

# Wiki-urbanism

*Will collective intelligence or do-it-yourself urbanism transform the governance, planning, and environmental management of cities ?*

It is difficult to imagine uncovering the future of cities beneath a 1970s motorway flyover in west London. Yet, on an early summer evening in 2014, as the sun lowered behind the Westway, stretching its shadow over the nearby Le Corbusier-inspired concrete blocks, a group of people climbing up lampposts may have provided a glimpse into an increasingly common future.

These 'climbers' were community members using cable ties to secure diffusion tubes above street level to map their local area's nitrogen dioxide levels. Some came from a nearby tower block whose green space had recently been built over, reduced, and partially replaced by new plastic football pitches a couple of hundred metres away next to a slip road leading to the Westway flyover. Concerned about the potential noxious effects of sport being practised at such close proximity to ceaseless traffic, they had responded to a call on Twitter to take part in a citizen science project run by the social enterprise Mapping for Change that would provide communities with the tools needed to conduct their own probes into air quality.

A few months later, when Mapping for Change's lab analysis confirmed the community's fears, showing that European Union NO2 levels were being breached pitch-side, the group used the new evidence to lobby the local land trust for improvements. They wanted the trust to apply for London-wide funding to install green walls that could absorb some of the emissions and separate people using the pitches from the

traffic. A little over 18 months later, the trust, which had previously denied air quality was an issue on the site, announced that it was installing green screens between the road and the pitches to mitigate the effects for those participating in sport (RBKC 2016).

In this story there is no one single entity responsible for bringing about change. The community group was only formed as a result of their green space loss, bringing together otherwise disparate and apathetic people (Grenfell Action Group 2015). The social enterprise, despite being based in the same city, only connected with the group as a result of global technology improvements. And, the trust changed its view, partially as a result of the evidence facilitated by the other two groups, and consequently built green screens to protect the pitches. Here, the complex convergence of people changing, technological change, organisational change, and institutional change all overlapped to affect one another and create a process for change.

If this is an indication of anything, it highlights how urban governance - understood here as the localised result of interactions between technology, people, organisations and institutions - is mutating in favour of citizens as they increasingly become protagonists of change. So, if a wiki, as its Wikipedia page says, 'allows collaborative modification of its content and structure directly', then perhaps the emerging system of city governance where institutions enable citizens and organisations

to collaborate and influence change, could be understood as wiki-urbanism.

### > Interfaces and participation in the planning system

Participation in urban planning and environmental management, two fundamental tools of governance, is being facilitated due to the changing interface between citizens and their city. Being constantly a click or a swipe away from what Benjamin Bratton perceives to be a 'stack' of planetary scale computation (Bratton 2014), through the proliferation of smartphones and social media means that interdimensional living - between physical and digital - impacts on the very fabric of place. Not only do landscapes become tapestries of digital information, what Malcolm McCullough terms the 'ambient commons', but perceptions of the city change (McCullough 2013). While distances may be distorted into Uber fares, esoteric neighbourhoods understood as clusters of average house prices as seen on Zoopla, this simultaneously presents opportunities for people to identify, collect, and publish information in real time .

Citizen-led initiatives are generating data that can be used for advocacy to impact directly on their cities (Gray, Lammerhirt, Boundegru 2016). Digital tools enable people to shape their cities, from using the live streaming app Periscope to monitor human rights issues to using the UK's SpaceHive to crowdfund physical improvements in neighbourhoods. The growth of new borderless tools such as Loomio, Assembl, DemocracyOS, and CivicWise also indicate the growth of a new ability to establish collective dialogues for direct interventions in urban space, and evidence of what Bernardo Gutiérrez González sees a step towards cities' transnational democratic future (2016).

The mutualism between technology and the city means that technologies become active agents in shaping it. In this two-way relationship, while the city influences the birth and the development of the technology, the technology in turn influences the city at both the micro and macro levels. This symbiosis can be seen in early human development too. A study by Aldo Faisal found 'tool making and language evolved together because both required more complex thought' (Sample 2010). This implies that there are reciprocal effects between a technology and the social system it forms part of (Lemmonier 1992). And perhaps, as cars and mobility change from being merely unboxed products into personalised services, governance too evolves as a result of this.

