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Editorial

Co-Creation and the City: Arts-Based Methods and Participatory Approaches in Urban Planning

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Abstract

This editorial for the thematic issue on “Co-Creation and the City: Arts-Based Methods and Participatory Approaches in Urban Planning” draws together the key themes of the ten articles in the issue. Firstly, the concept of Co-Creation is defined as a collective creative process involving artists, academics, and communities. Co-creation results in tangible or intangible outputs in the form of artwork or artefacts, and knowledge generated by multiple partners that, in a planning context, can feed into shared understandings of more socially just cities. The ten articles are summarized, and the emerging conclusions are drawn out, under three broad themes. The first set of conclusions deals with power imbalances and the risks of instrumentalization within co-creative processes. Contributors dismiss romanticizing assumptions that expect artistic practices to inevitably disrupt power hierarchies and strengthen democracy. The second set of outcomes relates to how arts-based strategies and methods can help address the translation of issues between urban planning and art. Finally, the third group of conclusions focuses on practices of listening within co-creation processes, raising the issue of voices that are less audible, rather than unheard or not listened to. In their concluding remarks, the authors recommend further research to be undertaken in this emerging field to explore the constraints and possibilities for urban planners to listen to arts-based expressions, in order to integrate a broader range of understandings and knowledge into plans for the city of the future.

Keywords

affective knowledge; arts-based methods; co-creation; communities; embodiment; listening; participatory planning; power asymmetry; situated knowledge

Issue

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1. Introduction

Across multiple disciplines, there is growing awareness of the importance of understanding experiential and embodied ways of knowing that go beyond conventional practices of knowledge generation. In the discipline of urban planning in particular, participatory practices have been experimented with in an attempt to move away from rational planning methodologies (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2005) and to embrace affective and subjective perspectives on place that can emerge through creative practices (Sandercock &

Attili, 2010). While creative, arts-based, and participatory approaches are generally believed to be inherently democratic, prompt thickened understandings of place, and encourage deeper community engagement in the planning process, in many cases they can also be hierarchical or co-opted by the power-holders.

There has been growing evidence, however, that applying arts-based methods within a communicative planning paradigm (Healey, 1997) at neighbourhood level can address some of the limitations of conventional approaches to planning. Recent experimentation with co-creation, in particular, has highlighted that arts-based

methods can contribute to produce situated and affective knowledges which in turn advance more inclusive understandings of place, that transcend conventional practices of consultation (Horvath & Carpenter, 2020). In this case, Co-Creation (with an upper case C) is defined as a collective creative process involving artists, academics, and communities resulting in tangible or intangible outputs in the form of artwork or artefacts, and knowledge generated by multiple partners that, in a planning context, can feed into shared understandings of more socially just cities (Carpenter et al., 2021).

While such arts-based approaches have proven useful to complement conventional understandings through their focus on previously unexplored issues such as social connectedness, they also pose a number of methodological challenges, issues which are contemplated by the articles in this thematic issue. Whether it be through the medium of drama (Larsen & Frandsen, 2022; Sachs Olsen, 2022), storytelling (Barbarino et al., 2022; Ortiz, 2022) or photography (Carpenter, 2022), this collection highlights the quest to find adequate ways to develop arts-based approaches and test their potential to contribute to planners' understandings of local knowledge production. They also draw attention to the power imbalances inherent within the planning system, which need to be mitigated in order to move towards more inclusive and socially-just cities.

2. Contributions From Each Article

This collection of articles uses the urban arena as an experimental field to explore how arts-based methods can contribute to creating fairer, more inclusive and sustainable cities. Contributors look at a variety of contexts ranging from Scandinavia to North and Latin America as well as Western Europe, identifying stakeholders whose voices tend to remain excluded from conventional processes of urban planning. These audiences range from marginalised urban communities and grassroots organisations to non-human species and inanimate objects, reflecting an experimentation to expand the definitions of community.

Sachs Olsen (2022) explores the potential of arts-based methods to develop a "multispecies placemaking." Drawing on a performative event in Norway, her article brings together theories and practices of the evolving field of multispecies art with the more established field of socially engaged art to discuss challenges of co-creation and participation from a new perspective. It concludes with a reflection on the possibilities of arts-based methods to foster not only methodological innovation within the field of placemaking, but also to suggest a re-thinking of what placemaking is and could be.

Larsen and Frandsen (2022) also focus on performative art practice in their assessment of a method that straddles political theatre, deliberative participation, and research, entitled "Free Trial!" Conceived by a

local non-governmental organisation in Copenhagen, the "Free Trial!" process highlights the role of advocacy, agonism, and liminality in addressing contentious issues in the urban arena. However, the authors question whether such a process can handle issues of imbalanced power relations in the city. Power is also a theme in Crisman's (2022) article on arts-based community organising in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, which draws on the example of a grassroots-driven co-creation process to show how empowered actors can listen and respond to community voices in urban development.

