Planning activism: Using Social Media to claim marginalized citizens’ right to the city

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**Abstract**

Finding a physical solution for complex social problems has been one of the dominant approaches in planning experiences since the beginning of the 20th century. Expansion of scientific rationality in social science is one of the theoretical foundations of these experiences that led to domination of comprehensive planning as rational and efficient way of doing planning in many cities. After Habermas introduces communicative rationality as an alternative for scientific rationality, many planners have tried to bring his idea in planning and define new roles for planners such as advocates, facilitators, and mediators. This paper does not aim to enter this discussion to define a formal role for planners in exiting planning structure, instead it introduces an informal role for planners as activists outside power structure and planning departments to pursue marginalized citizens’ right to the city. Planning activists, like other kinds of activist such as Human Right activists, work with marginalized citizens to raise their voices in existing decision-making processes and power structures. Since Information Technology and Social Media have revolutionized activists’ works in pursuing their causes around the world, this paper discuss how planning activists can use these tools to advocate both parts of citizens’ right to the city, which are right of participation and right of appropriation.

**Introduction**

From modernist experiences in the early 20th century to comprehensive approaches in the mid-20th century and recent experiences of New Urbanism, planning has often sought to find a physical solution for complex social problems. These approaches are rooted in modernist scientific rationality, which became dominant in the social sciences in the mid-20th century and has faced several criticisms in the last few decades. As an alternative to modernist scientific rationality, Habermas introduces the concept of communicative rationality and communicative action. Planning scholars bring this concept into planning as a theoretical and practical alternative to rational comprehensive approaches in planning. However, they face similar criticisms that Habermas has faced from Foucault and Foucauldian theorists because of the lack of consideration of power relations in different steps of the decision-making processes. Despite these criticisms, this new definition of planning has identified new roles for planners beyond that of rational technical expert, such as planner as advocate, planner as facilitator, and planner as mediator. (Friedmann, 1987). Most of these discussions are generated around the role that planners can play inside the mainstream planning structure. However, in the present paper, I introduce planning activism as a role that planners can play outside the dominant planning structure to support, advocate, empower, and mobilize local citizens to claim their marginalized interests based on their right to the city.

To define this new role for planners as activists, the current paper first investigates the literature that (a) defines right to the city as the basis of planning activists’ work, (b) supports the necessity of defining new roles for planners beyond that of rational technical expert, and (c) suggests urban social movements as a way to claim the right to the city. Based on this theoretical foundation, in the discussion section, I redefine the planners’ role as activists and explain how development in Information Technology and Social Media can facilitate their ability to advocate citizens’ right to the city, which includes both the right of participation and the right of appropriation.

**Theory**

Worldwide, people are protesting against existing power structures to claim their Human Rights. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which defines the fundamental rights that all humans worldwide are equally entitled to. Activists have used this concept to raise people’s awareness of their rights as humans and mobilize them to claim their rights as members of the society in which they live (e.g. the
Civil Rights, Women Rights, and Gay Rights Movements). But what about cities? Do all individuals who live in a city have an equal right to that city? If so, who can play the local activist role in local communities? How can planning activists act in parallel to Human Rights activists to raise citizens’ awareness of their rights to the city and mobilize them to claim these rights? These are some of the questions that I will address in this section by reviewing the relevant literature on the right to the city, planning roles, and urban social movements.

What is the right to the city?

‘Right to the city’ is the title of two different essays (the first written by Henri Lefebvre and the second by David Harvey), separated by a 40-year window. In 1968, Lefebvre defined ‘right to the city’ as ‘a cry and a demand’ and argued that it cannot be simply interpreted as a right to visit the city or return to the traditional city (Lefebvre, 1996a, 1996b). In Lefebvre’s definition, right to the city “can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre, 1996a, 1996b, 158). Approximately four decades later, Harvey expanded Lefebvre’s definition and made a stronger statement that “the right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it” (Harvey, 2003, 939). Even now, ‘a cry and a demand’ definition of Lefebvre is the foundation of many discussions about the right to the city. Marcuse (2009) is one of the scholars who has developed this definition and provided a clearer picture of the French philosopher’s intention by defining the right to the city as ‘a cry and a demand.’ A summary of Marcuse’s discussion about differences between cry and demand is summarized in the following table (Table 1).