Understanding the city through this wiki-urbanist frame means first of all recognising the reality of cities not being static entities, but rather complex systems continuously adapting in which it is becoming less and less acceptable for policy making to occur in a silo.

### > Open source city and a new commons

The idea of an open source city is certainly not new. In 2008, The Economist wrote the following:

"As a technological practice of innovation, open source has not quite been about cities, but about the technology. Yet it resonates with what cities have and are at ground-level, where its users are. The park is made not only with the hardware of trees and ponds, but also with the software of people's practices."

And, in 2011, Saskia Sassen went further by using open source urbanism as a 'DNA that resonates strongly with how people make the city theirs or urbanise what might be an individual initiative' (Sassen 2011).

Using 'open source' as the reference term is directly linked to developments in the sphere of informational technology and the developments of free, or open, software. The cultures centred on these themes developed around the growth of internet, and were understood in Chris Kelty's ethnography as a series of actors producing a type of public domain in which the prism for exchange occurs through the actions of people contributing to the code that they were working on, which he termed 'recursive publics' (Kelty, 2008).

The resultant model is one identified by Yoshai Benkler where peer-to-peer networks of collaboration render old categories of production, consumption, and distribution, less meaningful as the users are also involved in the creation of what they are consuming (Benkler 2006). In the context of a seemingly perpetual crisis of capitalism, where marginal costs have been brought down dramatically to threaten profits, Jeremy Rifkin sees a new economy increasingly grounded in the establishment of these peer networks, which establish a collaborative commons (Rifkin 2014). A reference retranslated spatially that is inextricably political given the apparent crisis of the commons in urban areas as privatised public space and public private partnerships become the *modus operandi* for development, and arbitrary evictions of informal settlements continue.

In the commons economy, an 'abundance' of information is shared and reproduced, but who maintains and manages the complex infrastructural facilities that enable this? Accessibility may not always be straightforward so Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom polemicise the abundant commons, and reframe information as a common-pool resource (Hess & Ostrom 2006). So how is this common-pool resource accessed in the context of David Harvey's accumulation by dispossession and the Lefebvrian right to the city?

Commons or open source urbanism hinges on the ability of people to interact with information. Some cities are trying to maximise this, Seoul has adopted the 'shareable city' moniker to facilitate citizen participation, and some countries too; Ecuador is attempting to model itself as a social knowledge economy (Flok Society 2015). But how can approaches to cultivating and maintaining an urban commons be included outside of tech-utopian discourses?

#### > Informality as wiki-urbanism

Within the wiki model, non-digital forms also exist. Initiatives such as Placemakers in Nairobi create new urban design processes through short-term multidisciplinary teams conducting rapid prototyping for long term impact. Actors of Urban Change, a fund of the Robert Bosch Stiftung in Berlin provides opportunities for these types of actors to network with each other. This 'analogue' aspect of wiki-urbanism can also be traced to what traditional planning refers to as informal activities, which in places across the world can be understood as havens for residents to shape urban space where limited interfaces exist for citizens to participate meaningfully in formal planning praxis.

Given that an estimated 50 million people in Europe live in informal settlements (UNECE 2011), approaching the self-made city as through the wiki-urbanist frame could be a more useful than the simple informal versus formal dichotomy, which can lead to temporarily displacing or even exacerbating problems. Anaya Roy cites examples from Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires where cosmetic physical improvements have been 'a bit like re-arranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic' (2005: 150), and this is complemented by Alan Gilbert's view that 'metaphorically, the plan is to eliminate the slum, something akin to finding the Holy Grail' (2007: 708). Perhaps this vivid metaphor that equates planning to a heroic feat is appropriate. Planners need to throw off the shackles of the planner as a solution bearer in these contexts.

John Turner writing in the 1960s and 1970s turned the idea of informality and planning on its head, by advocating that the value of the 'initiative of families to house themselves' (cited in Kiddle 2010: 883), as opposed to being provided and regulated by the state. The implication being not only a question about planners' utility or right to intervene in these spaces, but also that wiki-urbanism is inherent in cities. Thinking of planning in this way, as the interactions tied to a social dimension of space rather than its function in informal/formal terms then could become a way to respond to city problematics more appropriately. Turner's insight is challenging, as it also queries the current validity of planners' framing of problems, and elucidates how new alternatives are possible, those where planners can become the agency of community thought, and focus on process rather than outcome.

