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Editorial Introduction

Community Engagement for Sustainable Urban Futures

A special issue of *Futures*, <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/futures>

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This special issue of *Futures* is concerned with community engagement strategies that help to inform medium and long-term futures studies in order to foster sustainable urban environments. Recent special issues of *Futures*, such as Human Extinction (41:10) and Utopian Thought (41:4), reflect the increasing significance of sustainability issues, which is why we present another crucial component of sustainability, community engagement. Responding to futurists' long term concerns about climate change outlined in *Futures* 41(9) [1], Stevenson concluded that we can no longer support infinite growth, and that our goal should be to reshape the economy to let us live within our means.

In the face of the continued and accelerated crisis in environmental, economic and social sustainability, a number of trends informed our call for papers on the possible role of community engagement in contributing to enhanced urban sustainability:

- Changes in the public sphere in terms of participation, online deliberation systems, polity of urban futures;
- The possible use of user-generated content for urban planning (paralleling the rise of user generated content elsewhere);
- The related role of social networking, collective and civic intelligence, and crowd-sourcing in urban futures;
- The rise of technologies such as wireless Internet and mobile applications, and the impact of neogeography, simulations and 3D virtual environments that reproduce and analyse complex social phenomena and city systems in urban futures, design and planning.

The emphasis on technology for community engagement has the potential to become disengaged from local participation, however its contribution cannot be ignored. Hearn and Rooney [2] observe a general trend towards the democratisation of knowledge production, which has occurred with the development and wide spread availability of high bandwidth storage, distribution and knowledge capture devices in conjunction with Web 2.0 architecture [3]. Major media organisations have underestimated the impact of Internet-based news sourcing and the social logic or 'collective intelligence'. The fundamental transformation operates according to Cunningham [4] in terms of new forms of newsgathering and distribution; the shift in architecture is towards grassroots or citizen journalism with the 18-34 demographic creating this inexorable momentum.

All types of information are being produced in this way — from open-source technical movements to artistic creativity via the Creative Commons movement. Innovation, as exemplified by the World Wide Web itself, has proceeded from an ‘open-source’ approach to knowledge rather than via proprietary mechanisms.

Hindmarsh [5] argues that a key challenge for the future of ‘life policymaking’ is the creation of less formal public spaces that offer inclusive social negotiation and collective representations (e.g., deliberative forums, citizens’ juries, consensus conferences, open science or mode 2 science). Similarly, Fitzgerald [6] documents the movement toward ‘open access’ to publicly funded research, from the Open Access Declarations of Berlin and Bethesda¹ and the OECD² in 2004 through to the conditioning of research funding by institutions such as the USA’s National Institute of Health³ and the UK’s Wellcome Trust⁴. One particular example Fitzgerald cites is the Science Commons NeuroCommons project. Science Commons is an exploratory project designed to apply Creative Commons to the realm of science, particularly in terms of making data accessible. Its NeuroCommons project builds upon open access scientific knowledge to create a semantic web for neurological research.⁵ The aims of the NeuroCommons project are to:

- demonstrate that scientific impact is directly related to the freedom to legally reuse and technically transform scientific information — that open access is an essential foundation for innovation;

¹ See the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities (2003), <http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin/berlindeclaration.html>, and the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing (2003), <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/bethesda.htm>

² OECD, Declaration on Access to Research Data from Public Funding, http://www.oecd.org/document/0,2340,en_2649_34487_25998799_1_1_1_1,00.html

³ National Institutes of Health, Office of Extramural Research, *Policy on Enhancing Public Access to Archived Publications Resulting from NIH-Funded Research*, available at <http://publicaccess.nih.gov/>

⁴ <<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk>>

⁵ See <http://sciencecommons.org/data/neurocommons>.

- establish a framework that increases the impact of investment in neurological research in a public and clearly measurable manner;
- develop an open community of neuroscientists, funders of neurological research, technologists, physicians, and patients to extend the NeuroCommons work in an open, collaborative, distributed manner.⁶

In other words, inclusive, ‘open’ and democratic processes are not just an ideological mandate, but rather they are necessary to solve some of the complex problems that we now face.