The relationship between Human Rights as defined by the UN and the right to the city as defined by Lefebvre has been another question related to this topic. In 2008, UNESCO (UN Habitat) published a report, entitled “Urban Policies and the Right to the City,” to answer this question (Brown & Kristiansen, 2008). In this report, Brown and Kristiansen explain that “the right to the city is founded on the intrinsic values of human rights as initially defined in the UN Declaration, but does not form part of a human right regime” (Brown & Kristiansen, 2008, 17). The right to participate is a basis for the right to the city in Brown and Kristiansen’s definition. They argue that the right to the city is a vehicle for urban change; however, to elicit change, “citizens must claim [their] right of participation, and allow others the same right” (Brown & Kristiansen, 2008, 17). Finally, they identify five axes toward the right to the city, as follows: (1) access to benefits of city life and responsibilities to facilitate these rights; (2) transparency, equity, and efficacy in city administration; (3) participation and respect in local democratic decision-making; (4) recognition of diversity in economic, social, and cultural life; and (5) reducing poverty, social exclusion, and urban violence.

### Table 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Cry</th>
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<td>For material necessities of life</td>
<td>For what is necessary beyond material to lead to a satisfying life</td>
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<td>For existing legal rights</td>
<td>For future; discontented with life as they see around them</td>
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<tr>
<td>From aspiration of those superficially integrate into the system, but constrained in opportunities and oppressed in their social relations</td>
<td>From those directly in want, directly oppressed; those whom even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled</td>
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<td>Ex. led to fall of the Berlin Wall</td>
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Who can play the activist role to claim the right to the city?

Building on this definition of the right to the city, the following two main questions remain: Who is in charge of mobilizing citizens to claim this right? How can she/he mobilize local groups to reach their goals? Friedmann introduces planners as “social change experts” and defines their role as social reformers with clients who are “mobilized community and groups.” He argues that planners can raise awareness about “the promise of emancipation” and “confidence in the possibilities for change” (Friedmann, 1987, 301). In addition to Friedmann, Healey identifies a similar role for planners as “intermediaries.” According to Healey (1991), planners have the skills to play a combined and harnessed role as intermediaries to the societal tasks of social mobilizations and to mediate between theory and practice in social transformations. Healey emphasizes that planners “will not centrally engage in action;” rather, their role will be more reflective and consolidative regarding “the knowledge needed to guide such challenging transformative actions” (Healey, 1991, 32). The theoretical foundation of planners’ role as activists is rooted in Habermas’s theory of communicative action and Foucault’s discussion of power struggle. In the present paper, I show how their theories and interpretation in planning can support the role of planners as activists.

**How does Habermas’s theory of communicative action support planners’ role as activists?**

Habermas introduces communicative rationality as an alternative to modernist scientific rationality, “in which knowledge is used instrumentally as a mean of successfully gaining strategic ends” (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b, 33). In Habermas’s communicative rationality, “knowledge is used communicatively for purposes of understanding and discussion of issues” (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b, 33). Scientific rationality and communicative rationality are also differentiated based on their goal, as instrumental control is the main goal of scientific rationality and consensus building is the main goal of communicative rationality. Following the definition of communicative rationality, Habermas defines communicative action as “the conviction that a human collective life depends on vulnerable forms of innovation-bearing, reciprocal and unforcefully egalitarian everyday communication” (Habermas, 1987, 82). Therefore, the theory of communicative action represents the “theory of society conceived with a practical intention” (Habermas, 1973, 3) in which “participants communicatively negotiate to reach a rational consensus” (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b, 33).

Planners have considered Habermas’s theory useful because it provides an alternative to the broadly criticized modernist rationality (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004; Forester, 1989). Norris (1985) defines the notion of communicative rationality in planning, in which “communication will no longer be distorted by the effects of power, self-interests, or ignorance” (149). Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (2002) classify planning interpretations of Habermas’s theory into the following two categories: (1) communicative planning as prescription, in which planners go ‘about planning’ to challenge and avoid distortion of communication; and (2) communicative planning as a normative theory that deliberates a form of collective decision-making over aggregated methods (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 2002, 210).

