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# Activism by Lay and Professional Planners: Types, Research Issues, and Ongoing Analysis

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Activism was one of the main themes of the AESOP PhD Workshop 2018 in Karlskrona and Tjärö, Sweden. One of my presentations was about the activist roles of planners working for local governments and lay planners affiliated with civil society organizations. I have kept a close eye on the academic literature on activist planning for many years, and am still working in that sub-field of planning theory. My aim is to explore the limits of how professional planners with an activist intent can practice their line of work inside a bureaucracy, and to study how actors from the civil society can use spatial planning and local environmental planning in combination with direct action as a strategy for achieving their goals. To specify the kind of planning I have in mind, I follow Healey (1997:69), stating that: 'Spatial and environmental planning, understood relationally, becomes a practice of building a relational capacity which can address collective concerns about spatial co-existence, spatial organisation and the qualities of places'. Activist planners can contribute to the processes of such planning and help collect and form the input to spatial and environmental plans.

In this paper, I propose a classification of activist planning types, point out a few issues for discussion in the study of activist planning, and question if the idea of an activist communicative planning makes sense. In addition, I explain my own approach to delimitation of the activist planning concept and give a brief account of my ongoing work.

## Why Activist Planning?

Injustice and repression may be upheld by prevailing social institutions and thus need to be combated by strategies going beyond – and possibly breaking with – the accepted practices of these institutions. However, activist planning does not necessarily entail a heroic fight for recognition, freedom and equal rights. The driving force may, for example, be the mobilization of community resources in order to improve living conditions through locally desired neighbourhood plans and urban renewal projects on terms set by the present inhabitants (Addie 2008). In other cases, the motivation for activist planning comes from civic groups' disagreement with public planners and elected politicians about the organization of the official planning process and the goals for city development (Legacy and van den Nouwelant 2015). The basis for activist planning can be democratic disagreement as well as a fight against repression. Activist planning can be legitimate even in well-governed liberal societies.

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Cooperation between public activist planners on the one hand and activists in social movements and protest groups on the other can be mutually beneficial (Hysing and Olsson 2018). Civil society activist organizations can help professional planners put pressure on unduly self-serving stakeholders, and marginalized groups can benefit from professionals' information, support and advice.

### **Some Issues in the Study of Activist Planning**

Problems related to this area of planning theory concern the delimitation of activist planning and classification of the different types of such planning. Moreover, the existing literature has a narrow scope, and scant attention is given to activist planning initiatives that are neither radical nor insurgent, but valuable as alternatives to official planning proposals in relatively well-functioning democracies.

*Delimitation of activist planning.* Direct action and an activist style of working is required. Activist planning implies working outside the normal channels for reporting and handling problems in the organization where the planner is employed. Some publications pretend to deal with activist planning even if the narrative is about politics or protest with only insignificant attention given to planning. There is admittedly a conceptual and practical segment of overlap between politics and planning, but it is most often easy, when it comes to concrete cases, to see if the activists have initiated a planning process, developed any spatial planning ideas, or co-authored any planning documents for the contested area.

The distinction between invited and invented space is useful in delimiting activist planning (Ay and MirafTAB 2016). Ordinary citizen participation takes place in invited space and is not activist planning. Invented space is created by the activists and is an arena where interchange with government and stakeholders can take place on terms influenced by the activists. Sometimes, invented space comes into being by transformation of invited citizen participation to types of interaction that the authorities had not asked for or anticipated: agonist political discussion or protests transgressing the confines of the project that the bureaucrats and politicians wanted to inform people about.

Planning done by university academics to assist communities struck by natural disaster or downward spirals of blight and poverty constitutes another borderline sort of activist planning. Campus-based community outreach is a legitimate activity at many universities and is within the scope of approved academic work, and it is in this respect a peripheral form of activist planning (Reardon 2008). For the same reason, I do not see service learning initiatives as activist planning (Kennedy and Tilly 2019, Pinel 2017).

