BEITSKE BOONSTRA

PETER DAVIDS

ANNELIES STAESSEN

OPENING UP THE PLANNING LANDSCAPE

15 years of Actor-relational Approaches to Spatial Planning in Flanders, the Netherlands and Beyond

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CONTENT

Spatial planning in an age of active citizenship – Toward the art of creating consistency

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The emergence of civic initiatives

Civic initiatives are increasingly popular in cities and regions across Europe. They come in different forms and shapes: citizen movements protesting against neoliberalist urbanization and mega-plans (Uitermark et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 1997; 2005; Domaradzka, 2018); social or niche innovations providing civic-driven solutions to social issues (Moulaert et al., 2010); locally driven, user-generated, place-based and temporal direct actions reshaping urban space like Do-It-Yourself urbanism (Deslandes, 2013; Douglas, 2013; Talen, 2015; Finn, 2014; Iveson, 2013); collective actions such as urban commons (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Iaione, 2015); or cooperative urban development (Patti & Polyak, 2016).

For a long time, civic initiatives were seen as marginal, at the most temporal, and often stand-in-the-way methods to achieve formally planned spatial development. Nowadays, however, civic initiatives are increasingly framed as providers of alternative and additional public values, services, and places in environments where public institutions fall short due to decentralization, austerity, and complexity. Planning scholars indeed argue that the "many changes by many hands"—in which no long-term and strategic plans, but individual, entrepreneurial interventions and direct actions play the main part—will stimulate the emergence of a more diversified, resilient community-based urban fabric (Talen, 2015; Savini, 2016; Folke et al., 2005; Armitage, 2007).

However, enhancing civic initiatives in ongoing spatial planning processes is not an easy task. Still, many spatial planning professionals tend toward participatory methods when interacting with citizens. Within such methods, citizens are

provided with formal procedures to influence policies of which the thematic, procedural, and geographical delineations are already pre-determined (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011). Civic initiatives are often too dynamic, multiple, and versatile to align with such prescriptive governmental-led processes. Moreover, civic initiatives are often carried out with deliberate hints of anti-professionalism and informality (Douglas, 2013; Talen, 2015; Douglas, 2013; Lydon & Garcia, 2015, Finn, 2014; Deslandes, 2013). They consist of hybrid, loose, and informal collaborations between citizens, artists, community workers, etc. and their objectives are rooted in personal, situational, timely, and local conditions. Moreover, their focus expands easily in social, geographical, and thematic terms according to the issues at hand (Gosewinkel & Kocka, 2006; Van Meerkerk, 2014; Boonstra, 2015). As such, the dynamics of civic initiatives are not easily connected to governmental processes focused on stability, account-ability, regulation, and thorough decision making—even though governmental dynamics (political shifts, civil servant mobility) can be much higher than those of citizens, especially those with a high and long-lasting attachment to their working and living environment.

The question thus arises: what planning strategies would fit this age of active citizenship? How do these initiatives come to be, how do they interact with professional spatial planners and specifically local governments, and what can professional planners learn from the emergence of civic initiatives?

New practices, new conceptualizations

To answer this question, this chapter discusses the results of research conducted in the period of 2010-2015, shortly before the planning literature on civic initiatives and spatial planning boomed. At that time, several pioneering local and national governments in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Denmark had already developed policies in support of civic initiatives. In Denmark, the long-standing tradition of Do-It-Yourself-together (especially in the housing sector) formed an interesting institutional environment to study civic initiatives for co-housing. In the United Kingdom, the Business Improvement District regulation (instated by New Labour in 2005, years before the famous Big Society was launched) formed an interested institutional environment to study entrepreneurial initiatives for neighborhood branding and public space enhancement. In the Netherlands, the municipality of Almere developed groundbreaking approaches to facilitate civic initiatives across

domains, and thus formed an interesting institutional environment to study civic initiatives in public space, co-housing, and entrepreneurs. Of those civic initiatives, twelve in total, their process of becoming was analyzed, with specific attention to planning practices. To study the emergence of these initiatives, the notion of "self-organization" was taken as the main theoretical guideline. This notion is derived from complexity theory and stands for the emergence of new order out of chaos, based on individual actions without central coordi-nation or guidance (Cilliers, 1998; Heylighen, 2001; Teisman et al., 2009). This notion highly resonates with poststructuralist philosophy, which especially boomed in late 20th century France. Its philosophers – Gilles Deleuze (1994), François Lyotard (1984) and Jacques Derrida (1988) – elaborate on the notion of 'becoming' and the 'becoming of a self'. Their philosophies have in common that they see the 'becoming of a self' as a continuous process that unfolds in full interaction with the environment. It is not predefined but develops along the way. Seen from that philosophical standpoint, self-organization would describe the becoming as an individual civic initiative in a complex and dynamic environment. Emphasis is then turned toward the process through which a civic initiative acquires meaning and relevance in the dynamic and complex environment of spatial development (Boonstra, 2015).