What role do planners play in the Habermasian theory of communicative action? To answer this question, Innes and Booher (1999) introduce consensus building as a means for planners to “search for feasible strategies to deal with uncertain, complex, and controversial planning and policy tasks” (412). Although the consensus building process does not change the entire structure of power, it aims to ‘equalize power’ in decision-making by requiring a ‘super-majority agreement’ before making decisions and giving “the power of veto or withholding agreement” to participants.
How does Foucault’s discussion about power struggle support planners’ role as activists?

The concept of power is the central point of Foucault’s criticism of Habermasian theories. Foucault argues that “action is the exercise of power”; thus, to perform an action, we must understand how power works (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004). Despite Habermas, Foucault considers both the productive and destructive roles of power and emphasizes the issue of subjectivity. In his theory, Foucault recognizes individuals’ differences in creating their own identities through ethics and forms of self-constitution (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b). Therefore, groups can build social networks to develop and reinforce their power to pursue and advance their causes (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b).

Similar to Habermas, Foucault’s theory inspires many planning theorists. Flyvbjerg, one of the main scholars who has brought Foucault’s theory to planning, found Foucault’s space–time discussion as an important entry point for applying his theory to planning. Foucault discusses particular sets of practices and knowledge that are specific in both space and time. According to Flyvbjerg and Richardson (2004), “Foucault links space with the operation of courses, and hence with power” (55), and “the spatiality of Foucault’s work opens up the possibility of planning theory which understands how power and space are closely bound up in planning” (57). Similar to Foucault’s criticism of Habermas’s theory of communicative action, Flyvbjerg criticizes communicative planning because of its limitations in understanding the role of power in shaping planning. According to Flyvbjerg and Richardson (2004), communicative planning is weak in “its capacity to help us understand what happens in the real world” and in “serving as a basis to effective action and change” (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004, 45). This discussion is rooted in Foucault’s analytic approach concerning what is done, compared to Habermas’s normative approach concerning what should be done.

As an alternative to Habermasian communicative planning, Flyvbjerg suggests an analytic planning in which the recognition of power and understanding of how planning is exercised can open space for democratic social changes (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004, 61). In other words, creating a powerful message from local sources of reverse-discourse provides an opportunity to not only examine power relations in planning, but also to communicate powerful messages across political resources (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b). Some planning theorists criticize Foucault’s theory as oppressive by “accepting the regimes of domination which condition us” (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004, 61). Flyvbjerg and Richardson (2004) disregard these criticisms by stating that Foucault’s theory does not accept the domination of existing power; rather, it uses analytical approaches to understand power and its relations regarding rationality and production of knowledge to challenge the dominant discourse and uses the resulting insights to engender social changes in society.

How can planning activists claim the right to the city?

Urban social movements are a response to the question of how the right to the city can be granted or claimed through planning and decision-making processes. Based on the definition of right to the city, citizens have both the right of participation in decisions that affect where they live and the right of appropriation in accessing, occupying, and using spaces and creating new spaces that meet their needs (Lefebvre, 1996a, 1996b). These rights must be granted to both individuals and collective groups-creating cosmopolitan development that celebrates cultural diversity and intercultural collaboration (Brown & Kristiansen, 2008).

Because previous planning traditions “failed to acknowledge this lack of consensus and the existence of fundamental inequality of opportunity in society” (Friedmann, 1987, cited in Healey, 1991, 1992), scholars have attempted to fill this gap by raising discussions about urban social movements. Castells defines urban social movements as a reaction (not an alternative) that aims to transform the meaning of the city (not society) by “calling for a depth of existence without being able to create that new breadth” (Castells, 1985, 327). In Castells’ definition, urban social movements can occur in quite different forms “from counter-cultural squatters to middle class neighborhood associations” (Castells, 1985, 327). Friedmann refers to characteristics and problems of urban social movements as “an ideology of dispossessed” (Friedmann, 1987, 84). According to him, each social movement has three main characteristics, as follows: (1) the primary assertion of direct collective action; (2) planning conception as a form of politics; and (3) seeking a transformative process (Friedmann, 1987, 83–84).

Building on this definition of planners’ role as activists, one question remains: How can planning activists mobilize local groups to claim their right to the city? The following sections address this question by explaining how planners can use their knowledge and expertise to fulfill their role as planning activists to claim the right to the city, including the right of participation and the right of appropriation, and how Social Media can facilitate this process. In addition, I provide three examples of how planning activists have used Social Media to address these issues.