Moreover, the very notion of community is evolving rapidly because many interactive communities are now online. Urban communicative ecologies operate within a global context increasingly dominated by Web 2.0 services (e.g., search engines, instant messenger networks, auction sites, and social networking systems). The notion of ‘glocalization’— introduced by Robertson [7] and later re-interpreted by Wellman [8] — is useful here because it emphasises the need to develop meaningful ways of using this global service infrastructure locally rather than trying to compete with existing global sites and content. Studies have highlighted a range of opportunities for the development of local (and location-aware) services as well as locally produced and consumed content [9,10].

For example, collective interactions (‘community activism’) relate to discussions about place (e.g., community events, street rejuvenation initiatives and body corporate affairs). Networked community interactions (‘social networking’) relate to place-based sociability; features that support this kind of interaction seek to raise awareness of neighbourhood

⁶ <http://sciencecommons.org/data/neurocommons>.

demographics, provide opportunities for residents to learn about one other, and initiate contact with each other.

In the context of the field of urban planning and development, the promise of digital content and new media potentially serves new urbanist visions to develop and support social relationships that contribute to the sustainability of communities Foth [11]. However, outcomes such as community participation and diversity, whilst often advocated, are simultaneously very difficult to deliver.

In this light we hoped to receive new models of community engagement for this special issue. We imagined that technical, social and discursive elements might work across (1) online and offline communication modalities; (2) local and global contexts; and (3) collective, networked and other interaction paradigms. Perhaps this thinking was too technologically determined; what we have found amongst our contributors — in addition to interesting examples of technologies used for engagement — is the prevalence of the political, cultural, ideational, and institutional issues that remain in the attempt to engage communities in issues of urban sustainability.

Shepard et al. are optimistic about new technologies of visualisation and argue that despite its complexity, scientific climate change information can be structured and applied at the community level, through use of coherent scenarios, which need to be localised in order to be 'real,' understandable, and meaningful to laypeople. In particular, climate change scenarios can be spatialised at the local level to allow analysis of climate change impacts, vulnerabilities, and adaptation/mitigation suitability, making them more likely to be integrated into planning processes. These local climate change scenarios need to be framed so as to make climate change choices more explicit between possible alternatives

over the short and long-term, and provide clear options for action in the community. Local information, knowledge, and input to the framing of scenarios, along with scientific inputs, are vital for defensibility and public buy-in.

Similarly, Larsen et al. argue that local deliberative processes of low-carbon futures as well as processes of local-global interaction in 'eco-innovation jam' dialogues, carried out in a virtual space, but founded on communicating with local stakeholder groups, were deployed successfully in their research on regional sustainability. These experiences from national processes and international examples of these structured dialogues of community engagement at a global level raise important questions on environmental justice and deliberative processes. This is particularly relevant since the environmental justice discourse traditionally frames environmental concerns in a place-bound manner and considers a local and reactive view on environmental questions. The authors argue for the importance of local and global forums and deliberative processes for community engagement in order to incorporate stakeholders' perceptions of future options for low-carbon living, travelling and consuming services and products. Larsen et al. also emphasise the importance of citizen participation for understanding local conditions for change, processes of localized internationalization, and new roles for nation-states facing the climate change challenge. At the same time they underscore the importance of the local and global level of deliberative processes targeting sustainable urban futures.

In a study of scenario planning for regional sustainability, Chakraborty illustrates how scenario models could be adapted to multiple scales, contexts and variations in desired technical complexity. The paper concludes that such processes have an inherent value in capturing the issues of the future and in creating awareness and future knowledge. This article argues that certain considerations, such as early strategic engagement of

stakeholders, flexibility of technical tools and diversity among organizers, all play a role in enhancing the dialogue amongst stakeholders. Furthermore, when timed with favourable external conditions and designed within suitable institutional frameworks, community engagement has the potential to provide a foundation from which tangible regional benefits can be realized.

However, two other studies emphasise the importance of social/institutional issues in community engagement that these new technologies perhaps cannot circumvent.

Arslan and Cahantimur's study is based on the idea that community intelligence can be an influential force on decision making processes about the physical, social and economical future of an urban community, and involves incorporating a successful traditional guild system (Lonca) in Turkey. However, the increased complexity and mutual interplay of social, economic, environmental and institutional processes provoked challenges. Overall, this research suggests that development of a community engagement model poses a number of policy issues that need to be addressed with an awareness of the global and local context in which they are situated. Community engagement experience in Turkey is quite new, making it difficult to draw conclusions about its effectiveness on sustainable future studies. However, the study can be seen as an initial effort to clarify the development of community engagement models that have influenced sustainability studies in Turkey.