Activist planners are engaged in specific cases. They have to be hands on, actually working on the planning process or the plan for a particular area and taking part in direct action. Many activist planners belong to groups or movements that in turn are members of umbrella organizations one step removed from the concrete planning situation and the stress and strain of conflict. There are a number of such networks on the citywide, national and international scales. Some are umbrellas over poor people's local grass-roots organizations, such as Homeless People's Federation (Philippines) and the Federation of the Urban Poor (South Africa) at the country level, and Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) internationally. Other umbrella organizations offer planning advice to individuals and communities or administer the networks and resource supplies of progressive planners, such as the Planning Aid section of the Royal Town Planning Institute (UK) and the Planners Network (USA), respectively. I treat the work of umbrella organizations

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as activist planning only when they are directly engaged in local planning processes of the types displayed in Table 1.

The last borderline to be drawn here distinguishes activist planning from action research. An example close to this borderline is INURA, the International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA 2003, Lehrer and Keil 2007). The issues that network members are involved in include major urban renewal projects, the urban periphery, community-led environmental schemes, urban traffic, and social housing provision. However, INURA as organization is not involved in planning.

*Classification of activist planning types.* Table 1 concentrates on partisan planning and gives room for both lay and professional planner roles. An alternative to partisan planning is outlined in the next section. Three of the four main categories in the table contain important sub-types of activist planning (Sager 2013:66–95).

**Table 1.** Partisan modes of activist planning

	<i>Government planner</i>	<i>Civil society planner</i>
<i>Loyal to group or community</i>	1 Official partisan planning	2 Community-based activist planning, Advocacy planning
<i>Committed to substantive cause</i>	3 Equity planning, Inside issue advocacy	4 Radical planning, Critical-alternative initiatives

The official partisans in cell 1 work in close contact with local people. The planners can easily be frustrated by the gaps they observe between obvious needs in the community and the resources granted. This may trigger community-loyal action that goes beyond the mandate given for the planner's work.

In cell 2, advocates come from outside the client community and talk on behalf of it. In contrast, community-based activists are members of the community in need of protection or improvement.

In cell 3, inside issue advocates may aim for safeguarding of the natural environment, democratization, or women-friendly cities, for example. They pursue their favoured cause from a position inside the agency. Corburn et al. (2015) report from health equity planning in Richmond, California. Hysing and Olsson (2018) give an account from Sweden of how green inside issue advocacy can work. In equity planning and inside issue advocacy, the planner typically seeks cooperation with external allies, supports the allies by politically motivated activities, and tries to make the external allies push towards sustainability or a fair process and plan.

In cell 4, radical planning challenges the system or the regime, while critical-alternative initiatives are not insurgent, but lodge objections at the policy level.

Table 1 can be helpful, as it gives room for most familiar types of activist planning, but the classification scheme is not without weaknesses. First, the same action may be taken both out of loyalty to someone and to support a particular cause. It is sometimes hard to know whether activist planning for, say, environmental improvement or more transit-oriented transport systems belongs in the upper or lower row of the table. Second, the distinction between radical planning and critical-alternative initiatives in cell 4 is unclear in cases where the criticized policy is crucial to the regime's political programme, turning activism against the policy into insurgent conduct. Third, in cell 2-cases, the community's own activists sometimes

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partner with an outside activist organization, making it difficult to decide whether the case exemplifies advocacy planning or community-based activist planning.

*Narrow scope of the existing literature on activist planning.* There are still types of activist planners whose stories have not been told. In a recent article (Sager 2018), I tried to expand the field of activist planning by including spatial planning by members of intentional communities. These are activist communities that people join by intention, not because they belong to a particular ethnic group, because of tradition or because of cultural pressure. Note that some direct action of the intentional community must connect to its spatial planning in order to constitute an activist planning case. A faith-based intentional community concentrating all its direct action on spreading its religious message would not qualify.

