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## **Planning for People – anthropologists in dialogue with planning scholars**

### **A new demand for anthropological expertise?**

Why would anthropologists pay attention to planning research? The symposium, "Planning for People", held on May 3rd 2011 demonstrated that there are many reasons. Most obviously, anthropologists have to deal more and more with the impact of rapidly changing built environments while planners are increasingly dealing with culture. Even in Finland where planning is mostly in the hands of architects and where anthropologists are not well known as scholars of modern bureaucratic institutions, the scope for planners and anthropologists to learn from each other turned out to be great.

The symposium, organised by the Finnish Anthropological Society and the Finnish Society for Housing and Planning, with contributions from the Finnish Society for Urban Studies, brought together six scholars to exchange views on the emerging common ground between anthropology and planning research. The well attended event became a "trading zone": an arena where a discipline's or community's internally "thick descriptions" could be exchanged in the form of "thin description" with other disciplines and communities (Mäntysalo et al. 2011). The dialogue made clear that planning research is open to anthropological input, not least because of two things in which anthropologists claim specialist expertise: culture and ethnography. In turn, anthropologists' use of planning research seems likely to proceed on a more *ad hoc* basis.

Such an event was not without risks. Inter-disciplinarity is often automatically seen as an indicator of progressive intellectual endeavour, but there are challenges to producing such a one-off encounter. As organisers we, Timo Heikkinen from the Finnish Society for Housing and Planning and Eeva Berglund from the Anthropological Society, knew there was overlap between the theoretical references used across different disciplines, and we knew much of the empirical terrain would be congruent. But this was no guarantee of enhancing understanding. We suspected many anthropologists would benefit from a better understanding of urban governance, but how many really are interested in planning? We knew planning researchers were curious about anthropology's methods and foci, but would they really engage with what anthropologists saw as the core issues? And would anthropologists even agree on what these were?

As soon as we had found interested speakers we launched the dialogue by sending them each others' work on areas where research interests overlap. One of the anthropologists, Simone Abram, has specialised in the study of planning institutions, another Gisa Weszkalnys in planning outcomes, and the third overseas guest, sociologist Agnès Deboulet in the study of urban conflicts. The planning researchers Marketta Kyttä,

Raine Mäntysalo and Lasse Peltonen have looked at applications of geographical information systems, planning institutions and planning conflicts respectively. The event thus comprised three dialogues between a pair of speakers focussing on the same issue: everyday life; professional (planning) institutions; participation and conflicts.

This being the product of informal conversations and funded by the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, the pressure to immediately produce an auditable or tangible "outcome" was less pressing. We would be able to foster dialogue before making grand pronouncements. The symposium underlined that creating more robust and sensitive research tools for both research and implementation was both an urgent and a demanding task. It showed that there is demand within planning research for anthropological input, but also that anthropology's image does not do justice to the already ample and important work that it has produced in this area. The audience, from a wide range of backgrounds, also had an opportunity to contribute and commentators from the three sponsoring learned societies offered their comments at the end of the symposium. This report summarises the day's discussion.

To open the symposium I reminded the audience of some of the shared challenges: sudden and unwelcome change in the built environment, inequality and spatial segregation, climate change, displacement and political marginalisation. I also drew the speakers' attention to the anthropological tradition of paying attention to the things that organise daily life, family, religion, festivals, in short, culture in all its dimensions. There were words of caution, too. Anthropologists are apt to act as if good description and good theory are the same thing. Also, ethnography on its own tends to become the grounds for anthropology's intellectual authority, not least in comparison with other scholarship, such as in this case. On the other hand planning theory, particularly that associated with the so-called communicative turn, which emphasises the role of planners as negotiators and cultural brokers between stakeholders, have tended towards a naivety about what culture might mean.

### **The contradictions of everyday existence (Berlin)**

Gisa Weszkalnys kicked off with an overview of her own work on the planning and development of Berlin's Alexanderplatz (Weszkalnys 2010), forming the first part of a session on place-based everyday experience. In the much-debated and potentially fraught post-reunification project to rebuild the large square, she was able to focus on a new set of questions, namely how "the Alex" is constituted as a place through practice. This approach owes much to Weszkalnys' familiarity with critical perspectives on ontology and concepts like Actor Networks and the performance of reality in science and technology studies and elsewhere (Collier and Ong 2005; Latour 1996, 2000).

