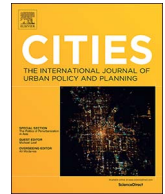


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Cities

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Informal democracy in Patras, Greece: A mechanism for improved planning?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Informal planning
Communicative rationality
Test planning method
Greece

ABSTRACT

Greek spatial planning reality faces the problems like sprawl and illegal settlements outside the building zones, underpinned by the conventional self-financed real estate development model under the patronage of the national government. In case of transportation congestion problems, the formal planning proved to be even more ineffective and unpopular. Therefore, non-institutionalized supplement to formal planning is considered highly effective: informal planning relies upon the principles of collaborative dialogue, networks and trustful relationships among the relevant players. The article describes the informal planning procedure – the test planning method – analyzed against the theoretical background of communicative rationality, on the one hand, and critically assessed through the practical implementation in the case of Peloponnesian city of Patras on the other. As a result, the article highlights the successful phases of the test planning, nevertheless pointing to its shortcomings, which could be expected in the societies with a dominant political cronyism.

1. Introduction: spatial challenges in Greece

In recent years, global socio-economic transformations have strongly challenged the spatial planning practice. The countries of Eastern and Southern Europe in particular have experienced a prolonged economic crisis with tremendous impact on numerous facilities, services, and infrastructures. Increasing demand for housing, the provision of low-interest mortgages, and the significant, but not sustainable investments in major urban projects manifest the crisis unevenly across space (Papaioannou & Nikolakopoulou, 2016). The relatively inexpensive mortgage credit encouraged households to purchase homes built on greenfield sites across Greece, while regional and local governments neglected planning policies promoting sustainable compact land development (Getimis & Giannakourou, 2014; Giannakourou, 2011). In fact, the authorities overlooked the costs of sprawl feeding political patronage, thus spreading risk to overextended homeowners living on the urban edge (Zifou, 2015). In late 2009 international financial markets collapsed stranding millions of new owners with speculative debt few could sustain. The results were catastrophic for southern economies generating a prolonged recession. Massive state-financed rescue and recapitalization of the financial system staved off complete collapse. Modest national government fiscal stimuli attempted to stimulate economic growth and reduce unemployment (Hadjimichalis, 2011). The shock wave crippled Greece: not only it had too much private debt ended up in speculative private real estate investment, but national (and regional/local) governments had borrowed

to fund infrastructure that encouraged such inefficient development – for instance, building roads for unsustainable sprawling development rather than trains for compact sustainable development (Zifou, 2015). Regional and local spatial problems in Greece result from practices largely indifferent to spatial planning, but sensitive to the private plans of lenders and developers with ties to local political elites (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2016; Romero, Jiménez, & Viloría, 2012).

Current spatial problems flow from the complexity of interactions among hierarchical levels of political and economic competition among private firms (developers, lenders, investors, land owners), households (owners, renters), political organizations (political parties, advocacy groups, non-profits) and public officials (elected, administrators, professionals). All these agents make plans, but the ensuing decisions are neither transparent nor coordinated. Ironically, state administrative bodies and public organizations responsible for strategic spatial planning miss opportunities for democratic cooperation that might reduce unnecessary conflicts and delays for important infrastructure projects (Papamichail, 2015; Pappas, Kalamiotis, & Karidi, 2013). Free for all privatization encourages inefficient outsourcing and speculation as private plans pay lip service to environmental sustainability and public accountability (Getimis & Giannakourou, 2014; Reimer, Getimis, & Blotevogel, 2014). The HRADF (Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund) created with effusive liberal rhetoric encouraged speculative peripheral development and then changed the laws to make low quality unsustainable projects legitimate. Public sector planners responsible for assuring the quality of future spatial development have not done much

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.12.023>

Received 17 August 2017; Received in revised form 30 December 2017; Accepted 31 December 2017
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to resist these efforts. Worse, some invite corrupt practices to approve substandard development (Giannakourou, 2011).

The liberal privatization efforts were supposed to replace the tradition of centralized bureaucratic planning that did little to support the efficacy of practical democracy for spatial planning in Greece. But the reformers used the rhetoric of democratic reform to undermine the requirements for a truly democratic spatial planning. The nation that invented democracy must take steps to revive and practice it. This starts with including citizens in collaborative initiatives where public and private interests intersect as plans for places (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009). The decentralization of spatial planning responsibilities to regional and local authorities in the 1990s proposed procedural mechanisms for citizen involvement in spatial planning (Giannakourou, 2011). But these did not take hold because local professionals remained tied to an urbanism tradition that focused on regulating physical form rather than making spatial plans (Newman & Thornley, 1996). The bureaucratic administrative culture dominates practice encouraging reliance on narrow disciplinary expertise unable and unwilling to cope with the increasingly complex spatial problems that pose recurring crises for regions and localities (Pappas, 2017).

