

The complex interrelation of community action and planning

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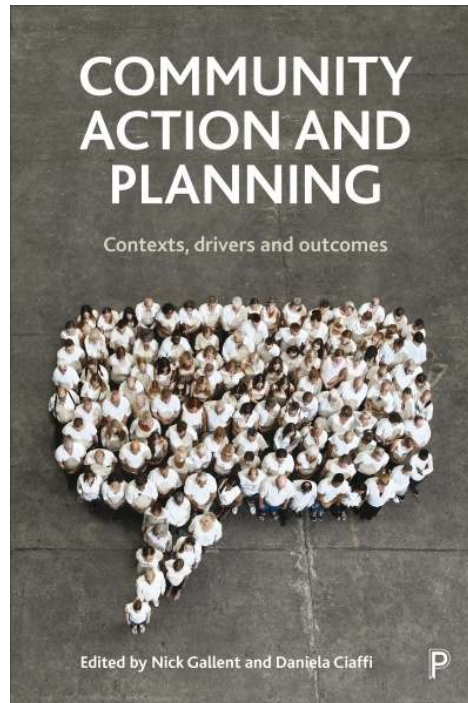
Gallent N., Ciaffi D. (eds). 2014. *Community action and planning. Context, drivers and outcomes*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

1 Gallent and Ciaffi have put together a mosaic of very different perspectives on a subject of contemporary relevance. They deal with the multi-faceted issue of “community action and planning” mixing a broad range of authors in a successful manner as they are able to maintain a common sense and flow within the book. The subtitle “contexts, drivers and outcomes” is key to structuring the content in a way that the reader could either decide to read all through the book or select specific content.

2 Chapter 1 is introductory and frames the main questions which constitute the substratum of the entire book. It highlights the challenging issue of setting community action against the background of governance and planning. The evolving concept of community is disentangled

underlining its shift from a passive-subject connotation to the more contemporary expression of active networks. The authors touch on the importance of the meaning of planning for communities as a guide for local action and strategies. Accordingly, community planning is distinguished from normative planning for its mostly social aims. Bearing in mind all these assumptions, communities are interpreted from a socio-spatial perspective as they display a shared identity in spite of possible internal contrasts. Such identity is forged by “contextual drivers” (p. 9). The recognition of the remarkable role of drivers in shaping community action is indeed one of the most valuable features of the book.

3 The notions of “networks” and “social capital” (p. 21) connecting them with community dynamics are introduced in chapter 2. Rydin, at first instance, acknowledges the generally positive meaning assigned to the word “community”, its spatial identification and unitary vision as communities have shared interests. However, the author wisely warns against the existence of not-so-idyllic types of communities whose ideological beliefs entail a constraint of their members’ liberty. Moreover, Rydin links social capital with the idea of community as “bonding social capital” which favours the creation of a “sense of common identity” (p. 28). Again, the role of planning emerges in this chapter as planners are seen positively as they can encourage connectivity among people through a mix of stronger and weaker types of bonds. In chapter 3, Peter Matthews explores the importance of time in community development. He states that experiences are crucial to comprehending community involvement in planning. Highlighting the relationship between planning, policies and history is considered as fundamental, as well as the existence of collective memories through which a community is shaped and delimited. The sense of place is linked to the sense of community as “the built environment is rich with meaning” but also “is part of what makes community” (p. 46). The use of narratives and memories is an essential part of Matthews’ approach, whose text flows consistently and easily guides the reader to the end of chapter.