Discussion: Redefining planners’ role as activists to claim the right to the city in the age of the Internet

This section discusses the dimensions of planners’ role as activists to claim citizens’ right to the city and how each dimension is influenced by the development of Information Technology and the rise of Social Media. Before entering into this discussion, two questions must be answered to clarify this paper’s approach in defining a new role for planners based on Habermas’s and Foucault’s theories and intention on focusing on the role of Social Media, especially Twitter, in facilitating planners’ role as activists.

First, what is the difference between the current paper’s approach in defining a new role for planners and the previous interpretations of Habermas’s and Foucault’s theories in planning? It may seem that defining planners’ role as activists follows the same pattern of previous interpretations of Habermas’s and Foucault’s theory in planning in identifying new roles for planners, such as planners as facilitators, planners as mediators, and planners as advocates, that may reject or criticize the dominant role of planners in existing planning processes. However, the present paper claims that there is no right way or wrong way of conducting planning. Similar to other fields, planners differently use their skills in controlling information and shaping attention (Forster, 1989), depending on their employer and their personal interests and values. One of the indicators that may distinguish between the different roles of planners is their employer. Based on this indicator, similar to many other professions, planners have three major employers, as follows: the public sector (e.g. cities’ planning departments), the private sector (e.g. developers or consulting firms), and nonprofit organizations (e.g. environmental groups). When the interests of these groups conflict with each other, employees are more likely to intentionally or unintentionally work in favor of their employer’s interests.

Moreover, because money and power are mostly in the hands of the public and private sectors (Gibson, 2004), the job of activist can be costly and risky in many societies. Therefore, it cannot be stated that the planner’s best or most suitable job is as an activist. However, similar to other professions, planners can choose to use their specialized skills to play an activist role to raise the marginalized voices of local groups and help defend their rights to the city. A
person does not need to be a planner to play an activist role in planning, just as one does not need to be a physician to work to prevent HIV around the world or a lawyer to work for Human Rights.

Second, why does this paper focus on the role of Social Media, especially Twitter, in facilitating planners’ role as activists rather than the previous tools of Information Technology? Although the development of Information Technology provides an opportunity for activists to gain attention for their causes and raise voices that want to be heard, it has limitations. Online communication tools, such as email, IM, and voice/video chat, are limited to private person-to-person or person-to-group communications, and audiences are specified as individuals rather than grouped by interests. In addition, broadcasting online tools, such as weblog, podcast, and YouTube, are in danger of becoming lost due to the large amount of information produced online and because they depend on audiences that search for specific issues via search engines. Social Media, such as Twitter, have played a revolutionary role in overcoming these two restrictions of traditional online communication and broadcasting tools in publicly targeting interested groups and gaining attention for specific causes.

In Twitter’s terminology, each person can open a discussion by creating a hashtag (for example #OCW for the Occupy Wall Street movement and #Jan25 for Egyptians’ revolution in January 2011), and an individual can use the same hashtag in his or her tweets to enter into that discussion or simply follow it around the world. In addition, the retweet feature provides an opportunity for each person to amplify a voice and ensure that a specific concern has reached its target audiences. These features are added to Twitter’s 140-character limit for each post, which wisely addresses online audiences’ lack of patience in reading long pieces. This limit encourages each tweet to be as concise as possible. All of these features work together to make Twitter a revolutionary tool for activists around the world to raise their voices and maintain momentum for their causes.

In addition, due to the current trend in Social Media to store the geographic locations of online contents from users’ IP addresses or fast-growing GPS-equipped mobile devices, Twitter is an even more useful tool in the hands of planning activists. With this trend, planning activists can address specific locations and specific interests. Furthermore, citizens can follow both what is happening around them and specific points of interest around the world.

To clarify the planners’ role as activists in claiming the right to the city, the present paper discuss how planners can play this role in each of the two aspects of the right to the city, the right of participation and the right of appropriation, and how planning activists can use and have used Social Media to fulfill this role.

**Right of participation: Encouraging public participation by raising public awareness and advocating marginalized interests**

For more than half a century, planners have discussed public participation. As a result, most planning projects are now required to have open opportunities for public engagement in their processes. If all individuals have equal opportunity to participate in and influence public projects, what is the problem? To answer this question, Forester (1989) emphasizes planners’ ability to systematically shape participation by selectively channeling information and attention (Forester, 1989, 20). He also states how planners can strategically hide information and manipulate expectations. Therefore, planners can “shape not only documents, but also participation: who is contacted, who participates in informal design review meetings, who persuades whom of which option for project development” (Forester, 1989, 28). Therefore, he concludes that information is a source of power for planners and that planning can be a source of misinformation.

