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Viewpoint

Flexible spaces as a "third way" forward for planning urban shared spaces

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1. Introduction

Once the site of a small but active urban scene, downtown Christchurch, New Zealand, tends to be quiet most evenings, since the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes flattened much of its center. And while a scattered handful of clubs, restaurants, and cafés continue to draw nightlife downtown, Christchurch's dominant features are now the vast number of compromised structures and vacant lots where earthquake damaged buildings once stood.

This setting made the scene at Christchurch's "Dance-o-Mat" one evening in the Fall of 2016 all the more incongruous. In a field of rubble where a high-rise once stood, the Dance-O-Mat is an oasis of light, sound, and motion in the midst of an otherwise inanimate nocturnal urban landscape. Created by "Gap Filler" a local non-profit group dedicated to bringing life and art to the city's numerous empty spaces, the Dance-o-Mat consists of an open-air dance floor with floodlights and loudspeakers, a mirror ball, and a re-purposed coin-operated washing machine sporting an audio jack. Inserting a $2NZD coin into the slot of the washing machine activates the lights and speakers, allowing users to plug a music player into the system for an impromptu public dance party. This particular Saturday night has seen half a dozen local teenagers, a pair of international artists, a family from the US with two small children, and a mob of jovial North Islanders all sharing the floor, dancing to a mix of hip-hop, classic disco, and Japanese lounge/techno in an increasingly interactive, ebullient, and multi-generational street party. And this evening is no anomaly. This experimental project is currently seeing almost 2000 activations per year and may become an international franchise with new Dance-O-Mats in Canadian and Australian cities (Gates, 2015).

While unique, the Dance-O-Mat is emblematic of a new generation of what we describe as "Flexible Spaces" in cities with a surplus of underused, abandoned, or vacant space, along with a need for urban revitalization. Such experiments are often characterized by their limited duration, temporary use of borrowed land, and experimental, community driven design and operation. This study interrogates the possibility of using such "Flexible Spaces" as tools for pursuing a third-way of engaging in urban planning for shared space, instead of conventional expert-led and procedural-participatory frameworks.

Specifically, we propose a framework for creating Flexible Spaces that are minimally regulated, reconfigurable and democratically available on a rotating basis to individuals and groups who wish to use those spaces for activities of a limited spatial and temporal tenancy. By enabling a broad range of users to engage in the ongoing creation and management of the built environment, free from most of the traditional processes of land use regulation, Flexible Spaces potentially offer a new approach that can sidestep many longstanding shortcomings of planning. We address these shortcomings in Section 2. Section 3 outlines what a coherent approach to planning through Flexible Space might look like, based upon a set of conceptual guides. Section 4 examines how Flexible Space can help address the endemic problems of planning. Finally, Section 5 offers a series of empirical case studies to illustrate how and why these conceptual guides can offer a new, "third way" to plan.

2. The problems with planning

Traditional planning seeks to base policy decisions on processes that go beyond political exigency or executive authority. Although there are a number of well-established contemporary approaches to planning, they are distinguished by where they place ultimate discretion over the analysis and evaluation of policy decisions, generally within two distinct frameworks; the expert-led and the public participation models (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Day, 1997; Fagence, 1977; Innes, 1996; Juarez & Brown, 2008). In expert-led frameworks, decision-

making is based on urban planners' expertise; whereas public participation frameworks are intended to generate opportunities for citizens and communities to express their needs and offer their knowledge with planners mediating those processes.

In countries of the core, dominant planning approaches have evolved in response to broader social dynamics. The post-World War II faith in science and expert knowledge led to practices that vested authority in professional planners (Brooks, 2002; Filion, 2001; Taylor, 1998). The subsequent backlash against the worst of 1950s and 1960s expert driven planning – including urban renewal and dysfunctional modernist "vertical slums" – reflected a broader challenge to the postwar status quo and the disempowerment of marginalized populations. Critics of conventional approaches excoriated the anti-democratic vesting of authority in planners, and the resulting class and racial bias animating much of their work (Harvey, 1978). Planning education began to rethink planning as a tool for providing communities both a voice in the policy decisions affecting them, and an opportunity to share their knowledge of their own neighborhoods and needs (Brooks, 2002). The resulting procedural-participatory model rapidly gained political momentum as a vehicle to incorporate stakeholders into the decision-making process (Arnstein, 1969; Brooks, 2002). Under this model, governments describe major projects in early planning stages, and give citizens opportunities to provide feedback throughout decision-making, development and implementation. The planner's resulting role has shifted towards the 'mediator expert', combining the interpretation of citizen feedback with support of community decision-making (Campbell & Marshall, 1999).