- 4 Part 2 of the book examines situations and drivers that foster community action through case-study analysis which show how community action is diversified and may take multiple forms. Vilà's account of the evolution of community movements in Spain takes Barcelona and explores a forty-year period starting from 1970, from the origin of neighbourhood associations in Barcelona, passing through periods of growth and crisis and finishing with their updated role in a contemporary context. Vilà summarises the major contributions of neighbourhood movements to community action, focusing on the creation of social capital, the relationship between local residents and local administration, the influence on planning and policies, the defense of public needs and the promotion of civic and democratic values. The historical focus and writing style of this chapter make it enjoyable even for non-academic readers. Through another case study, Kilpatrick, Willis and Lewis provide in chapter 5 an insight on what community action entails for farmers and fishers in Australia. They underline the driving-force role of "boundary crossers", defined as local actors whose work is "between the farmers or fishers and health services" (p. 79). Health and wellbeing of farmers and fishers are among the most relevant issues discussed in this chapter. The authors underline an important difference emerging between farmers and fishers. On the one hand, the inclusive character in terms of community building of the farming areas is associated with the coincidence of working and living place. On the other hand, the isolation of fishers is detected, since their workplace is often distant to their residence.
- 5 In chapter 6 the difficulties in framing community planning within the French system are explained. According to the authors, associations exist but they are aimed more at contrasting institutions rather than providing mutual help to their members. They explain the case of a social housing regeneration in Marseille as good practice for incorporating the residents' perspective. Interestingly, the term "interactional infrastructure", that was previously mentioned in chapter 5, is used also here, showing the existence of a common discourse, applicable to very different contexts. They conclude that, even when "the capacity to act is a rare commodity", such capacity "sometimes shines through adversity" (p. 114). Satsangi declares in chapter 7 that his work is connected with the main purposes of the whole book by linking community action to planning and governmental issues. The Scottish community land trust system is taken as example of "activism" and "empowerment" (p. 117). In the text the author touches on questions of land ownership and its social, economic and political implications. Here, issues of power and lack of equity emerge and play a significant role in Satangi's account. At the end of the chapter, the author explains the purpose of the island's purchase by local residents willing "to realise future growth and self-determination" (p. 127). Then, growth is seen as driver for decision while "self-determination" takes the place of previous "subservience" (p. 127).
- 6 Part 3 delves into the concept of planning at the community scale and introduces the debate on long-term community action versus its usual time-limited response to a crisis, immediate needs, service, or specific intervention. Time-limited mobilizations are easier to sustain than longer term efforts. The "prioritisation of planning" (p.131) depends on the community group to recognize the longer-term pressures, and in order for these efforts to sustain, they need to be framed within structures of informal community activism or formal community governance. Chapter 8 describes communitarian planning which is embedded within community processes, although seeded by the state. Therefore, it links the idea of active citizenship to positive and equal engagement with the local state

which they describe as the “Fourth Way” (p. 140) in community action with governmental support. Explained through four case studies of Dutch New Towns, they conclude that “local bridging to community action is the crucial condition for finding a workable Fourth Way” (153).

- 7 From the North American perspective Dandekar and Main in chapter 9 present a study in southern California in which community processes and capacities have been implanted in order to generate acceptance of planning decisions and outcomes. They explain a historic approach to forms of community planning which are state sponsored. These planning processes are in response to the fact that there is a disconnect between the interventions and the diverse needs of the community groups. They conclude that the approach must be flexible and planners must go to where community groups already are and then “become the translation of stories and concerns of these groups into outcomes that can rightly be addressed through planning” (p.172). In chapter 10 an example of participation through community plans in England is presented to exemplify how the government has tried to incorporate community action in order to address local distinctiveness and by doing so, get support or acceptance for strategic priorities with community actors. Parker states that in the cases in which the communities have been active, the “relationships between community activists and planners and others have often improved in areas where community-led planning has settled in” (p.194). The author leads to the overall conclusion that in order to create awareness and civic engagement with planning challenges, government, public authorities, schools, universities and professional institutes must take up the task.
- 8 Daniela Ciaffi in Chapter 11 starts by introducing the general picture in Italy as one of weak community engagement with urban policies. Through three case studies she exemplifies how community action in Italy is characterized by two extremes, one that is born by opposing major infrastructure projects and new buildings; and the other with a passive role with the objective of winning cash funding by supporting certain projects. The three case studies reveal the “life-cycle” of community planning (p. 202). In conclusion, there is a tendency in Italy “for community planning to be seen, exclusively, as planning with communities” (p. 213), and not linking it to government-led political processes. On the other hand, New York City’s community-based housing movement, introduced in Chapter 12, unlike the Italian case, evidences that the community-based housing organizations see a strategic advantage in community engagement. It introduces a very interesting interdependence of the city and the housing organizations of New York City in a kind of “co-production of public policy” different to that which distinguishes between planning produced by experts and local community action. In the past 25 years they have been joined by private developers and management companies that are producing affordable housing due to its non-risk due to high demand. Therefore, as Wolf-Powers concludes, “the success of New York City’s community-based housing movement... is certainly a function of its spatial and temporal context” (p.229). Chapter 13 includes qualitative research and detailed information of self-build groups in Germany. It explains how the act of building is very closely related to community planning through the case of Freiburg, famous for self-build groups that have emerged as a way to deliver new housing. The research developed answers the interesting question of “how has a collaborative approach to planning and housing development influenced the profile of the Vauban community and internal relations?” (p.238). This example evidences that “group-build led development creates high quality urbanism, place-making and