Planning activists can play a crucial role in challenging this political system of misinformation, which determines who knows what (and when) and claims legitimacy by claiming to act in the interest of the public. Forester refers to Luke’s classification of three modes of power in controlling, (1) decision making, (2) agenda setting, and (3) need shaping, and argues that planners can be a source of misinformation in each of these three modes by encouraging passivity and thwarting democratic participation (Forester, 1989). Because planners have specialized knowledge and skills in shaping attention and participation, they can also use these skills as an activist to confront these three modes of power. Planning activists can shed light on decision-making structures to indicate opportunities for participation in each phase of planning processes. They can inform powerless citizens about how the power structure legitimizes the predefined agendas. They can also inform the public about their rights and needs, as opposed to what the political system attempts to introduce as public needs. The well-informed citizen can actively participate in decision-making processes to set agendas based on his/her real needs.

Raising public awareness about marginalized interests and encouraging participation among local citizens is essential, but not sufficient. At times, planning activists must play an advocate role to represent marginalized interests in negotiation with the power structure of planning. Davidoff is one of the first planning scholars to emphasize the advocate role of planners (Davidoff, 1965). An examination of planners’ roles as advocates is beneficial because it provides a clear picture of the planner–client relationship. Even if all clients have equal opportunity to defend their own rights and interests, some may not be able to defend their rights alone because they lack sufficient knowledge and experience. They need an individual who knows the rules of the game and has bargaining skills to defend their rights in courts and through negotiation with power.

Although court advocates either lose or win in each case, planners’ efforts in representing different groups should be based on a “negotiated win–win agreement” (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b, 69). Habermas calls this process ‘consensus building’ and acknowledges the legitimate role of bargaining and compromising in a democratic decision-making process concerning conflicting interests (cited in Hillier (2002a, 2002b, 124)). Hillier defines participatory democracy as “a process of open discussion in which all points of view may be heard, not a search for correct answer” (2002a, 2002b, 29). Therefore, planning activists can play the advocating role for those who are traditionally excluded and encourage attention to alternatives that might be suppressed by dominant interests (Forester, 1989).

Planning activists can utilize media to raise awareness and advocate the marginalized interests. However, Castells (1985) argues that since the mass media is in the hands of an “empire of image producers that monopolize the codes, flows, and information” (329) activists lack an “autonomous means of expression, organization, and mobilization” (326). Information Technology, and especially Social Media, is challenging this equation worldwide. Similar to other types of activists, planning activists can use Social Media to establish local networks of local activists and active citizens to reach grassroots populations.

In the remainder of this section, I provide two examples of how planning activists can use Social Media to encourage public participation by raising public awareness and advocating for marginalized interests.

First, the Dr. Pop website (http://drpop.org) is an example that shows how Information Technology and Social Media can be used by planning activists to raise awareness about urban planning issues, the right to the city, and the existing opportunities for public participation. Gilda Haas, a UCLA Urban Planning faculty member, moderates the Dr. Pop website as “a popular education website that engages citizens and urban planning scholars in discussion of the planning issues that matter” (2002a, 2002b, 69).

To illustrate this point, consider the example of how the Dr. Pop website uses Social Media to raise awareness about the right to the city. The website features a series of articles, videos, and discussions on a range of topics related to urban planning, including the role of planners as advocates, the right to the city, and the use of Social Media in planning. For example, a recent article discusses the role of planners in advocating for the rights of marginalized communities, and includes a video of a planning activist discussing their experiences in the field. The website also features a series of social media campaigns, such as the #Jan25 campaign, which encourages citizens to participate in planning processes by raising awareness about urban planning issues. The website also features a series of events and workshops, such as a workshop on how to use Social Media to advocate for the right to the city.