When following this post-structuralist interpretation of self-organization, resonance also becomes visible among the key notions within self-organization: autopoietic (self-referential and internally strengthening) behavior, dissipative (externally and diversifying) behavior, bifurcation (critical breaking) points and equilibria (temporary stable situations), and other post-structuralist conceptu-alizations of "becoming". In some way this is also consistent with assemblage theory, that describes the becoming of an assemblage as an interplay between territorialization (homogenizing and stabilizing behavior), deterritorialization (diversifying and dynamizing behavior), coding (fixing identities) and decoding (rejecting defaults) (DeLanda, 2002; 2006; 2016). Furthermore, actor-network theory could be helpful in describing the becoming of a civic initiative through the phases of problematization (rejecting defaults), interessement (convincing and relating to new actors), enrolment (involving and fixing those actors in a role), and mobilization (acting as a whole) (Latour, 2005; Callon, 1984). Despite the many differences between these theoretical schools and their diverging ontological positions, in this chapter, once again, their similarities are stressed rather than their differences (See also Van Meerkerk et al., 2013; Boonstra & Rauws, *forthcoming*; Boelens, 2020 – introduction to this book).

A behavioral view on planning practice

To look more precisely into the practices of the aforementioned civic initiatives (three co-housing projects in Denmark, five business improvement districts in Birmingham, and four civic initiatives in Almere), a research framework was developed based on four forms of behavior and three intentionalities. The four forms of behavior are based on the resonance among theory on self-organization, actor-network theory, and assemblage theory, as described above and in the introduction of this book. The intentionalities describe what the initiative aimed to achieve in its environment, loosely based on the distinctions between strategies and tactics (Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

The four forms of behavior are: (i) Decoding, which stands for stepping away from the usual and the existing into a new and desired direction. Think of making explicit what should and can be changed, giving direction and goal to an initiative. (ii) Expansion, which stands for an external orientation, exploring new possibilities. Think of site visits, explorative conversations with funding agencies, drafting scenarios for the initiative, winning in expertise from professionals, and recruiting members. (iii) Contraction, which stands for an internal orientation focus on stabilizing, consolidation, casting boundaries, and establishing internal order and hierarchy. Think of appointing a board, deciding on a plan of requirements, and establishing internal working groups. (iv) Coding, which stands for the way an initiative uses external legislation, regulation, and references that can be regarded as normal. Think of using community legislation, complying to (or writing) a legal land-use plan.

The three intentionalities are: (i) Interfering for change – interventions aimed at changing perceptions and inciting others to take action. Think of tactical urbanism actions, the promotion of good practices, or the introduction of an experimental law. (ii) Networking for a fit – seeking an optimal connection between ideas and environment, aimed at materializing a project. Think of negotiations between a landlord and initiators or the attempts of civil servants to tweak a land use plan in order to accommodate an initiative that serves the general public interest. (iii) Assembling to maintain – attempts to safeguard things as they are and improve their conditions for the sake of their durability. Think of self-management of public spaces, neighborhood branding, or common activities to keep a community together. When combining these three intentionalities and four forms of behavior, twelve archetypical forms of self-organization can be identified (see figure 15.1). Through combining and shifting

Table 15.1. Twelve archetypes of planning (source: Boonstra, B., 2015, Planning Strategies in an Age of Active Citizenship: A Post-structural Agenda for Self-organization in Spatial Planning, InPlanning, Groningen)