strong social relations” (p.255), when residents are free to shape their built environment. This is possible due to their freedom to control in decision-making on planning matters. This chapter evidences the potential of community power in an enabling governance framework.

- 9 Part 4 of the book introduces the topics of “scales, influence and integration” as part of the community action and planning relationship and the design of public policy. Through the example of four scales of the province of Ontario, with an interest in and impact on the Growth Plan, Pierre Filion shows “the emergence of communities of interest specific to each scale” (p.274). It links scaling with a weakened planning capacity to address urban problems. The chapter evidences that standardized approaches adopted by large-scale planning strategies do not relate with diverse neighborhood realities. Through a very interesting and different case from Norway, chapter 15 shows a different perspective on scales and actors in the case of Volda. Here the effects of scale are not so strong due to the fact that the community actors have genuine power. Public local planning in Norway functions as flexible planning which enables different stakeholders and the needs across scales. They have adopted the strategic decision to give “support to community action as a particular approach to project implementation and an extension of established planning processes in Norway.” (p. 296). “Self-governed local development” responds to communities need for greater local control. The Volda case has assigned communities with a more significant role to address their own needs and loosening planning control and responsibility with communities has been the right track. Nick Gallent introduces the role of support groups in community-based planning in England in chapter 16. Their role is important as they help to connect the communities to local state and service providers. Likewise, they are effective in providing technical support and providing an essential “learning bridge as an antidote to weak connectivity- central to the evolution of effective community planning” (p.319). He argues that there is a need to “connect to the citizenry” to inform all levels of decision making.
- 10 The final Chapter of the book reviews reflects on the integration of community action and planning into governance structures and its influence on broader policy-making and strategic direction of planning. Community action has been a way to “renew democracy and to find better ways of planning for, and providing services to, all kinds of places and all sort of community” (p. 333). Overall a book which gives great examples of community action, and how it relates to planning; a perspective more contemporary than ever.

AUTHORS

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Marco Adelfio is an Urban Planner with a PhD in Geography from the Autonomous University of Madrid (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid). His research focuses on multi-stakeholder processes and driving forces contributing to compact, mixed-use and socially sustainable urban/suburban development. He has expertise in mixing qualitative and quantitative methods, assessment of

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CARMEN MENDOZA ARROYO

Carmen Mendoza Arroyo is an architect and holds a PhD in Urban Design and Planning. She is assistant Director of the School of Architecture at the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC Barcelona). She combines teaching and research on the development of integrated approaches in urban regeneration projects. Specifically, she delves on a comprehensive methodology with special attention to physical and social characteristics of settlements in order to mitigate social and spatial schism in the understanding of space, place, and social order. She explores on design processes which incorporate an intercalary approach and the needs of local communities. Related to this line, she has developed plans, projects and research in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona, and informal settlements in Latin America. Her second line of research encompasses reconstruction and urban strategies in the field of emergency architecture and post-conflict situations. In this line, she is supervising research and focusing on methodologies for physical and social integration of refugees.