Weszkalnys trained her detailed ethnographic attention specifically on contradictions and irreconcilable differences. Importantly, she did not take stakeholders as a given but approached the planning project by examining how they are made in the process of their management. Drawing on the example of "youth", she raised the question of people that cannot be reached by conventional processes of citizen participation, whether this is

due to social dynamics or to inadequate classification (not all stakeholders are recognised as such) or the limits of the bureaucratic imagination. By simply switching perspective she problematised the way planning issues were framed. She could also record instances of transformation, for instance where groups that were generally considered expert, like youth workers, themselves tacked backwards and forwards between claiming authority as experts and wanting to deny their expertise on the grounds that the youth they were seen to represent were really the best “experts of themselves”. And her ethnographic encounter with a modernist bureaucratic machinery highlighted how context-specific it is.

Alongside her contribution to anthropological analysis of complex, urban phenomena Weszkalnys work is a contribution to policy. She emphasised the need to develop planning in a way that acknowledges of conflict but also takes materiality seriously but not naively – matter organises life even as it is contingent. Planning, she suggested, should proceed in the kinds of conditions in which variety and existing discordances would not be ironed out into bland consensus, and it should recognise that there are many among those affected by planning who do not want to be enlisted as a “public”. She also raised the intriguing but perhaps typically anthropological propositions that one might do an ethnography of planning without looking at planning and that planning might proceed by not planning. Such questions arise often in the practical activity of ethnographic research but they also rest on the kind of work done by the one theorist whom she did mention, Annelise Riles (e.g. 2000). Riles is known for disciplined theorising that arises out of pairing seemingly unrelated domains – notably anthropology and modern law – and productively turning them “inside out” to reveal entities and choices that other approaches keep concealed.

### **Mapping subjective experience of place**

The next speaker, Marketta Kyttä echoed Weszkalnys in saying that materiality is poorly conceptualised in research on environmental experience. She noted that even in environmental psychology, her own disciplinary field, very little work took seriously the physical, material environment that is supposed to underlie the cognitive representations that are at the heart of its subject matter.

Her talk focussed on the research methodology she and her research team at Aalto University have developed to address this gap, SoftGIS, where the “soft” refers to adding qualitative, personal and perhaps contingent information about people’s experiences of a locality onto already existing huge databases of “hard” data in Geographical Information Systems (GIS). Could this mass of data, her group speculated, not be made more valuable to the planning professional by incorporating localised knowledge about inhabitants’ experiences?

The technology has been developed to enhance collaborative planning in practice (Kahila and Kyttä 2009) and is now being progressed for online use. It has won international attention, approval and collaborators in the process. SoftGIS enables residents to pin point places that are meaningful to them on a map and to report on a range of subjective experiences: “the area feels unsafe/safe”, “the surroundings are untidy/well kept” and

so on. In analysing responses, it has become clear that context or "localisation" matters.

Interpreting respondents' answers a demanding process in itself. Similar looking "hard" data from Japan and Finland – e.g. population density or proximity of shops – produce systematically contrasting SoftGIS responses. Acknowledging the problems associated with using such large datasets and with translating qualitative into quantitative information, Kyttä argued for adopting their methodology as part of municipal planning work, perhaps together with ethnographic methods.

### **Participation, ethnography and 'the public'**

One important point that ensuing debate returned to over and over, was the suitability of each method and the criteria by which results could be assessed. Ethnographic and SoftGIS methods might, it seemed, be fruitfully combined. However, Minna Ruckenstein emphasised the absence of social relations in the SoftGIS data, and suggested that bringing ethnography to the process could mean leaving the contextualising work to anthropology rather than integrating it into the analysis. Indeed, the point that ethnography and anthropology are often used to "outsource" the understanding of relations and contextual factors cropped up again and again. On the other hand, as Weszkalnys said, the aim of ethnographic research can be to become more explicit about where SoftGIS gets its questions and how groups of respondents are identified, that is, constituted. In other words, it is not just the interpretation of results that demands the kind of sensitivity associated with qualitative research, but the design of the tool itself, the process of identifying what the problems are and who can be considered representative.

