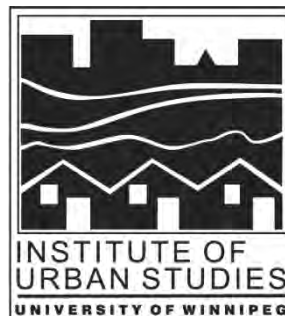


Participation and Planning (Spontaneous Town Planning): A Paper Presented to the Congrès d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme, Brussels, November 22, 1971

by Lloyd Axworthy
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The Institute of Urban Studies





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WINNIPEG

FOR INFORMATION:

The Institute of Urban Studies

The University of Winnipeg
599 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg
phone: 204.982.1140
fax: 204.943.4695
general email: ius@uwinnipeg.ca

Mailing Address:

The Institute of Urban Studies

The University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

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PARTICIPATION AND PLANNING
(Spontaneous Townplanning)

A Paper Presented to the
'Congres d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme'

Brussels
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by

Lloyd Axworthy
Director
Institute of Urban Studies
University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Canada

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Preface

It is very difficult in a short paper to outline all the issues that are involved in a discussion of citizen participation in the planning of cities.

This paper seeks simply to present some of the basic arguments and a short description of some of the experiences in North America in finding answers to the questions of why and how people should participate in planning.

It is hoped that this will be sufficient to stimulate a more extensive examination of the important problem of participation by people in planning.

There are new voices being heard in the city today. Voices calling for citizen involvement in the planning and implementation of policies in housing, renewal, welfare, urban transportation, downtown development, or any other of a number of enterprises formerly considered the exclusive preserve of small coteries of planners, architects, developers, bankers and the odd politician.

This has caused confusion, consternation and increasingly acts of confrontation in the management of urban issues. The institutional mechanisms, the conventional practices and the intellectual concepts that have determined the way cities are planned have not been designed with citizen participation in mind. It is a new social phenomenon demanding a different set of responses and new institutional machinery.

For example, in Canada there is an increasing activity by citizen groups. These are groups of citizens who have organized themselves to achieve better programs and which want more say in deciding the policies that affect them. They are challenging the way decisions are made by local government. Participation in policy-making, new forms of community-controlled programs, a more equitable distribution of goods and services, and decentralization of power and authority are the kinds of demands being made by these citizen organizations. They want a reappraisal of the principles and a re-working of the practices that presently are used in the planning of cities.

These citizen organizations have emerged because existing systems of government have not successfully managed the changes taking place in the urban environment. Conflicts over public housing, programs of urban redevelopment and renewal, expressway systems, the delivery of welfare services, have been the catalysts for the formation of new groupings of citizen-based opposition. Changes are being demanded in the way these programs are planned and executed and the major focus of attack is local government.

The forms of government we now use were sufficient for providing the caretaker services that were required in simpler days. But, as instruments capable of handling the complex, subtle social and human concerns of modern urban citizens they are failures. They are too distant, too bureaucratic, too simplistic in their approach. What is even more worrisome, they are becoming less and less democratic - immune to the new voices expressing themselves in urban matters.

Our institutions of local government were devised in the nineteenth century, and have been only moderately amended since that time. Yet the volume of government business, the flow of information, the variety of tasks have increased multi-fold, without accompanying adaptations. As government becomes increasingly more involved in peoples' lives, it is only natural for them to want to exercise greater control. As Sydney Verba notes, "the expansion of governmental interventions in the economic and social life of the nation increases the stakes of participation: the government does more and therefore more is to be gained by having a voice over what it does".¹

¹ Sydney Verba, "Democratic Participation". Bertram Cross (ed). Social Intelligence for America's Future. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969.

Our representative chambers, our political parties--the devices that we proclaim provide access to the system--only provide access in an intermittent way and on some occasions. The average citizen of a large city has limited contact with his government and even less control over what it does. Roscoe Martin points out in his book the Grass Roots - the level of government furthest away from most citizens is city hall.² And Emmet Redford observes in his study of democracy that,

"Election of representatives or referendum have always been recognized as key means of access for the citizen. But more participation than this will be necessary to implement democratic morality in an administered society." ³

The truth is that our present practices and our existing institutions are not very democratic. Decisions are made by small clusteries of influentials; there is limited access to the forums of decision-making; and there are large numbers of people who have no power to act.

We delude ourselves with rhetoric about our democratic way of life, while we practice an advanced form of technocracy. This is not done willfully; there is no subversive conspiracy to wreck democratic ideals. It is simply a result of events overtaking institutions and of an indifference on the part of those who now exercise power to attempt any corrections.

There is therefore a fundamental issue in balance - that everyone involved in thinking, planning or executing urban matters must face - how to meet the requirements of advanced, sophisticated, complicated decisions to cope with demands of an urban society - with the need to have participation

²Roscoe, Martin. Grass Roots. University of Alabama Press, 1957. p. 3.