#### > Towards wiki-urbanism

Wiki-urbanism could be understood as a flexible approach that optimises the potential for urban planning and environmental management to integrate community and climate needs. In this model cities value new information and new interpretations of it, akin to Dave Snowden's popularised chef and recipe follower metaphor - where the chef makes the most of available products, while the recipe follower has a set of specific requirements - to avoid implementing silver bullet policies from elsewhere that can become redundant, and instead adapts appropriately to their own contexts (Snowden, 2009).

If cities are composed of multiple interacting agents and organisations, in the same way that Eric Beinhocker characterises the economy as a 'complex adaptive system' (Beinhocker 2006), then perhaps a wiki-urbanist framework for understanding cities could be more reflective of their reality. But, how could this operate? Would actively applying an understanding of the city as a wiki-urbanist process lead to a city that is more focused on process and experience rather than outcomes? And would this lead to a planning system that not only regulates and disseminates information, but creates the capacity for action among citizens? Would this be desirable?

The architect Marco Casagrande proposes that a form of urban acupuncture could be more sensitive to community needs than traditional institutional forms of large scale urban renewal interventions. This approach takes many forms where pressure points can be both physical and social, and localised needs are engaged

with through workshops. One of Casagrande's prototypes, the 'RuinAcademy', an architectural research academy in Taiwan, may have some implications for planning a wiki-urban system. In the Ruin Academy, the building is punctuated with a series of holes to enable nature to take hold, here architectural control is ceased and the building becomes part of nature. If this applied to planning, could a system emerge that facilitates self-organised community structures to develop, build knowledge, and shape their cities?

In some cities this is, to some extent, being pursued, and consultations that were previously box ticking exercises are taking on aspects of seemingly genuine participation. The Localism Act in the UK enables communities to proactively engage in the planning system, Paris enacted a large-scale participatory budget process, and the LabGov project in Italy is running an initiative in Mantova to institutionalise the city as a collaborative commons. Added to these are the growth of data generating apps and the diffusion of local innovation labs to collectively find solutions to municipal problems. The EU-funded OrganiCity is establishing experimentation as a service to enable citizens to respond to civic challenges in new ways. These initiatives could appear to move beyond tokenistic inclusion to represent Markus Miessen and Hannes Grassegger's view of 'real participation as an individual entrance strategy toward personal empowerment' (Miessen 2010: 24). So is this wiki-urbanism in action?

### > Concluding questions for wiki-urbanism

Returning in conclusion to the introductory example of citizen science changing a local land trust's response to air pollution in west London may highlight some of the points to consider for the emerging wiki-urbanist model. In this example, the campaigning community were ultimately excluded from the decision making process. They presented information that changed the trust's views, but the implementation of the solution was not in their hands. Does this fit the wiki-urbanist model? And does it matter if the outcome achieved was what the community wanted?

More intriguingly perhaps, is that this community centred on Latimer Road tube station by the Westway, one of the most deprived areas in the borough dubbed the 'richest in the world', is sandwiched between two areas subject to their own neighbourhood plans. This means that the other residential areas - Norland and St Quintin - overlooked including their

poorer neighbourhood when devising their own resident-led plans. This leads to an important question. Even if a wiki-urbanist approach to cities is taken, who will shape the process?

Research in the UK shows that neighbourhood plans are being pursued mainly in affluent areas, and the majority seek to maintain the status quo (Turley 2014). Perhaps the biggest challenge for the emerging wiki-urbanist approach to the city is to ensure that the urban poor and the most vulnerable communities do not remain excluded from changing governance structures; something of pertinence in the context of high migration to Europe. A true wiki structure would be one in which a city enables any member of its population to join a governance process at any time and still create an impact, and this type of platform is still very much in the future.

