

Heads I win, Tails you lose:

Information, power, and the illusion of choice in participatory planning

Diane Hopkins

Curtin University of Technology

Participatory planning is becoming an increasingly common means by which governments seek to make decisions on planning issues facing cities. Citizens and stakeholders participate in such processes in the hope of influencing planning decisions. Planning theorists propose the concept of technical rationality be replaced by a communicative rationality that values all information and knowledge. This shift in planning thought parallels an increase in participatory decision-making processes, particularly processes developed in accordance with deliberative democracy principles, being employed by governments. The Western Australian Government initiated a deliberative planning process, 'Dialogue with the City', in September 2003 to develop a long-term metropolitan plan for Perth. This paper argues that information about planning problems and their potential solutions was used selectively by the Government in this process to convey an illusion of choice for participants. Throgmorton (2003) describes planning as 'persuasive story-telling' about the future. These planning stories shape meaning and direct public attention, encouraging the adoption of preferred options (Forester 1989; Hillier 1993). Planners have significant power in public participation processes as they control the information participants consider and act upon. This paper examines the use of visual information in the 'Dialogue with the City' deliberative forum, the key participatory event in the process, and draws on the author's doctoral research. It is argued that information in the form of urban growth models for

the city was presented by the Government in a directed fashion so that participants would select a pre-determined option - choice was therefore an illusion.

Key words: public participation, deliberative democracy, information, power

Introduction

Citizens and stakeholders participate in participatory processes in the hope of influencing planning decisions. The way that participants seek influence over decisions that affect them is by expressing their preference for different planning options or choices offered in participatory processes. However, planners have significant power over the design, and hence outcomes, of participatory processes. This paper examines the role of visual information at the Western Australian Government's 'Dialogue with the City' deliberative forum in order to address the following question: Do participatory planning processes offer real choice, and hence influence, for participants or is the promise of choice in such processes only an illusion?

The role of knowledge in planning: from technocratic to communicative rationality

The main argument for involving the public in planning lies in a critique of the concept of rationality employed by planners that make decisions 'in-house'. Planning decision-making has traditionally been based upon processes that position technocratic rationality as the legitimacy base for expert decision-making. Faludi (1978:164) defines rationality as "*a feature of decision processes aiming to identify what best to do in given situations*". This concept of rationality is informed by the policy analysis tradition in planning (see Friedmann 1987; Healey 1997), which views planning as a procedural decision-making activity separate from normative questions about the form of cities and regions. Planning in this tradition therefore involves the formulation of options and evaluation of the impacts of those options based on scientific and technical knowledge, such as the modelling of urban form impacts. Since the concept of technocratic rationality was critiqued during the 1960s, there has been a widespread shift in the planning literature away from approaches to planning which insist that facts can be separated from values. These critiques argue that the technical analysis planners engage is not objective and

inevitably involves political values about the desired form of cities and regions. This shift in planning thought has led to many planning theorists advocating a participatory model of planning that employs a different concept of rationality (see Forester 1999; Healey 1997).

Planning theorists propose the use of a new concept of rationality that values all forms of information and knowledge, including personal stories and moral and emotive reasoning (Healey 1993, 1996, 1997; Innes 1998). The concept of communicative rationality, as presented in Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action, is proposed to replace technical rationality in planning decision-making. This alternative concept of rationality requires participatory decision-making processes whereby citizens engage in discussion and deliberate over planning matters. The rationality or value of arguments is determined by how convincing they are (Habermas 1984) in a process referred to as 'public deliberation' (Bohman 1996), 'argumentation' (Elster 1997; Healey 1996), 'public reasoning' (Cohen 1996) or 'dialogue' (Bohm 1990; Forester 1999; Gleeson & Low 2000). These decision-making processes value the opinions and preferences of laypersons as just as legitimate as those of the planner or 'expert'.