³Redford, Emmette. Democracy in the Administrative State, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 29.

and involvement of citizens in the construction of the urban environment. Perhaps - Wentworth Aldridge of Dartmouth used more straight-forward terms at the 1968 American Institute of Planners Convention, when he said -

"Professional Administration (rule by experts) versus participatory democracy (planning with people) is the dilemma of the late twentieth century". 4

For many, especially professional planners and government administrators, it is not a dilemma. They see little need for people to be involved in planning. They contend that what is needed is less democracy and more getting on with the job. There is already too much time consumed in honouring democratic niceties, when there are many urgent urban problems crying for solution. If there has to be elitism to do the job, then it is worth the price, according to the advocates of this position.

This is an understandable, but an unwise philosophy. Citizen involvement should be the number one goal for planning the environment because it is an effective way of dealing with problems. The involvement of people in the planning process gives them an opportunity to express their needs, as they see them, and to take on responsibility for the improvements in their own community. To continue present trends in planning will only strengthen further the dominance of professional elites and damage the cause of planning good cities.

Robert Aleshire who has examined the American experience with community action lists the major benefits of citizen participating in planning.

⁴ Aldridge, Wentworth. "Toward a National Policy for Planning the Environment". Earnest Erber's Urban Planning in Transition. New York: Grassman Publishers, 1970. p. 5.

First, because society grows large and the individual more anonymous, it becomes essential for the individual to be involved in decisions that affect his community. It is a way for a citizen to take responsibility for his neighbourhood. Secondly, it represents a check and balance against the elitist or technocratic theorist. Increased involvement of citizens can often save the community from the decision of the technician or professional which may produce irrelevant and unresponsive action. Thirdly, it is a way of giving individuals a sense of worth. Powerlessness demerits, participation gives dignity. Fourthly, involvement of citizens is a way of properly establishing community priorities. If some groups are missing from the arena of decision-making which is now the case, then the planning priorities that emerge will not represent a true public interest. Similarly, it is a better way of raising and debating important issues, something that political parties do not do. Finally, the act of citizen participation unifies planning. The citizen has an integrated life. It is not separated into physical, social and economic components. Therefore he might give a perspective often missing from the vertical plans and programs now made by planners and administrators.⁵

Two examples drawn from the community action programs in the United States illustrate the power of this argument.

The Hough Development Corporation in Cleveland and the Jeff VanderLou neighbourhood corporation in St. Louis are both community-run planning operations. Both grew out of community initiative, not government sponsorship, and have grown to a point where they have undertaken major

⁵ Aleshire, Robert. "Costs and Benefits of Citizen Participation", Urban Affairs Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 4, June 1970, p. 374.

Aleshire also notes that there are costs associated with citizen participation. It is often more time-consuming and complex.

redevelopment activities. The Hough Corporation, initiated by a broadly represented community group, has undertaken major programs of economic development in an area of Cleveland that suffered severe rioting in 1966.⁶ It operates a loan guarantee program, a home maintenance program and is in the advanced stage of planning for a unique shopping center - housing complex.

In St. Louis, the residents of the Yeatman district became increasingly disturbed by the indifference of local government to the steady deterioration of their area. They banded together, formed the Jeff VanderLou Community Corporation in 1968, and have since undertaken a major rehabilitation of 300 homes in the area, built a community park and started a medical clinic.⁷ They had problems, mainly from a city government which refused to give him money and designated another neighbourhood group as the area's official poverty agency. The Corporation has persevered and now receives major federal financing for its work of rehabilitation. Both cases demonstrate that there is a capacity for self-renewal in lower-income areas and that the program devised by the community corporations can often undertake more effective renewal action than conventional government agencies.

The same assessments can be made of the experience of community action in Canada.

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See "Community Capitalism Under Fire" in City, June/July 1970.

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See Arthur Tobin, "A Community CAP in the Housing Business" in Housing and Education, p. 46-47. A Special Council on Urban Education Report.

The idea of community-based planning in Canada owes much to the community action programs arising out of the American civil rights movements and the War on Poverty of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations. These ideas were quickly transmitted across the border during the mid 1960's and picked up by Canadians working in the field of social development.

Federal government agencies and politicians then gave serious impetus to the emergency of citizen movements and the idea of community participation. The Company of Young Canadians, a government-financed agency for promoting social action, became involved in a series of community planning projects and succeeded in spawning a number of citizen groups across the country that challenged official plans in urban renewal areas. Widespread popularization of the idea came about as a result of Prime Minister Trudeau's repeated call for a form of participatory democracy during the 1968 federal election campaign. The Federal Task Force on Housing and Urban Development, established in 1968 to review and redesign federal policies and programs, sought to involve citizens in the solution of urban problems. It provided a forum for many citizens groups during its cross-country tour in the autumn of 1968, and incorporated many of the ideals of citizen participation in its report. The subsequent stoppage of federal urban renewal assistance based on Task Force recommendations and more tenant-oriented approaches toward public housing reinforced the movement towards programs based on some kind of citizen involvement.

