
- BERRIDGE, P., KOCH, V. & BROWN, A. 2003. Information Spaces for Mobile City Access. *International Journal of Architectural Computing*, 1, 34-45.

- CARPINI, M. X. D., COOK, F. L. & JACOBS, L. R. 2004. Public Deliberation, Discursive Participation, and Citizen Engagement: A Review of the Empirical Literature. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 7, 315-344.
- DAVIES, S. R., SELIN, C., GANO, G. & PEREIRA, Â. G. 2012. Citizen engagement and urban change: Three case studies of material deliberation. *Cities*, 29, 351-357.
- DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIEIS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT, 2013 *Planning System: National Statistics*. Available from World Wide Web.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/departement-for-communities-and-local-government/about/statistics>
- DOUGLASS, M. & FRIEDMANN, J. 1998. *Cities for Citizens: Planning and the Rise of Civil Society in a Global Age*, John Wiley & Sons New York.
- GEDDES, P., LEGATES, R. T. & STOUT, F. 1949. *Cities in Evolution*, Williams & Norgate London.
- GOIST, P. D. 1974. Patrick Geddes and the City. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 40, 31-37.
- HANZL, M. 2007. Information technology as a tool for public participation in urban planning: a review of experiments and potentials. *Design Studies*, 28, 289-307.
- KIILLIAN, J. & PRETTY, D. 2008. *The Killian Pretty Review. Planning applications: A faster and more responsive system*. Department for Communities & Local Government. London
- KREK, A. Rational ignorance of the citizens in public participatory planning. Proceedings of the CORP 2005 & Geomultimedia Conference, Vienna (April 2005), 2005.
- LEGISLATION GOVERNMENT UK, 2013. *(The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2010)*. Available on the World Wide Web.  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk>
- MELLER, H. 1994. *Patrick Geddes: Social evolutionist and city planner*, Routledge.
- QUICK, K. S. & FELDMAN, M. S. 2011. Distinguishing Participation and Inclusion. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31, 272-290.