Discussion also turned to using these methods as a way of accessing the public, in particular when "the public" is known to be heterogeneous and, at least implicitly it seemed, impossible to serve in a truly equitable fashion. Ethnography or SoftGIS could, it was implied, be preliminaries or aspects of public participation, a currently prominent planning challenge for planning.

### **Culture in practice and in theory**

While there was much contemplation of how to integrate ethnographic insights with other research methods, Simone Abram pointed out that ethnographic methods were hardly the only possible contribution that anthropology could offer planning. She pointed out that what planners are doing is trying to categorise members of the public. People being drawn into participation exercises meanwhile are trying to categorise what planners are trying to achieve. Categories and misunderstandings proliferate. Abram argued that planning then creates dilemmas for itself by the way it sets out its problem, for example accessing the "right" categories of people. Fundamentally, planning builds its authority on successful and extensive participation when there is no conceptual model for how to integrate the authority of a participatory process in the democratic system. The problem here, Abram argued, wasn't so much the practical challenge of reaching the public, as the theoretical problem of knowing how to be accountable in a democracy. The comments indicated that the problems are familiar to planning researchers.

Raine Mäntysalo challenged the disciplines to consider the cultural dimensions of environmental perception. This debate was cut short by lack of time, but the exchange did demonstrate that where planners can conceptualise culture as one dimension of the human experience alongside others, an anthropologist has a more dispersed notion of what it is. In fact, it is so dispersed that we cannot identify it as a category on which to do research, it penetrates everything. And yet at the same time we recognise the term's historical and theoretical contexts and their specificities.

On reflection Mäntysalo's question highlighted the specifically anthropological task most awkwardly and so most provocatively. Anthropologists appear once again comfortable with diffuse and complex uses of one of their disciplinary core term, culture. At the same time there is justified resistance to for the way other types of intellectual endeavour can simply add culture on to their notionally non-cultural findings. Is this tension between theorised and unreflective conceptions of culture a problem? This was left hanging in the air, but Abram has investigated the problem in print (Abram 2011a, 2011b). By making partial connections but leaving a discernible gap between methodological principles and ways of identifying research needs, the symposium's first session certainly helped map the outlines of current work and research needs on everyday life and local knowledge.

### **Actor Network Theory and new ethnographic objects**

The second session, on professional institutions, had Simone Abram and Raine Mäntysalo bouncing off questions and ideas in what came across almost as a choreographed performance spanning the width of the room and delivered without notes or power points. We did, however, get a diagrammatic representation on a flip-chart, of planning-in-action as discussed by Bent Flyvbjerg in his influential *Rationality and Power* from 1998. This empirically grounded and damning critique of the assumed technocratic proficiency of the profession argued that in reality planners mostly serve the needs of power by rationalising *ad hoc* and politically inflected decisions and so giving the planning process some political legitimacy. The book is familiar to many anthropologists and does contain much that overlaps with anthropological preoccupations.

The session thus chewed on the big question that presented itself in the first session: how can one conceptualise the realpolitik of planning without becoming cynical or falling into naïve fallacies? These may be rooted in disciplinary features, like the "paranoid fallacy" (Lukes 2005, cited in Mäntysalo and Saglie 2010: 331) among planning theorists perhaps. Anthropologists in turn know about the ethnographic fallacy, the unfounded assumption that there must always be a significant gulf between "official truths" and what a good ethnographer can find out.

Resisting the view that anthropology's only contribution is detailed ethnographic evidence, Abram gave insight into other possible anthropological contributions. Her own career demonstrates that it really can reach into the organisation of contemporary life, structured as it is around different spatial scale, complex and mobile social arrangements and highly specialised professional domains. Unlike a planner an

anthropologist is not, as she put it, interested in making better planners or plans, but in exploring and challenging the concepts on which these are based, the myths a professional institution tells about itself.