In the last two years the federal government has funded a series of demonstration projects and trial programs involving citizens groups

in the rebuilding of their own communities. This last summer, a twenty-five million dollar "Youth Opportunities Program" was introduced. It provided money to young people who would design and execute their own programs of community improvement in the summer. This winter, as part of its program to fight unemployment, the federal government here allotted fifty million dollars to community groups and citizen organizations who will undertake projects to rehabilitate housing and improve community facilities. The federal government of Canada has thus begun to take seriously the notion that private citizens can be involved in planning and implementing programs for their own improvement.

There remains however many unanswered questions about how citizen participation in planning can be effectively developed. Right now it is still something of a random occurrence with little comprehension of what it involves or what the implications are. Basic guidelines are needed to order the relationships between planner and citizen. Techniques for appraising and analysing community attitudes and feelings are required. New decision-making mechanisms or new institutions are necessary to make the idea of participatory planning. Strategies for organizing citizens and dealing with the fears of elected politicians must be developed. In other words, a very serious examination of the meaning and conduct of citizen participation planning must be stated.

For the past three years, the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg, has been engaged in a series of action research projects in an effort to gain answers to some of these questions. The method of

action research is to actually initiate a process of change or innovation, and through careful evaluation of what takes place, be able to assess the results and draw conclusions. Using this method, we have helped initiate a number of citizen action projects in several urban renewal areas of the city and have begun to develop some tentative prescriptions on how citizen-based planning or participatory planning should and can take place.

A full description of the projects is not possible, but a brief listing will give an idea of the nature of the work.

----A neighbourhood development corporation, called The People's Committee for a Better Neighbourhood Incorporated, has been actively engaged in a series of housing and renewal projects in an inner city area for the past two years. The corporation is composed of area residents - be they tenants, people on welfare or local merchants. They succeeded in moving a six-unit apartment unit ten blocks, rehabilitated the apartments and now manage a low-income housing project. Presently they are involved in negotiations with the city officials over the planning of a recreation complex in an abandoned railway site in the area, and most importantly are working out agreements that the planning and execution of the project will be jointly shared by the government officials and residents.

----A self-help housing corporation, called The Kinew Housing Corporation, is managed by Native Indian and Metis people in the city. It has purchased over thirty homes for Indian families newly migrated to the city from rural areas. This corporation helps the families to make the transition from rural to urban life and the people running the corporation have developed a high degree of skills.

----A community television system has been established. This is a city-wide communication system, operating on one channel in the cable system. It acts as an information outlet for citizens and average citizens, not professional broadcasters, produce and present the programs. This gives an opportunity for citizens to present issues important to them, to express their concerns, to discuss issues pertinent to what they feel. It is the beginning of a public communication system which will be used to develop an effective two-way flow of information between citizen and government.

In each of these projects, the role of the Institute was to help initiate and organize communities, provide technical and professional advice, present alternative ideas that the group could use, and evaluate the process. In time the citizen groups have become quite independent and have developed their own skills.

These experiences have provided useful insights into the way citizens can become involved in planning. First, there must be some form of organizing agent which will animate citizens. Secondly, information must be supplied on what is happening in the community, as most people are unaware or ill-informed of what decisions are being made that will affect their community. Thirdly, professional advice in planning, architecture, law and finance, and administration is necessary in order for the citizens to make plans and decisions. Fourthly, there should be some kind of structure such as a development corporation - that is legally founded to provide continuity and permanence for the citizen. Fifth, there needs to be some effort to both objectively analyze community attitudes and concerns and to capture the subjective perceptions of community residents, through such

methods as video-tape recordings, surveys or observation analysis. The findings are shared with the community group and forms part of the knowledge they need to choose their priorities and undertake renewal activities.

If these conditions are met, it is quite possible for a group of citizens in an urban community to develop their own plans and execute programs in their own behalf. The programs themselves are often a truer reflection of needs than those conceived by the professional planner, and therefore better programs. And, the act of participation, helps develop a sense of worth and integrity for the citizens themselves. It is an effective way of giving them a stake in their community.

Obviously, the action of individual citizen organizations in planning must be fitted into some larger scale organization. The nature of urban planning requires some co-ordination of efforts between different parts of the city and some decisions on area-wide requirements. As well, the programs of citizen planning depend upon the use of tax monies, requires the use of land, which is often beyond the capacity of citizens to acquire, and should be co-ordinated with the provision of public service and utilities. There is a need therefore for institutions or mechanisms which would be somewhat integrated with the city government system, but still enable citizens to play a part in decision-making.

