

BOOK REVIEW

# Digital Tools for Participatory E-Planning and Community Development

*Reviewed by Carlos Nunes Silva, University of Lisbon, Portugal*

*Digital Tools in Participatory Planning*  
Sirkku Wallin, Liisa Horelli, and Joanna Saad-Sulonen (Eds.)

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This edited collection of essays offers an overview of digital tools for participatory urban planning and community development, applied in Finland in the last few years, in particular since the publication of the new Spatial Planning System (Land Use and Planning Act), in 2000. In addition, some of the essays included in this collection examine the consequences of these new participatory e-tools in the new Finnish spatial planning system, in a period of fast and far-reaching development of information and communication technologies in the country.

The book has six chapters covering examples of participatory GIS and public Web

portals designed for planning processes, as well as specialized tools for citizen participation in local development projects, namely through the use of GPS, Web 2.0 tools and interactive digital screens, plus an Introduction and a concluding chapter written by the three editors. The digital technologies explored in these chapters can be divided into three main categories: the first group comprises tools that were designed and used to collect data about the living environment, either for research purposes or for direct application in the planning process; the second includes tools used to advance the e-participation of different categories of urban stakeholders, including local citizens, in the planning and community development process; and the third includes tools and platforms that can be customized and co-developed by local citizens and other stakeholders within the broader context of urban governance.

In chapter 1, "SoftGIS as a Bridge-Builder in Collaborative Urban Planning," Maarit Kahila and Marketta Kytta examine the use of softGIS methods, as a geo-information tool to gather qualitative information on the living

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experiences of local inhabitants, an important input for urban planning studies. The article provides a comparison of SoftGIS methods.

In "Online Environments Shake up Urban Planning. Developing Local Internet Forums," Aija Staffans, Heli Rantanen, and Pilvi Nummi explore and describe the development and use of internet forums, conceived as arenas for citizen e-participation in urban planning and community development processes, based on the example of Espoo. As the authors explain, this web-based tool allows the transformation of local citizens' knowledge into a form that can be useful for the urban planning process.

Joanna Saad-Sulonen and Andrea Botero, in chapter 3 "The Urban Mediator as a Tool for Public Participation. A Case of Collaboration between Designers and City Planners," describe the participatory design, use and adaptation of the Urban Mediator tool, a platform for sharing, obtaining and gathering location-based information, in the context of traffic safety planning in Helsinki. For the authors, the use of collaborative design or participatory design approaches, derived from Scandinavian approach for the development of user-centered systems, in the creation or adaptation of digital tools for citizen e-participation, such as this one, should be embedded within the participatory process itself, and explain how such collaborative approach enables the creation of digital tools, or adaptation of pre-existent ones, to the needs of urban planners and citizens, making e-participation in urban planning easier and more relevant.

In "Technologies to Support Communication between Citizens and Designers in Participatory Urban Planning Process," Virtu Halttunen, Antti Juustila, and Johanna Nuojua describe an experiment, in which three new digital technologies, Web and mobile tools, were used to improve the communication between urban planners and citizens, and discuss the outcomes of such experiments. These three technologies make use of maps and location-based functionalities to support communication during the early stages of the urban planning process, allowing the acquisition of experiential and contextual local knowledge, in the

form of pictures, voice stories and comments, as well as discussions about plans and places. Although rather descriptive, the chapter offers useful indications on how to apply these digital tools and, for that reason, readers will find here a good starting point to begin the exploration of these technologies within urban planning participatory processes.

Anna Kanervo in "The Users as Co-producers on a Neighbourhood Website: The Local Perspective to ICT-tools and Urban Planning," describes, based on the concept of users as co-producers of digital online content, how the local website can provide equal opportunities for the participation of all urban stakeholders in the urban planning process, and how this type of participatory platform can act as an interface between the local community and the wider world outside it.

In the last chapter, "Developing a New Approach to e-Planning Within Community Development – The Case of Ubiquitous Helsinki," Liisa Horelli and Sirkku Wallin describe the use of Web 2.0 tools for community development, namely on how they can provide online opportunities to anticipate the future and to get feedback of progress in the planning process, illustrated by a case-study in Helsinki.

The tools employed in each of the cases described in the book, and the evidence provided seems to support the claim made by the editors and authors that the widespread use of information and communication technologies in urban planning is changing the way planners work, namely the form and relevance of citizen participation in the planning process. Although some of the chapters are a mere description of digital tools and of their application in a specific planning context or experience, in other cases the approach is more reflexive and theoretically oriented, and for that reason, the book as a whole is certainly a must read for students, researchers and practitioners in the field of urban e-Planning. And since new insights can emerge through comparative research, these e-Planning experiments should now be compared with similar cases in other planning cultures, in Europe and in other parts of the world.

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