		Behavior			
		Decoding	**Expansion**	**Contraction**	**Coding**
Intentionalities	Interfering for change	Showing what could be different in order to point out the need for a new direction.	Exploring different options and opinions in order to point out possible futures.	Emphasizing the like-mindedness and common ground in order to create support for a new direction.	Setting up rules and regulations in order to make change happen.
	Networking for a fit	Changing things and leaving behind old practices in order to move along and find a fit with the environment.	Exploring different options and opinions in order to move along and find a fit between the initiative and an environment.	Creating like-mindedness and common ground between the initiative and its environment.	Using (or tweaking) existing or new rules and regulations in order to find a fit between the initiative and its environment.
	Assembling to maintain	Defining what should be changed in order to maintain the quality and stability of the assemblage.	Disseminating and exploring different possibilities of and for the assemblage, in order to strengthen its stability and l egitimacy.	Emphasizing the like-mindedness and common ground in order to maintain the stability and strengthen the durability of the assemblage.	Upholding rules and regulations in order to maintain the security and stability of the assemblage.

through these archetypical forms of planning, the civic initiatives acquire meaning, identity, and the ability to materialize ideas in continuously dynamic and uncertain environments of spatial development.

The art of creating consistency

Whereas at first, only the emergence, processes, and actions of the fourteen civic initiatives were mapped on this diagram, through their interactions with local governments, the processes and actions by those local governments became visible through the lens of archetypes. Then it shows that all these twelve archetypical forms of planning are equally performed by all actors, including professionals and lay people, public, civic, or business actors. This goes for the decoding in combination with interfering for change. This is applied by civic initiatives in the form of tactical and temporary interventions in space *and* by governmental planners who aim to change regular policy processes. It goes for coding in combination with assembling to maintain, which is

applied in the development of legal land use plans *and* by civic initiatives that agree on a legal form to keep the community together. And it goes for all archetypical forms of planning in between. As such, when looking at planning from a behavioral point of view, distinctions between professionals working for planning authorities and civic initiators become blurred, as *both* try to create meaning and reasoning in a dynamic and uncertain world.

Spatial planning scholars usually describe spatial planning as the practice of collaboratively formulating ideas for the spatial environment, the translation of these ideas to spatial visions and interventions, and the organization of resources to implement and actualize these interventions (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997; Albrecht, 2006). With this scheme of archetypical forms of planning in mind, however, this research concludes that such a practice is also performed by civic initiatives. Civic initiatives are—as much as spatial planners working for governments—busy creating meaning in their spatial surround-ings. Moreover, they must do so in an environment in which the resources for spatial interventions are spread over a large number of different actors. As such, everyone who takes a spatial – and to a more or less extent – collective initiative can thus be regarded as a spatial planner – which resonates with the idea of a flat ontology of planning, as described in the introduction of this book. So what can professional planners learn from the emergence of civic initiatives? Have they become obsolete in an age of active citizenship? Not in the least! When everybody who aims to physically change a working or living environment can be regarded as a spatial planner, *professional* spatial planners can complement these civic-led practices with the following activities:

1. Conditions that open up

The first activity is the creation of conditions that do not constrain but open up possibility spaces. This planning activity is related to the behavior of coding and (allowing for) decoding. Instead of developing (spatial, institutional) frameworks that delineate the freedom of civic initiatives beforehand, planners should perhaps pay attention to conditions that provoke agency (Hillier & Van Wezemael, 2012). Such conditions can be both generic (e.g. planning legislation) or situational (e.g. local planning issues and actors). By provoking agency, the likeability of the emergence of new initiatives increased, thus adding to the diversity and resilience of the urban system. This links closely to interfering for change but from an institutional point of view.

2. The need for navigators

The second and subsequent activity is to "navigate" between planning initiatives, related to the behavior of contraction and expansion. From the cases it becomes evident that the actors who contribute most to the robustness and resilience of an initiative are people who are able to connect. They are not just boundary spanners. They arepeople with the ability to think beyond their own self-interest and to empathize with other interests (Van Meerkerk, 2014) but do so with a strong sense of self and direction in which to guide their actions. Hence the term "navigator": People heading for a certain end goal, but in a complex and ever changing environment without known or fixed paths and endpoints (Hillier, 2007). This links closely to networking for a fit.

3. The art of creating consistency

The third, and again related, activity is the art of creating consistency, related to all forms of behavior. This is consistency not in the sense of coherence and sameness, but in the sense of moving in the same direction. This consistency does not follow from disciplinary frameworks or inclusion-ary procedures, but much more from the ability to relate, to empathize, to build upon the performances of others, and to make strategies as open and known as possible (the twelve archetypical planning strategies can be instrumental in this). The art of creating consistency comprises that planners are able (i) to recognize the potentials of specific and detailed projects of civic initiatives for longer-term futures, (ii) to scan the various becoming selves and explore what potentials there are for consistency between civic initiatives, (iii) to think on how civic, public, and private interventions in space can add up to each other, (iv) to argue what areas could benefit from additional impulses for and by civic initiatives. This links closely to assembling to maintain and the search for coherence in diversity.