One answer proposed with increasing frequency is the idea of neighbourhood government or neighbourhood corporations. The most radical expression of this idea has come from Milton Kotler. In his book, Neighbourhood Government, he claims that the definition of neighbourhood has always been in

political, not sociological terms, and that the history of cities is characterized by neighbourhood governmental units.⁸ As cities become increasingly centralized economically and politically, it is important that independent neighbourhood corporations be used to counteract this trend and give people some opportunity for self rule. Kotler describes the formation and operation of the East Columbus Community Organization to support his claim that government can be decentralized, and that many of its functions can be taken over by independent corporations.

A slightly different version was presented by The Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders, in the United States, which advocated a decentralization of city government itself, and beginning with the creation of neighbourhood city halls. Some forms of this have begun to be implemented in cities such as Boston and New York. Government officials in these cities have begun to share responsibilities for the delivery of local services, receive complaints from residents, and develop programs from the local community. It is a start in sharing power, not a division of power.

Perhaps the most detailed examination of the idea has come from the Harvard University Program on Technology and Society.⁹ They have developed working models of local development corporations and worked closely with Paul Yvilsacker when he was Commissioner of Community Affairs in New Jersey to set up an extended system of new community development organizations in that state.

The essence of all these suggestions is that some type of organization or formal structure is necessary to make citizen-based planning work. It will not work if community people operate through informal

⁸ Kotler, Milton, Neighbourhood Government. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969.

⁹ Rosenbloom, R.S. and R. Murrie, Social Innovation in the City. Harvard University Press, 1969, p.181.

association. They have no legitimate authority, must wait upon the decisions of those in power, and can be dismissed. They must have a forum where the power of decision-making can be equally shared by resident and official, in the way that neighbourhood corporations or councils can relate to the wider structure of government. This is an issue that almost has to be worked out according to individual situations. But, there should be some integration of the neighbourhood unit with the city government in order that plans and programs be co-ordinated, and to avoid continual conflicts.

This will require not only new forms of policy making and institutions, but different forms of administrative procedures, and certainly a new set of operating arrangements for the professional planner and architect. There will have to be techniques worked out whereby administration of renewal or redevelopment projects is not seen as a hierarchical-- top down set of relationships but where the public official works in collegial fashion with citizens, technical advisers, elected representatives. The professional will no longer be able to exercise the privilege of "creating" his own solution to an urban problem, but will have to work in concert with citizens to help them translate their needs into a series of alternative solutions from which they can then choose. There will have to be ways of supplying information to citizens and insuring that there is a proper and open feedback. Also, indicators must be developed that will effectively measure the social and economic impact of plans and programs, so that effectiveness can be measured by more than simple criteria of design or physical improvement.

Many of these techniques are not now available. But, there is a growing sense that they are needed and increasing experimentation and testing on how they can be brought about.

The most serious handicap to these changes in the style and approach to planning is not the lack of technique. It is the basic conservatism and unwillingness by professional planners and both elected and appointed public officials to admit that changes are needed. They often resent the efforts of citizens groups to become involved in the planning process. They see the idea of citizen participation as a threat to their pre-eminence and a challenge to their position. They do not concede that citizen involvement can result in both better plans and a more democratic form of decision-making.

There will therefore be conflict. Already in Canada there have been innumerable examples of confrontation between the advocates of citizen participation and the civic administrators, planners and politicians.

But, the signs are hopeful. To begin with, citizen groups have won some victories. For example, they succeeded in convincing the provincial government of Ontario to step in and stop the building of the Spadina expressway in Toronto. In the Winnipeg experiments, they are demonstrating that they have a capacity for responsible action on their own behalf.

Secondly, the professions are changing. Increasingly young architects, planners, and lawyers are prepared to work in the community as advocates for the citizens. They are supplying the citizen organizations with skills that make for fair competition between government and people.

New knowledge in the art of planning and in the social sciences is beginning to emerge. It shows how planning must be based on more sophisticated understanding of people's behaviour and attitudes and is beginning to supply the methods for analyzing community concerns.

And finally, there is a growing realization by officials that better forms of urban government are required if there is to be an effective response to the changing issues of the city. In Winnipeg this year a new system of regional government was introduced which while providing one government for the entire region, decentralizes much of the authority for decision-making down to a series of "community committees" which offer the citizen at the neighbourhood level contact and involvement with his government.

The changes towards a system of urban planning will not come easy, but they will come. The forces demanding change and giving support to change, at least in Canada, seem at this moment to be gaining strength.

The belief in self-determination and open democratic planning and management is gaining credence and a following. It is impelled by the recognition that the basic theorem of Aristotle is once again making sense; that "if you want to know if the shoe fits, ask the man who wears it, not the man who made it". But it is also based on the stark fact realized by more and more people, that unless we put our mind to it and develop a new commitment to democratic goals and make the necessary changes, then democracy in the urban age will not survive.