## References

- Beinhocker, E., (2006), *The Origin of Wealth: Evolution, Complexity, and the Radical Remaking of Economics*, (Harvard University Press)
- Benkler, Y., (2006) *The wealth of networks: how social production transforms markets and freedom* (Yale University Press)
- Bratton, B. H. (2014) *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, (MIT Press)
- Conroy, M. M., Evans-Cowley, J., (2006). "E-participation in planning: an analysis of cities adopting online citizen participation tools". *Environment and Planning* 24, 371-384
- de Lange M. & de Waal, M., (2011). *Ownership in the hybrid city*. *Virtual Platform*
- Ellingson, L. (2008), *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research An Introduction*, Sage
- Gilbert, A. (2007), 'The return of the slum: does language matter?' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 31 (4): 697-713.
- Gray, J., Lämmerhirt, D., Bounegru, L., (2016). *Changing What Counts: How Can Citizen-Generated and Civil Society Data be Used as an Advocacy Tool to Change Official Data Collection?* (Civicus)
- Gutiérrez González, B. (2016), 'The open source city as the transnational democratic future', *Open Democracy*, 19 January. Online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/bernardo-guti-rrez/open-source-city-as-transnational-democratic-future>
- Hansen, Lene (2006) *Security as Practice. Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, Routledge.
- Hess, C. and Ostrom, E., (2006) *Understanding knowledge as a commons: from theory to practice*
- Kelty, C. M., (2008). *Two bits: the cultural significance of free software* (Duke University Press)
- Kiddle, G. L. (2010). 'Key Theory and Evolving Debates in International Housing Policy: From Legalisation to Perceived Security of Tenure Approaches' *Geography Compass* Vol.4:7: 881-892
- Lemmonier, P., (1992), *Elements for Anthropology of Technology*, (University of Michigan)
- McCulloch, M. (2013), *Ambient Commons: Attention in the Age of Embodied Information* (MIT Press)
- Miessen, M. (2010), *Crossbenching: Toward Participation as Critical Spatial Practice* (Sternberg Press)

- Pearce, J. M., (2013). Open-Source Lab. Elsevier
- RBKC (2016) 'Green screens' to block pollution from the Westway, January Online <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/press-release/'green-screens'-block-pollution-westway>
- Rifkin, J. (2014). The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism, Third Edition, (Palgrave MacMillan)
- Roy, A. (2005). 'Urban Informality. Toward an Epistemology of Planning'. Journal of the American Planning Association, vol. 71, n. 2: 147-158
- Sample, I. (2010). 'Language and toolmaking evolved together, say researchers'. The Guardian. 3 Novembet. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/nov/03/language-hand-toolmaking-evolution>
- Sassen S. (2011). "Open Source Urbanism, The new Significance". Domus, 19 June. Online: <http://www.domusweb.it/en/op-ed/2011/06/29/open-source-urbanism.html>
- Snowden, D. (2009). "Creating chefs from recipes", Collective-Edge Blog. Online: <http://cognitive-edge.com/blog/creating-chefs-from-recipes/>
- Tapscott, D., (2008). Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything, (Portfolio)
- Turley, (2014). Neighbourhood Planning: Plan and Deliver? March. Onlne: [http://www.turley.co.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/news/Turley\\_%20Neighbourhood%20Planning\\_March\\_2014.pdf](http://www.turley.co.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/news/Turley_%20Neighbourhood%20Planning_March_2014.pdf)
- The Economist. (2008). Commons Sense, Why it still pays to study medieval English landholding and Sahelian nomadism, The Economist. Online: <http://www.economist.com/node/11848182>
- UNECE (2011), Self Made Cities: In search of sustainable solutions for informal settlements in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region. UNECE Online: <http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/publications/oes/SelfMadeCities.pdf>

## Websites

- Flok Society, <http://flokociety.org>
- Peta Jakarta, <http://petajakarta.org/banjir/en/>
- Casagrande Lab - <http://www.clab.fi/projects/ruinacademy/>
- St Quintins and Woodlands Neighbourhood Forum - <http://stqw.org/>
- Norland Conservation Society - <http://www.norlandconservationsociety.co.uk/what-we.../neighbourhood-plan/>
- Grenfell Action Group - <https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2014/11/02/some-awkward-questions-for-rbkc/>
- Mapping for Change - <http://mappingforchange.org.uk/>
- OrganiCity - <http://organicity.eu>