In their attempt to involve a high school in a community engagement exercise, Mallan and Greenaway found that the pragmatics of timetabling, curriculum demands, assessment and extracurricular activities made it difficult to involve students in an extended or free form of engagement. Attempts to engage schools in community projects, therefore, need to be mindful of how this 'isolated autonomy' impacts issues of control, regulation, protocols of engagement, publicity, and the school's responsibility to parents

and to its main employing authority. Despite these limitations on the process of the project, the gains that were made in terms of the subjective and intersubjective relations between student-school-community were seen as promising.

The final two papers are not anchored in particular case studies, but instead hold up the possibility of a discursive reframing to transform community engagement as a process. Collie uses Michel de Certeau to argue that narrative forms connect people to particular places and makes place concrete and inhabitable. These narratives generate an imaginary, poetic geography that haunts the abstract city of street maps and development plans to make it socially meaningful. Collie then examines a particular form — science fiction — and investigates its relationship to the city, urban planning, and questions of community engagement. The paper argues that the ‘cities of the imagination’ generated by science fiction and other forms of narrative provide a powerful means of understanding, communicating and enriching the connections to place in urban communities. Moreover, science fiction is often characterised by its ability to explore the future of cities. This gives the genre a fascinating and potentially useful resonance with urban planning as a discourse and set of practices, and in particular, strategies for engaging communities in the design process and, thus, designing for future social sustainability.

Tony Fry argues for a new economic paradigm based on what he terms ‘sustainment.’ Echoing Stevenson’s point of departure for our issue, he suggests that an economy based on continual growth increasingly looks to be completely flawed. In his view the ‘restricted economy’ (capitalism) is dislocated from the ‘general economy’ (the biosphere).⁷ This means that the system of exchange of the former is not articulated to the metabolic processes of the latter. Unless this situation changes, defuturing consequences of environmental damage and resource stress can only get worse. There can be no progress toward sustainment without advancing global equity and social justice; put bluntly, this

⁷ These terms are borrowed from Georges Bataille – see *The Accursed Share* (trans Robert Hurley), New York: Zone, 1988.

means that the poor have to get richer and the rich, poorer. For Fry the only way this shift can happen is to move into an economic paradigm based on quality, not quantity. The kinds of changes just indicated suggest that 'progressives' need to move from 'sustainable development' to the 'development of sustainment.' And in the context of the (re)formation and enablement of community, this means cultural life and practice, social structures and relations, and care for things and environments all have to acquire much more importance, not least economically. Moreover, the rematerialisation and reanimation of community as the basis of urban life in the coming conditions of unsettlement has to become a priority. Finally — Fry suggests — sustainment also poses a fundamental question for democracy: can it be transformed to deliver sustainability? Putting the question another way: can people be induced to vote for the far-reaching and fundamental changes that sustainment — and thus a viable future — requires?

Conclusions

New models of community engagement will encourage people of all ages to gain a better appreciation of their capacity to bring about change within their local community by networking people and re-invigorating a more contemporary interpretation of community values in a networked society. Watters observes that 'social capital comes from much more fluid and informal (yet potentially quite close and intricate) connections between people. [...], social capital could as easily accrue among a tight group of friends yet still have an effect on the community at large' [12]. These connections could enhance the capacity of humans to interpret themselves differently and to establish a public sphere that emphasises digital citizenship through user-producer activities of creative expression.

However, innovations in the technology layer of community engagement are not enough. The social, institutional, discursive, and ideational layers must also be rethought.

In a democracy it is the right of all citizens to affect change. Ideally they feel duty bound to do this wisely, but in order to make responsible decisions, citizens need easy access to a variety of reliable knowledge.

Community engagement can be a process of foresight to investigate the need for change, and the nature of that change. Such a perspective is based on many traditions of the social that emphasize the possibility of social change. The action learning/research tradition aims to combine insights from such thinking and aspires to be free of any given ideological stance. In this model/tradition there is a guiding objective that endeavors to encourage and improve a person's capacity to investigate and understand their own situation, and to create action within their ongoing social context. Perhaps transformation is needed even deeper in our social hierarchy, in schools and other institutions. It is essential that we develop a finer appreciation of critical thinking — asking questions and instilling public ethics — and a greater sense of responsibility for unborn generations.

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