Intentional communities are home to some of the most dedicated activists. They do not only leave their mainstream residential areas for a short while to take part in a demonstration or some other direct action. They take their opposition to the commercialized market society further by organizing alternative communities where they can practice their deviating lifestyle. Intentional communities are interesting also because they link to the self-organization theme in planning theory. It would be an unwarranted narrowing of the activist planning field to leave out the planning experiences of intentional-community activists trying to live as they preach. For example, the planning carried out by activists in ecovillages has so far not been analyzed and documented.

Another omission is the planning activism of socially engaged artists decorating public space. Some of them install artwork in new or existing neighbourhoods with the explicit intention to affect the behaviour of people using the place. In their role as activist planners, such artists aim to make better communities which strengthen people's feeling of belonging. The artists are activists when their paintings, sculptures, or other installations are put in place as part of a process that is not controlled by the owner of the place (Loftus 2009, O'Kelly 2009). They are planners when aiming to build relational capacity in the community and addressing spatial co-existence and the qualities of the place, as already suggested in the preceding quote from Healey (1997). A case in point is the Swedish artist and curator Kerstin Bergendal, living in Copenhagen. She has made several counter-plans for urban commons, replacing official master plans for the areas. See the chapter on Trekrøner Art Plan in Roskilde, Denmark, in O'Neill and Doherty (2011). Bergendal wanted to allow artistic interventions within a prescribed environment that simultaneously critiqued the planning process and gave local residents a chance to contribute to their built surroundings.

*Emphasis on spectacular and heroic radical planning cases?* Typical cases of radical planning are shack dwellers' movements campaigning against evictions and for public housing and poor people's right to the city (Pithouse 2009), and the work of organizations such as Reclaim the Streets, The Transition Network, and Right to the City. Some of them contain an element of insurgency. Reasonably well-functioning democracies should put more emphasis on the critical-alternative initiatives of Table 1 (Sager 2016:1272–73). Such planning-based protests against particular policies are part of the normal democratic dealings in liberal societies with room for citizen initiatives. Critical-alternative initiatives are part of the discussion in the public sphere about how to make democratic governance produce better results (Long 2013). There will always be agonism over the best means to achieve social goals when developing a city centre (Nyseth 2011) or planning for integration of immigrants with foreign cultural backgrounds (Shakir 2008), for example.

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### Activist Communicative Planning?

I introduce the idea of 'activist communicative planning' to suggest that there are non-partisan modes of activist planning in addition to the partisan modes displayed in Table 1. Moreover, it is of interest to explore the possibility of an activist version of communicative planning, arguably the most discussed kind of planning since the 1980s.

It is not self-evident that the term 'activist communicative planning' makes good sense. Communicative planning implies a striving for dialogue, and in the theory of communicative action developed by Jürgen Habermas – which inspired most communicative planning theorists – dialogue is narrowly defined. Utterances should be comprehensible, factually true, sincere, and appropriate within the normative context at hand. Participants in dialogue should be committed to reaching mutual understanding, and nothing should coerce them except the quality of arguments (Sager 2013:4–7). This is too much to ask of people in conflicts where the stakes are high. To make activist communicative planning an interesting category for describing planning practice, dialogue must be less of an ideal type concept (Bächtiger et al. 2010).

It is more probable that modified forms of Habermasian dialogue can be observed in processes with a relatively low level of conflict – that is, more likely in cases of critical-alternative initiatives than in radical planning. However, the full potential of activist communicative planning does not become clear unless an extra row is added at the bottom of Table 1. The cells on this new row should contain planning initiatives in which the activists are committed to a relational cause. This means that the activist planner does not take a partisan position, but aims at improving the relationship between contending parties in the planning process. The planner performs activist mediation in the spirit of Lawrence Susskind, as described by Forester (1994).