Carpenter (2022) focuses on the method of photovoice in her article, as a means of revealing otherwise obscured perspectives held by communities in marginalised neighbourhoods. Based on a case study in the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, the research shows that photovoice can potentially provide a means of reimagining place within the framework of participatory planning processes. However, she also demonstrates that there are limitations to the approach, bringing into sharp focus the ethical dimensions and challenges of participatory visual methodologies as a tool for engaging with communities in an urban planning context.

Gaete Cruz et al. (2022) take the example of urban landscape design to explore how a co-design process framework can bring together different stakeholders, in the setting of the Atacama Desert, Chile, to apply visual collaborative methods for design. They conclude that urban co-design methods have an important role to play in planning and implementing urban transformations. Urban transformation through arts-led urban development strategies is also a theme for Foster (2022), who looks in detail at the role of co-creation in arts-led strategies, taking the case of the Bristol Light Festival, UK. She highlights the important role of cultural ecologies and co-creation in urban planning practice that engages with the arts.

Wiberg (2022), for her part, draws on the example of a government-funded arts project in Sweden, which aimed to strengthen local democracy in areas with low voter turnout. Rather than discussing the project from a binary logic of empowered/disempowered, consensual/agonistic, or political/antipolitical, her contribution highlights a more complex and nuanced understanding of how artistic methods can contribute to situated knowledge production in urban planning.

In her article, Ortiz (2022) argues that urban planning and design more specifically have to innovate in their methodological repertoires, to include visual, digital, and performative storytelling which can challenge epistemic injustice. Taking a case study in Medellin, Colombia, she suggests that the role of storytelling is pivotal to achieving this overall aim, as storytelling helps to foster empathy, to understand the meaning of complex experiences, and to inspire action. Similarly, Barbarino et al. (2022) also experiment with the method of storytelling, in a case study from Wiesbaden, Germany. In their case, they use the medium of podcasts to bring together

different and, at times, opposing voices to explore communicative and agonistic approaches to co-creation and urban planning.

Finally, taking a literary perspective, Hawkins (2022) highlights the increased interest in applying literary methods to spatial design, and argues for a reconsideration of narrative methods for urban planning. Drawing on work by the architects Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò around the concept of the porous city, in particular in Greater Paris, Hawkins makes the case for a narrative of poetic practices within planning, highlighting their value in creating rapprochement between new possible futures.

3. Conclusions

The conclusions emerging from the ten articles contained in this issue can be grouped into three broad thematic categories. A first set of conclusions deals with power imbalances and risks of instrumentalization within co-creative processes. Contributors dismiss the romanticizing assumption that artistic practices will inevitably disrupt power hierarchies and strengthen democracy. Hawkins, for example, debunks the myth that storytelling carries positive values in itself and its use automatically enables planners to impose coherence to the urban landscape. Wiberg shows that commissioned art is not the panacea that public authorities hope for: a time-intensive process subject to uncertainties, it can however facilitate dialogues and raise new perspectives. Crisman also reveals that co-creation does not necessarily involve partners involved in vertical power relations. On the contrary, his case study in Little Tokyo points toward horizontal practices between equally empowered grassroots organisations who collaboratively influence urban outcomes through art.

A second set of outcomes is concerned with how arts-based strategies and methods can help address the translation of issues between urban planning and art. Thus, Gaete Cruz et al. advocate the use of visual collaborative methods to facilitate communication between planners and communities participating in the co-design of mixed sports functions in the Kaukari Urban Park project in Chile, while Foster shows how adopting a creative and cultural ecologies framework helped actors with asymmetric power relations negotiate their different social, cultural, and economic agendas while organising the Bristol Urban Light festival. Larsen and Frandsen's assessment of the performative conflict and power-mediation method "Free Trial!" not only reveals its potential to promote an agonistic mode of participation but also points to a broader societal need, vital for a pluralist democracy, to create alternative, parallel, or counter-institutions.

Finally, a third set of conclusions focuses on practices of listening within co-creation processes, raising the issue of voices that are less audible, rather than unheard or not listened to. Carpenter, for example, highlights that

the potential of photovoice to become a viable participatory planning method giving voice to the community greatly depends on planners' willingness to listen to such alternative modes of consultation. Similarly, Sachs Olsen reveals that a multispecies perspective can only fulfil its promise to establish relations of respect and solidarity if planners are ready to move away from conventional human-centric approaches to placemaking. Ortiz's case study reveals the power of storytelling methods to bring the interwoven stories of individuals and collectives to the fore and create atmospheres for "asymmetrical reciprocity" if not symmetrical power relations—but only if met with progressive attitudes to planning. Barbarino et al.'s reflection on podcast co-creation also exposes the centrality of attentive listening to giving space to emotions and personal experiences and perspectives.

This rich set of articles has brought to the fore some of the opportunities and challenges for integrating arts-based methods in urban planning. While the articles have uncovered key issues as we have outlined above, this is an area of research that is just emerging, and the findings from these articles highlight some of the gaps that need to be filled as the field of research evolves. In particular, we see great merit in pursuing further research into the politics of listening, at all political scales and more broadly, to address some of the limitations of applying arts-based methods in an urban planning context. This would include exploration of the constraints and possibilities for planners to listen and respond to arts-based expressions, in order to integrate a broader range of understandings and knowledge into plans for the city of the future.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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