In conclusion, Social Media can be a powerful tool for planning activists to raise awareness about urban planning issues and advocate for marginalized interests. By using Social Media, planning activists can engage citizens in planning processes, raise awareness about urban planning issues, and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities.
that helps people ... by explaining complicated things in simple ways.” In addition, Dr. Pop focuses on raising awareness about “how the economy, urban planning, and democracy work, provide living examples of how they can work better, and offer tools for organizers, educators, students, activists and all manner of curious people who are interested in change.” (Dr. Pop, 2012).

Second, i-Neighbors is an example of how the integration of online social networks within physical boundaries can help planning activists to advocate for marginalized voices in the negotiation with planning power structures. Keith Hampton, founder and CEO of i-Neighbors, began i-Neighbors as an NSF-funded research project at the MIT Urban Information Systems Group in 2002 and continues working on the research behind this site. i-Neighbors is a social network service that aims to reverse the trend toward declining local involvement by helping “communities organize, share information and work together to solve local problems.” The website utilizes Google Maps to localize any information that can be geocolated on a map and shares this information with the members of local groups. Users can simply add a public GeoRSS or KML file (i.e. crime data) or create their own KML file and publicly or privately upload it on the website. Many local groups and local governments in the US and Canada have used i-Neighbors as a platform to address the local issues that have been raised by active citizens and local activists (i-Neighbors.org, 2012).

Right of appropriation: Using Social Media to mobilize direct action among marginalized groups

In the previous section, I discussed how planners can play an activist role to raise awareness and advocate marginalized interests to encourage participation. In addition to the right of participation, citizens have the right of appropriation. According to Lefebvre, “appropriation includes the right to access, occupy, and use [existing] spaces, and create new space that meets people’s need” (Lefebvre, 1996a, 1996b, 174). In this section, I discuss how planning activists can mobilize local citizens to bypass the dominant power structure and cause direct action in agnostic spaces and how Social Media can be used to facilitate this process. In addition, I provide an example from South Dallas to show how planning activists can fulfill this role.

I use the term praxis to refer to these informal direct actions. Praxis has been widely used by American pragmatists and European NeoMarxists to identify the types of social actions that frame and refine theory through practice, not directed by theory (For ester, 1989). Lefebvre defines praxis as a form of social practice in which “people individually or in teams clear their way, propose, tryout, and prepare different forms of action, and learn from failure and give birth to the possible” (Lefebvre, 2009, 151). Freire defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” and argues that through praxis, oppressed citizens can acquire a critical awareness about their condition to struggle for their liberation (Freire, 1986, 36). If praxis refers to informal direct action by local citizens to bypass the power structure and raise marginalized voices based on their right to the city, does it undermine citizens’ actions to resist the institutionalized attempts to oppress their voices in the process of decision-making at the local level (Hillier, 2002a, 2002b).

More than any other avenue, activists around the world have used Social Media to call for direct action and seek global coverage for their causes. The Iran 2009 election aftermath, Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and current Occupy Wall Street movements are highly empowered by the abilities that Social Media provides for local activists to raise their voices and call for action on the streets. In these three examples, the participants utilize a civil disobedience approach in bypassing the power structure and claiming their right on the streets rather than employing the established methods of public participation in the existing power structures.

Planning activists can also call for direct actions when they cannot pursue their goals in supporting marginalized interests and the right of local groups to the city in the bureaucratic methods of public participation or in bargaining as advocates in the existing planning processes. Hillier refers to Foucault’s concern about citizens’ responsibility to cultivate and enhance the local decision-making processes by developing action to resist the institutions, techniques and discourses that attempt to oppress them. Hillier further states that establishing networks is essential for most forms of direct actions. These networks provide participants with access to material resources, knowledge, and power. Information Technology, and especially Social Media, has revolutionized the activists’ abilities to establish and expand networks for their causes. Planning activists can use Social Media in establishing and expanding location-based networks to call for direct actions on the streets, spread the word, and obtain public attention for their causes. Different forms of direct action include civil disobediences such as marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and refusal to pay taxes. Planning activists do not seize the opportunity to gain political power through direct actions; rather, their purpose is to gain decision-makers’ attention to consider alternatives that are regularly ignored in bureaucratic processes of decision-making.