Acknowledging classic anthropological inspirations like Mary Douglas Abram's empirical project of understanding planning has proceeded by drawing imaginatively from frameworks such as Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Science and Technology Studies (STS), notably as developed by Bruno Latour. Although her work focuses very much on space, this way she has shifted the definition of the ethnographic field away from the geographical area to the plan. The plan is the operative idea that draws people together and so it can become the ethnographic object.

Important differences in the anthropologists' and planning researchers' agendas were highlighted. If the anthropological norm is to be a critic of institutional myths, the planning researcher has an obligation to support the institution of planning. And yet, as Mäntysalo pointed out, it is but a small step from being critical to being normative. On reflection, this very nexus is one of the many insights that can be gleaned from Latour's already iconic *We Have Never Been Modern* 1991 (*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*).

### **Local specifics and the ahistoricism of the New Public Management**

Anyone concerned with planning is likely to have an interest in New Public Management (NPM) discourse, and with the tensions that arise as practices labelled with common NPM signifiers enter existing institutional frameworks. Many anthropologists recognize the situation but take somewhat different trajectories in their approaches. Mäntysalo argued that NPM can often put planners in extremely difficult situations and planning research is in a "hopeless" situation. Abram offered a different possibility, that of building simultaneously on micro-level ethnography and multi-scalar analyses to illuminate the impossibilities of the very norms which planners are required to fulfil. From this point of view the "problems" the Norwegian planners she researched were experiencing could never be resolved by doing planning work "better". Change would not come from doing, say public participation better, because that was not where the problem was located. So long as neo-liberal pressures towards privatisation and market principles dominate, ideals of participation and collaboration cannot produce "answers" so much as create "problems". In a perhaps typical anthropological move one might most constructively focus away from this problem, and reconfigure the situation differently. It might help to be an anthropologist, Abram noted, but it isn't necessary. Furthermore, the issues raised are not unique to planning. The contradictions of dominant economic practice create real problems in many areas to do with social relations and social reproduction, but these are open to analysis. This observation of course opens up important and ample new terrain for anthropology (e.g. Ruckenstein et al. 2011).

Something like this was implied in Professor Christer Bengs' suggestion to redefine the problem. The problem, he said, is not planning but how we produce our cities. An affinity with an anthropological approach also came out in Bengs' suggestion the institution of planning can profitably be researched via historical comparison as a legal institution. This would show that planning in the Nordic countries in the last 100 years has been

transformed from planning for people into planning for investors. The questions planners ask themselves about how to achieve better communication and more participation are thus really rather irrelevant. The prominence of concerns over process – notably participation – serves the interests of business above all, who need clear administrative rules. Participation then has little to do with democratic politics.

One of the session's clearest messages was that the planning process could not be investigated in isolation from politics or from history. Planning practitioners who manage even in difficult situations rely on local and pragmatic capacities as well as on abstract learning. The problem in recent times has been that so much is imposed on planning regimes from outside. NPM and participatory planning were highlighted, but academic fashions are also problematic for the profession. The American planning professor John Forester, for example, much admired in Finland and Britain, has based his work purely on the USA's experience. Since there the only authority planners have is as mediators and brokers, little wonder that they are particularly likely to want to enhance communication and participation methods, but elsewhere the context for planning practice can be markedly different.

The discussion also embraced questions about communication in a different way. In practice at least in the UK, people are required to learn from and listen carefully to planners more than the other way around. Participants of the symposium argued that here too there is much to be learned from comparisons. For instance there are areas in Africa, where the actual production of urban infrastructure requires community participation not only in words but in actions. The authorities in poor cities simply cannot implement planning projects without people (perhaps a bit like Finland's "hartiapankki" concept of self-build supported by a local authority). Another important issue that came up were the development pressures that displace existing communities in urban areas.

### **Popular participation in 'sensitive' areas of the French metropolis**

The need for more comparative research was endorsed by the symposium's final pair of speakers, Agn s Deboulet and Lasse Peltonen who looked at participation and conflicts in planning.