Take for instance the problem of transportation congestion and recent large-scale projects to remedy the problem including the Hellinikon (the former main airport of Athens) redevelopment (Komninos, 2014; Milonias, 2010), the construction of the new metro line in Thessaloniki (Roukouni, Basbas, Stephanis, & Mintsis, 2016), or the proposed railway development in Patras (Papamichail, 2015). Each took years to plan with little collaboration and in each case the proposed solution proved both unpopular and ineffective. The reasons behind such a situation are in public plans that followed formal conventions. Formal planning retains the top-down approach focused on privileged political interests, thus often unrelated to the complex causes and interests shaping the regional spatial problem. This affects the attention of local government planners who also remain attached to disciplinary conventions that treat plans as physical blueprints rather than strategic guides for multiple agents. On top of these, the effects of privatization embrace the speculation and corruption. In sum, formal planning proved unable to integrate and resolve conflict among competing interests. Therefore, informal practices that focus on setting and solving spatial problems collaboratively may offer practical remedies for complex spatial problems (Pappas, 2017; Scholl, 2017).

Briefly put, informal planning activities sacrifice authority for responsibility. Instead of focusing on what you can control you focus on those whose actions shape the future consequences for a spatial planning situation (e.g., the flooding, the traffic, etc.), as well as those who will bear most of these consequences. Current formal conventions usually keep the people in these respective social positions and locations apart. Informal action brings some of these people together to collaborate making plans for the place. The formal planning process gets squeezed between the contest of political elections and the competition of economic investment. The informal approach invites politicians and investors to join in temporary collaboration without the strictures of formal roles. The collaboration is democratic and focused on deliberation among these participants. The payoff is not increased power, but improved judgment about what to do as each learn from one another to conceive and compare problems and solutions for a place that combines causal assessment and political judgment (Briassoulis, 1997; Scholl, 2017).

In general, the attribute of informality of the planning process has been gaining its importance with the evolution of deliberative democracy as a context within which the process is embedded. This has both theoretical and practical implications. From the theoretical perspective, the informal planning revolves around the ‘collaborative-argumentative turn’ in planning (Forester, 1999; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1995, 1996). In practice, informal planning has been largely discussed and implemented (to various extent) in both the developed and developing societies (Buchner, Kohoutek, & Pamer, 2004; Foldi, 2006; Keresztély &

Scott, 2012; Scholl, 2017; Scholl, Staub, & Vinzens, 2013; Vojvodiková, 2010). This paper documents how the informal process was used to conduct spatial planning for a transportation problem in Greece. How well did informal planning work within the formal Greek system tie to the adversarial interests contesting for project influence in representative democracy?

The article first describes the spatial infrastructure problem for Patras, the third largest Greek city. Next comes the analysis of informal planning as a complement to the formal system and its cognitive and practical contributions. The central section explains the theoretical ideas animating the informal approach and how the test planning method put these principles to practical use organizing plan making for Patras. The concluding sections interpret the effectiveness of the informal approach arguing that informality works best for complex problems that formal systems cannot handle well.

2. The Patras case: spatial and infrastructural discrepancies

Once the main trading and cultural hub in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Patras lacks interregional railway connections with Athens. Formal system plans promote Patras as a national strategic corridor of PATHE (Patras-Athens-Thessaloniki-Eidomeni) that will bridge the East-West division of high-performance transport infrastructures. However, current plans for large-scale infrastructural projects include decisions by private actors like large private Chinese firms investing in port improvements for Piraeus and Thessaloniki. Formal planning system efforts plagued by administrative disagreements and political contests has produced competing unilateral project plans undermining hopes for coordination and failing to make the necessary adjustments to yield practical railway integration feasible and affordable. Protecting administrative turf and political authority excludes crucial actors while encouraging unrealistic options stuck in opposition to each other.

The main formal system actors – the OSE (Hellenic Railways Organization) and the ERGOSE¹ (the OSE subsidiary company in charge of real estate) – compete for authority. A rigid bureaucratic structure encourages top-down decision-making. This works fine for simple problems, but not for complex system problems that require an adaptive response combining a plurality of viewpoints, ideas and solutions including the interests and needs of relevant actors with a stake in the future. One set of formal actors promotes the plan for a tunnel – an expensive solution that fits the interests of a few powerful firms; even as other formal actors propose ground level solutions favoring competing interests. Neither adequately considers future consequences for relevant publics left out of the process. People interested in resolving the ongoing spatial transport problems cannot grasp the effects on the urban grid of a cut-and-cover² tunnel solution or other surface train alignments. The formal efforts possess legal authority, but neither take practical steps to assess the spatial distribution of financial, environmental and social risks and benefits nor provide assurance of responsibility for these impacts.

3. Informal planning

Spatial planning includes a structure of authority and a culture of responsibility. Adoption of formal plans by local governing bodies would yield publicly beneficial results. But when faced with complex

¹ The ERGOSE undertakes the management of OSE's Investment Program projects and in particular those co-funded by the EU Programs. The ERGOSE's tasks include planning, development, support, management, design, supervision, and construction of all types of projects for third parties in Greece and abroad, as well as land acquisition for the state or other public bodies.

² The length of the ramps for a train to dig in a tunnel (with a proper inclination) is about 600–800 m. This means that for a 1.5 km long tunnel across the historic city center, another 1.5 km of holes would divide residential areas. The estimated max. number of trains/day would be 2–3 per hour driving with a tram velocity through the residential areas.

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