Better Block is an example of how Information Technology and Social Media can be used to mobilize direct action against the dominant planning power structure. The first Better Block project was implemented in Oak Cliff, a Southern neighborhood of Dallas, by a few local activists who aimed to make a better neighborhood outside the mainstream planning process. The Better Block project is defined as “a demonstration tool that acts as a living charrette so that communities can actively engage in the build out process and provide feedback in real time”. The idea was to transform a block into an ideal, European-style block with bike lanes, trees, landscaping, coffee shop, bookstore, and food stands in a weekend. The Better Block team creatively used Information Technology and Social Media to organize the project, broadcast the event, and promote their cause to ensure that their voices were heard by public officials and local residents (BetterBlock.org, 2011).

However, they soon realized that several ordinances prohibited them from accomplishing their plan. For example, it is illegal to place flowers on the streets or have fruit stands, and sandwich boards cost thousands of dollars. Therefore, to accomplish the goal, they needed to break a series of laws that had existed for more than six decades. Jason used his art background and considered the entire project as an art installation project. “So I can say it is a real coffeeshop but my artistic version of what a coffeeshop would look like for here, same thing for flower, fruit stands, and kid arts studio,” Jason explains. Therefore, the team was fully aware of the possible consequences of their effort, but completed the plan as a type of civil disobedience against the existing ordinances and obstacles that prevented them from having a better neighborhood.

In one weekend, the team painted bike lanes and pedestrian crosswalks and created in-street parking that left only one line for traffic flow. In addition, the team worked with the community to open a 2-day coffee shop, a 2-day flower market, and a 2-day...
kids’ art studio on the same block. “We took out all the ordinances that we were breaking; we printed all of them and put it by each of them to show what are the problems,” Jason continues. The team also invited city staff and city council to show them that little time and money is needed to create a great area that can have a massive effect on the perception of safety and economic development of local businesses in the neighborhood. The team challenged some of the social and cultural perceptions that prevent people from asking for more walkable neighborhoods in Dallas, namely, the perception that people do not enjoy walking in the hot weather of Dallas.

Although this project hit the ground on March 17, 2010, its organization and preparation began a few weeks before in the online sphere. Jason and the community members that he had mobilized began to raise money for a new project in addition to the mural project on Seventh Street in the last week of February 2010, and they continued broadcasting their efforts online before, during, and after the project. Through the previously established online and offline networks, the project was successful in gaining public, media, and local official attention. Based on this support, the team repeated the complete version of the project during the Art Crawl event 1 month later. This event was the beginning of their work in increasing awareness about the ignored right of the citizens to have a better neighborhood.

Conclusion

Similar to many other professionals, planners can work for the public or private sectors based on their personal values or preferences. The present paper does not enter into the discussion about the ‘best’ role that planners can play in the planning structure as public or private sector employees. Rather, it discusses how planners can work outside the power structure to raise the marginalized interests of local citizens based on their right to the city and how Social Media can facilitate this process as a media that has traditionally been dominated by those with the greatest access to political and financial recourses. In this paper, I used the experiences of activists to show how planner activists can use Social Media to inform local citizens about marginalized interests and their right to the city, advocate their rights in negotiations with planning structures, and mobilize direct actions to claim their rights on the streets.

Furthermore, I criticized some debates among planning scholars that aim to identify the ‘best’ role that planners can (or should) play in an associative society. I argued that it is important to recognize that planners can play roles in both the public and private sectors. It is important to recognize that in the complex power relations between the public and private sectors, the interests of some powerless/voiceless groups are marginalized because of their lack of access to capital, power, and media. Activists can fill this gap by advocating and empowering marginalized voices in various ways, from negotiation with power structures to mobilizing direct action on the streets. Therefore, in this paper, I identified the role of planning activists outside formal planning power structures and explained how these activists can help empower marginalized interests based on local citizens’ right to the city inside or outside the dominating planning processes.

The digital divide is a legitimate concern when planning activists entirely depend on the Internet for all of their activities because those who traditionally have the least access to power often have minimum access to, and knowledge about, technological innovations. Thus, the present paper focuses on how these tools can help planning activists, not ordinary citizens, to raise local citizens’ marginalized interests. In addition, there are many examples around the world of how local and community activists have fulfilled these roles. However, because the terms ‘local’ and ‘community’ have broad meanings and cover different causes, this paper introduces planning activism as the specific area of interest for those who play the activist role in facing the dominant planning power structures to influence planning processes and claim marginalized citizens’ right to the city. Future researchers should conduct empirical studies on local and community activists’ experiences in fulfilling each of these three roles.

References

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