From talk of tokenistic participation the symposium moved onto an example of participation as genuinely transformative in Deboulet's case study of conflicts over urban renewal in France. The massive government program, PNRU (*Programme national de r novation urbaine*) involves demolition and reconstruction of 400 000 units over ten years (see Deboulet 2006). The stated ambition of the policy was to enhance social mix in neighbourhoods considered "sensitive" or, in unofficial terms, where in most cases workers and immigrants concentrate and which are seen as in danger of becoming ghettos. As elsewhere, this brings displacement and distressing experiences of vulnerability.

Deboulet noted that the agency responsible for implementing the policy had expected to find support for their aims of rehabilitation and bringing back a sense of privacy and enclosure and for demolishing high-rise buildings which had become symbols of urban decay. Instead, they got resistance. The populations in the affected neighbourhoods were certainly

keen on change, but not as dictated from above. Although expressions of discontent and active mobilisation had given way in many of the affected areas to apathy, the demolitions reversed the trend.

Deboulet's case study was from La Coudraie which became a success story of resistance to demolition. Home to mostly residents of Moroccan, Kurdish and Turkish origin, it is located near Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, one of the twentieth century's most famous architectural icons. It was the first place where the new urban renewal policy was reversed, initially through new elections and then through successfully integrating participation into the programme.

The research team, including students of architecture and planning, engaged in a kind of advocacy planning, not unlike anthropology's action research. The research team involved planners and residents first in developing internal discourses about neighbourhood change, but also in devising new proposals. They demonstrated, in a technical, architectural sense, that the level of deterioration in the area did not require complete demolition. In collaboration with professional cartoonists they helped residents regain a voice.

Once again the social science approach emphasized genuine clashes, including deep disagreements about the common good, what is beautiful, even what is logical and illogical. Deboulet also insisted that these led to new kinds of participatory processes that went well beyond the usual articulate and confident middle-class participants. The clashes brought into the open by the programme produced new mobilisation among renters' associations, ironically bringing not just new energy but a new social mix into the area. This included wealthy people and students who came into the neighbourhood to support the emerging urban movement. From a comparative perspective it transpired that participation arises in France out of histories of conflict further raising comparative questions about the role of planners but also anthropologists and sociologists. In answer to her own question, Deboulet suggested that conflict resolution is not something these groups can aim for. Rather, they can support and help give voice and a sense to residents that they can be recognised as experts of their own environment.

### **Inter-urban competition, conflict and varieties of participation**

If Deboulet's example was a case of unplanned participation "from the outside", Lasse Peltonen's presentation showed how much work is invested in Finland in planning participation "from the inside". In his extensive work on land use conflicts in Finland, Peltonen has seen that this kind of participation is seldom considered satisfactory (Peltonen and Sairinen 2010), but he also reported that planners themselves think planning has become more conflictual. Despite this, he reported that planning as an institution and planning legislation barely acknowledges conflict. The simple fact of documenting and analysing it, and giving practitioners a vocabulary with which to conceptualise conflicts and impasses is itself transforming Finnish planning and politics.

Peltonen took his inspiration particularly from John Forester's famous book, *Planning in the Face of Power* (1988) and his ideas about conflict mediation. If you are serious about creating a consensus – deciding what

will be done – you do need negotiation rather than bringing people together into the same room to shout and then go home. The idea that a public hearing is like a meeting from hell, was recognized by the gathered audience. Peltonen provided a more structured conceptualisation based on Forester's *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Disputes* from 2009, which addresses not just the planners' experience, but the social relations of planning conflicts more generally. And here Peltonen made a plea that anthropologists might well welcome: alongside the fashionable focus on communication, knowledge or framing and on the competencies of planning professionals, the debate could do with some old-fashioned concepts like interests, money, who owns what and so on. Deboulet echoed this saying that there are massive similarities in the conditions being faced by residents facing demolition and eviction. The competitive agendas of cities mean that residents suffer while planners are held responsible for problematic economic injunctions from very high indeed.

