

eParticipation Challenging Urban Planning

Constructing local knowledge in the net

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While the Internet has become a common media, citizen associations and active residents especially in Helsinki and other big cities in Finland have been building up web sites of their own. In order to create local knowledge, residential web sites consist of local data which could be called "geographically situated social data" (social GIS). Urban planning and changes in people's living environment in general are often the most important issues which are brought up. People are activated in different situations: 1) crisis/threat to the area (social regression, unwanted constructions etc.) 2) need for improvements (more services, flats, parks etc.) 3) need for publishing strategic visions, arguments and manifestoes. At the same time with this new form of citizen activism the municipalities begun to carry on new communicative planning practices, which included more interaction with the citizen – as the new act on building and land use implied.

The aim of this doctoral study is to find new information of in which way active residents and citizen associations use the Internet in order to participate in local urban planning processes: what kind of tools they use, which kind of contents they produce and how these internet-based tools manage to improve their impact on urban planning issues concerning their own living environment. This new information may challenge the traditional planning process, expertise of the municipalities and even representative democracy as we know it today while concerning urban planning issues.

The use and impact of web tools in the hands of residents are studied and compared in three study areas: an older city quarter in Helsinki, a suburb built in the 70's in Vantaa and a new residential area in Espoo. Three kinds of tools are studied:

1. "ordinary" local web sites maintained by the residents - activists and associations - themselves as voluntary basis. These web sites identify themselves as home sites of a city quarter or a larger urban area.
2. community intranet tools: more or less closed intranets or extranets which require registration. They are used mainly as an internal communication tool for certain groups and individuals in the area. The initiators in these community networks are: the city (Nettilä in Vantaa), a research project in cooperation with the residents (Nettimaunula in Helsinki) and a commercial enterprise (Iverkko in Espoo).
3. special planning tools like interactive maps, web GIS-applications and mobile applications provided for the citizens by research projects. These applications are pilot projects and their purpose is to test and develop the use of this kind of web tools further. The study will concentrate on one specified example in each study area.

All of these tools stand for different approaches to the issue: they represent various working methods and functions. If the www-sites are clearly the "first phase" in the evolution of then Internet, intranet tools are the next phase. More advanced web applications will show the way to the future development.

The questions are:

- What kind of internet tools the residents use in order to affect the changes in residential urban areas?
- How are these tools used? Are new innovative working habits and modes of action produced?
- Which kind of impact these tools have? Does eParticipation lead to citizen empowerment in decision making concerning local city planning and do they improve interaction with the planners and civil servants?
- Does eParticipation support and create activist networks in the area?
- Does eParticipation initiate new ideas and help the residents to construct local knowledge?

These questions are approached by case studies including interviews of key actors in the study areas.

The thesis is preceded at the Laboratory of Urban Planning and Design, Department of Architecture in Helsinki University of Technology. The supervisor of the PhD work is Prof. Kimmo Lapintie. The aim is to complete the PhD degree in Technology at the HUT by the end of 2007.