From the study of twelve civic initiatives against the background of pioneering governments developing policies to enhance them in the years 2010-2015, and with the analytical framework of self-organization and poststructuralist inter-pretations of the 'becoming of a self', a new perspective on spatial planning in the age of active citizenship came to light. This perspective comprises the ability of spatial planners to open the planning spectrum for many others, to navigate between these emerging others, and to empathize with the behaviors and intentionalities of these many others. The overview of the twelve archetypes can be instrumental in creating at least an awareness of these (and one's own)

behaviors and intentionalities. Then, the potential for consistency can be recognized and acted upon. Moreover, through the art of creating consistency, planners can become even more active creators of the dynamic, diverse, and resilient urban system so envisioned by the protagonists of civic initiatives in spatial development.

Urban regeneration through self-organization: business improvement districts

In Birmingham (England), five Business Improvement Districts were established in the city center from the period of 2005-–2015. BIDs are legal entities of entrepreneurs that organize a tax-levy among themselves, of which the revenues are reinvested for the improvement of their local business environments. BIDs are

elected by their members and renewed every five years and exist under a national BID legislation. The Birmingham city center BIDs are Broad Street BID (2005), Retail Birmingham (2006), Colmore Business District (2009), South Side BID (2010) and Jewellery Quarter (2012). While starting with a focus on safety, cleanliness, PR and marketing, these BIDs soon evolved towards an active engagement in the spatial development of the city center and the refurbishment of public space. They argued that a qualitative and well-functioning public space; good accessibility by public transport, car and pedestrians; and a reduction of vacant buildings would be a key towards a healthy local economy, and as such of benefit for the entrepreneurs within the BID area as well. Especially Colmore Business District grew strong in the public space: they initiated, lobbied, designed, and co-financed the refurbishment of Church Street Square. While before it was an underused car park, it is now transformed into a small pocket park and urban square with benches, trees, and greenery, especially well-used during lunch time. While initiating Church Street Square, the BID went through

Figure 15.3: Church Street Square by Colmore Business District

1. Broad Street
2. Convention quarter
3. Gas Street
4. Five Ways

5. Bull Ring
6. New Street Station
7. Colmore Row
8. Church Street Square
9. Charles Street Footbridge
10. Snow Hill Station
11. Colmore Square
12. Cathedral Walks

13. Hippodrome
14. Theater Square and Ladywell Walk
15. China Town
16. Hurst Street and Rhinestone Rhinoceros
17. Gay Village

decoding by taking a stand against deprived public areas; expansion by lobbying with the City Council for public space improvements; contraction by forming a specific partnership with the City Council for Church Street Square and defining a design; and coding by co-writing the Birmingham Movement Strategy and Big City Plan. Meanwhile, the intentionality driving Colmore Business District was mostly assembling to maintain: strengthen the local business

Figure 15.2: BIDs in Birmingham city center, England, and their public space initiatives

environment and improve its overall quality and functionality. After this initiative, more projects for public space improvement were set up in collaboration between the Birmingham City Council and Colmore Business District – as well as with other city center BIDs in Birmingham.
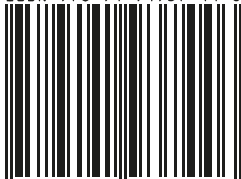
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Over the past 15 years, the actor-relational approach of planning grew and evolved from an interactive system between leading actors, factors of importance within evolving institutional settings to a co-evolutionary perspective on spatial planning. The various actor-relational and complexity-sensitive research and applications in the Flemish and Dutch landscape and beyond collected in this book demonstrate how this actor-relational approach of planning is not a fixed methodology but rather an attitude which (co-)evolves depending on specific themes, insights and surroundings. Therewith, the book forms a showcase of the wide applicability of the actor-relational approach in enduring or deadlocked planning processes. The combination of scientific exposés, column-like retrospective intermezzos and concise boxes is structured according to the main ingredients of the approach: actors, relations and approaches. The book offers an exploration of the consistencies in its (theoretical) insights, addresses future challenges in actor-relational and complexity-sensitive planning research and discusses its potential for future planning in the Eurodelta region and beyond.

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