Activist mediators must take into consideration that disinterested neutrality reproduces existing inequalities of power. Mediators ignoring obvious power imbalances are not being politically neutral. Active, non-partisan mediation gives the planner some leeway to strengthen weak parties through information, training and agenda-setting procedures (Sager 2016:1274). The idea is that, for example, skill-building training can be given to parties who really need it, as long as the offer is made to all parties, even powerful groups who will not benefit from it.

Gallent (2014) reports on the work of the independent support group *Action with Communities in Rural Kent* (England) trying to avoid confrontation between borough councils and community planners at the parish level. Another example is provided by Kohl (2003), examining how NGOs carry out the role as intermediaries between the government and the impoverished majority following enactment of the 1994 Law of Popular Participation. This law brought resources and participatory planning to Bolivia's largely rural municipalities for the first time. Dialogue stands a better chance in planning like this, where the point is not to win a conflict, but to bring the parties together for mutual understanding and search for win-win solutions.

### Work in Progress: Collection of Activist Planning Cases

My current work on activist planning takes the classification in Table 1 as its point of departure. For each of the types – community-based activist planning, advocacy planning, radical planning, critical-alternative initiatives, and equity planning – I search the English-language planning literature globally for well-documented cases where planning activism has taken place after 1990. The minimum requirement for inclusion in my archive is that the case is

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comprehensively described in at least one academic journal article or book chapter. For cases meeting this requirement, I supplement the portrayal of activist planning with information from other sources when available, such as conference papers, PhD dissertations, research reports, and internet pages. I have consulted the Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Journal of Planning Literature, using a number of search terms related to activism, participation, and planning.

At least since the launch of advocacy planning in the mid-1960s, there has been an interest in activist planning, predominantly in Western-type democracies. Nevertheless, only a limited number of cases are described in enough detail to be suited for analysis. A preliminary count suggests that the number of useful cases is unlikely to exceed twenty for any of the activist planning types over the last three decades. My aim is to analyze the cases in ways relating to the current discourse in planning theory by focusing on keywords such as gentrification and relocation, citizen participation, direct democracy, and right to the city.

The comprehensive collection of cases will enable me to analyze each type of activist planning from different angles. For example, I can trace possible links to ideologies: Are there populist ideas behind some of the activism? Is activist planning sometimes triggered by opposition to neoliberal policies (Sager 2016)? Many other perspectives may be of interest: Does identity politics motivate activist planners? Do the cases often result in social innovation? Is the planning conflict sometimes transformed, or do the case histories end with the same antagonism or agonism that prompted the activist planners to get involved in the first place? Green ideas have left their mark on politics, but has the quest for sustainability also spurred activist planning? Does activist planning sometimes follow in the wake of unsuccessful and disappointing collaborative processes? Does informality play a role in initiating the planning controversy or in the solutions proposed by activist planners? Are activist planning initiatives successful?

Last but not least, the case collection documents what activist planning is in practice. My impression at this stage is that activist planning is a nearly global phenomenon that takes on more different forms, and takes place in a greater variety of conditions, than is readily realized by reading the standard works of prominent activist planning theorists – such as Paul Davidoff, John Friedmann, Norman Krumholz, and Leonie Sandercock.

### Conclusions

There is a rich and half-century old planning tradition to draw upon when looking for ways to conduct activist planning. Such planning is used both by professional and lay planners, by planners inside and outside government, and for partisan and intermediary purposes alike.

Activism involving lay planners can be of interest to professional planners for several reasons: (1) Planners in public agencies may benefit from cooperation with external allies. Such alliances can more effectively put pressure on private actors who ignore the plight of vulnerable groups or are unduly self-serving when pursuing their own interests at the expense of society.

(2) Public planners may sometimes want to support planners affiliated with civil society organizations in order to create a more diverse city with respect to housing types, lifestyles, and cultural expressions. An understanding of citizens' aims and worries often proves useful.

(3) New ideas about urban place-making can emerge from the activism of planners representing civil society organizations or movements.

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