Notwithstanding planners' best efforts, the procedural-participatory model has, in practice, fallen short of its ideals of opening up urban planning to those who have long been excluded due to a lack of economic, cultural and/or political power. It often fails to enhance public participation, include disfranchised communities, or create meaningful opportunities for their input, (Carson, 2011; Day, 1997; Juarez & Brown, 2008; Reddel & Woolcock, 2004). While planners and theorists have attempted to address these shortcomings by proposing intensive communication, collaboration, and deliberation processes (Anderson, Cissna, & Clune, 2003; Campbell & Marshall, 1999; Dennis, 2006; Forester, 1999), wealthy, well-connected, and/or well-organized stakeholders [referred herein as "elites"] nonetheless remain able to drive planning outcomes (Maginn, 2007) reinforcing the sense that planning simply serves to legitimate the preferences of powerful stakeholders (Carr, 2014). Additionally, the tendency of individuals to reject uncertainties associated with changes to their environments has made "NIMBYism" – the insistence that change happen "not in my back yard" – inescapable, impeding essential policies and investments (Barlow, 1995; Devine-Wright, 2009; Lake, 2007).

The coexistence of these two paradigms has led to a structural contradiction within planning practice. Notwithstanding the ostensible dominance of the procedural-participatory model, the expert-led approach continues to pervade the planning profession (see, e.g., Ellis, 2005). And while public input based processes remain "best practices" (Slater, 1984), planners simultaneously incorporate those approaches with expert-led practices at a variety levels (Brody et al., 2003) with planners and policy makers able to vary the discretionary authority vested in the public (or even sub-groups of the public) depending on when and how each approach is mobilized (Carr, 2014). By enabling planners to shift discretionary authority between the public, elites, and other stakeholders on an ad-hoc basis, contemporary planning often combines the worst of both approaches, putting the public through intensive processes while disregarding their input when it is not aligned with the interests of more powerful constituencies (Carr, 2012). Moreover, a growing literature affirms planners' longstanding complaints that politicians often undermine even the best designed planning processes (Anderson et al., 2003; Carr, 2014; Cuthill, 2004; Innes & Booher, 2004).

It is unfair, however, to lay the blame for planning's ills entirely at the feet of individual planners, or the planning discipline. Because planners occupy an uncomfortable space between the governed and those who govern, it is unsurprising that they often have limited influence on either. Indeed, it has been argued that even though politicians, the public, and even planners themselves have seen planning as a flawed project, contemporary approaches persist because they enable elected officials to enact policy while avoiding the wrath of powerful stakeholders (Carr, 2012) and the greater voting public (Carr, 2014).

Further critiques of planning are rooted in forces as broad as the working of real estate markets, and as intimate as those of human psychology. Given the permeability of planning to politics, it is unsurprising that Marxist critics have treated planning as a tool of capitalism, while highlighting the inability of conventional planning to alter existing land use patterns driven by capital investment (Harvey, 2003). Moreover, there is a growing concern that stakeholders are often poorly situated to meaningfully participate in planning, as humans often fail to accurately predict whether planning outcomes will be satisfactory once implemented (Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989). In turn, this tendency may be seen as fueling NIMBY resistance to even the most democratically and carefully articulated planning outputs.

These critiques indicate the extent to which contemporary planning suffers from a host of largely unresolved structural problems. These include:

1) The tendency of planners to pre-determine outcomes, bringing their own biases and predisposed approaches to planning exercises;
2) The failure of urban planning to integrate truly democratic representation in decision-making;
3) The tendency of economic, political, and cultural elites to overly influence planning outcomes;
4) The inability of stakeholders to accurately envision how they will be impacted by proposed planning outcomes;
5) The inescapability of NIMBY resistance;
6) The failure of elected officials and other governmental actors to translate planning outcomes into policy;
7) And the limits that logics of private property and capital investment place upon planning.

Accordingly, any alternative to conventional planning approaches should seek to address some, if not all, of these entrenched problems.

3. Flexible Space defined

Our proposed elements for a definition of Flexible Space were developed through an extended series of observations in a variety of international contexts, including site visits in Australia and USA and extended periods of residence in Japan and New Zealand. We have drawn upon our experiences to analyse a range of flexible spaces emerging in different cities across diverse socio-cultural, political, economic, and environmental contexts.

Based on our analysis of the case studies outlined below, we offer the following characteristics of Flexible Space as a starting point for envisioning how consciously created environments that integrate alternative approaches to tenancy, use, exclusivity, and imagination might address some of the failures of conventional planning. Flexible Spaces are intended to offer reconfigurable, rotating, non-permanent, non-exclusive forms of land use that enable a broad range of spatial experiments. For convenience, we describe individuals or groups who exercise a period of management over Flexible Spaces as "activators", and those for whom the space is created and/or who end up using the space as "users". Additionally, some Flexible Spaces may need 'administrators': individuals or groups who intermediate between potential activators, users and other parties, such as landowners or governmental authorities. Ideally, activators and administrators are part of the communities where Flexible spaces emerge, endeavoring to address recognised problems felt by the broader community. We offer the