The significance of local conditions for how participation plays out in the real world again became a prominent theme. Empirical examples show huge contrasts between, for instance Deboulet's case study and local knowledge that can be profoundly parochial and anti-progressive. Another question raised was what a planner could do and whether or not a broadly American conception of planner-as-mediator is constructive. Deboulet noted that Forester was not at all invoked among French researchers. Indeed, planning is still seen as a primarily technical matter, a view that encompasses participation which has its own technical experts. But she had an anecdote about how her students in fact did become mediators of a sort. Two of her students did their diploma on La Coudraie, showing that it is possible to bring new solutions and not simply counter others' suggestions. These two students decided to call themselves *Assistants à la maîtrise d'usage*, making a play on the language of government policy. Deboulet explained that a *maîtrise d'ouvrage* is the one who decides the works that need to be done for municipalities, e.g. schools or buildings, while a *maitre d'oeuvres* is an architect. As laid out in French planning law, the former decides the building and the program and the latter the design. But her students called themselves *assistants* not to *ouvrage* but *usage* (use), highlighting the importance of mastering, understanding, the use and users of a building, the dwellers, in short. Importantly, their role as a buffer between the different sides in the conflict was a constructive one, a role that she has advocated for students elsewhere too.

### **The commentators: disagreements and common ground**

In the final session Anssi Joutsiniemi, representing the Finnish Society for Housing and Planning, chief editor of *YSS / Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu*. Director of EDGE Urban Research Laboratory/Tampere University of Technology, Terhi Pietiläinen from the Finnish Society for Urban Studies, graduate student in ethnology, University of Helsinki and Pekka Tuominen, Ph.D. Candidate at Helsinki University's Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, representing the Finnish Anthropological Society, responded to the day's discussion.

Joutsiniemi, whose concern is for good plans, as he said, "agreed with almost everything" he had heard in the symposium and added that the rise of participatory planning has made it uncomfortable to be an

architect-planner. Furthermore, as a resident, he would prefer to have experts produce good plans rather than be given the opportunity to participate in the production of poor plans. From an institutional perspective, he argued, "something needs to be done". This could go in the direction of challenging the expertise or of challenging the decision making. Alas, this is the hard part.

Pietiläinen confessed that she "loves participation". Her comments supported the observations made about the existence of much participatory policy but little genuine engagement. Her own work among Karelian refugees in the Lahti area had demonstrated to her that ordinary people's experience was still missing from Finnish debate.

As an anthropologist studying urbanity in Istanbul, Pekka Tuominen found it fascinating that he could relate to all the presentations so easily. He had expected the day to pit anthropologists against planners, but was proved wrong. He made the perhaps startling observation that the word gentrification was never mentioned. If in his research context "everyone is talking about it" it has also been a prime motif of critical urban studies, including ethnographic work, in recent years. He also reiterated the warning against bundling cultural dimensions of planning into their own box and, as it were, outsourcing them to an anthropologist. All research should be able to highlight local, everyday knowledge, and to use the privilege of switching perspective and reframing categories. On the other hand, he noted that a tool like SoftGIS might have been a huge asset to his own first steps in the field.

### **Towards an anthropology of the rich and powerful?**

The closing discussion demonstrated that although anthropology has studied modern institutions extensively, its image beyond the discipline makes it unlikely that researchers of planning and other bureaucracies would find or take up this potentially helpful, already existing material. In that sense, the flow of information on the day had made it a success as a "trading zone" of intellectual ideas. Furthermore, there was an explicit invitation to anthropologists to study not just planners but real-estate developers and landowners and so on. The very success across contemporary life, of neo-liberal ideas and New Public Management, seems to have made it even more necessary for researchers to find the tools to identify problems in ways that do not prejudge the solutions – there are ways to counter debilitating calls for improved efficiency and more transparency. As Peltonen noted, it seems that anthropology has been focussed – or has appeared to focus – on poverty and deprivation, but that evidently it has tools to say important things about the rich and powerful too.

Ultimately, the messages of the symposium defies summing up. In an introductory, perhaps even experimental setting, this should in no way mean that it was not a success. Ideas for new research projects and agendas included comparative study, both geographical and historical on the one hand, and the conceptual working through of how contemporary democracy could truly and constructively deal with the tensions between participation and representation.

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