The critique of planners' legitimacy base of technical rationality has been accompanied by a growing recognition that planning decisions are political. Despite planning being widely accepted as a political activity in planning theory, the activity of planning is still considered to be separate from political goals by much of the profession. As Throgmorton (2003) argues, many practicing planners have the view that *"planning is purely a technical activity and politics is something that takes place downstream from the technical work and can only muck it up"* (Throgmorton 2003:128). The apparent consensus in planning theory that planning is a political activity suggests that the public should be involved in planning decisions (see Taylor 1998). The view of planning held by practitioners as highlighted by Throgmorton, however, reflects the concept of technical rationality and implies that planners may not see the need for public participation. As Hoch (1994) highlights, relying on technical knowledge in planning processes means that other forms of knowledge are excluded as inferior.

The danger of technocratic rationality comes...from the use of technical findings to discredit the legitimate purposes of others as irrelevant, self-interested, and stupid.

(Hoch 1994:296)

The privileging of technical knowledge is reflected in planners' attitudes to community views on planning issues. Citizens who seek to protect the amenity of their neighbourhoods are labelled by practicing planners as either emotional and irrational or self-interested. The implication of this attitude is that those citizens who object to or disagree with planning proposals are considered to be either ignorant or self-interested (i.e. NIMBYism). Local community opposition to planning proposals is often considered by planners to be the main problem with public participation exercises. Opposition to planning proposals are perceived to be a result of citizens being uninformed, misinformed, or selfish (Lukensmeyer & Brigham 2002). Citizens armed with the same information as planners and oriented toward the common or public good should therefore come to the same conclusion as planners over urban form matters.

Decision-making processes based on the theory of deliberative democracy have emerged, as illustrated by the 'Dialogue' case, as a way of overcoming the problem with uninformed and self-interested citizens dominating participation processes. Deliberative democracy, which refers to a method of political decision-making based on the public deliberation of citizens (Bohman 1998; Uhr 1998), requires citizens to give reasons to each other for their preferences in an open forum (Cohen 1997a; Cooke 2000; Elster 1997; Gaus 1997; Gutmann & Thompson 2002; Rawls 1997). These processes of deliberation therefore require participants to go beyond their self-interests and orient themselves towards the common good (Bohman 1998). The legitimacy of knowledge in these processes is therefore based upon the concept of public reason, as opposed to expert reason.

The strategic nature of planning and the planner's power over preference formation

Planners use communication, whether verbal, written or visual, strategically to influence urban form outcomes. As Dear (1989) argues, planning is a strategic activity that seeks to persuade

citizens and stakeholders of its proposed actions. Planners have significant influence over the formation of citizen preferences through their control of the design of decision-making processes and the information used to make planning decisions (see Forester 1989). Planners create what Throgmorton (2003) refers to as 'stories' that shape meaning and hence shape views on planning.

[planning stories]...shape *meaning* and tell readers (and listeners) what is important and what is not, what counts and what does not, what matters and what does not.

(Throgmorton 2003:128)

As Hillier (1993) argues, planners present information selectively to frame problems and their potential solutions, therefore encouraging their preferred option. Planners' close relationship to the state (Huxley 2000; Yiftachel 1998) means that politicians have significant influence over how problems and solutions are framed in planning processes. The agendas of elected representatives can therefore affect how participatory decision-making processes are designed and how information in these processes is presented.

Deliberative decision-making processes aim to arrive at a consensus based on the assumption that participants' views can be transformed through the process of deliberation. The goal of these processes is not to deliberately change people's views but rather this can occur anyway (see Bohm 1990; Cohen 1997b). Those that advocate deliberative decision-making argue that these processes can change participants' preferences as a side-effect of deliberation (see Forester 1999; Healey 1997; Innes & Booher 1999). Healey (1997) argues that individuals do not have fixed interests and arrive at their views through interaction with others. Participants' views about solutions to planning problems are therefore considered open to change through the process of listening to and learning about the preferences of other participants. This type of decision-making relies on 'deliberative' as opposed to 'strategic' rationality (see Smith & Wales 2000). The power of arguments is therefore central to deliberative decision-making processes.

Public participation, power, and information

Deliberative processes aim to remove the influence of power differences between participants. Held (1987) and Young (2001) argue that participatory processes can actually be less democratic than processes that do not allow for participation because the more powerful players can often dominate such participation. This problem can be overcome, according to deliberative democracy theory, by drawing on the power of argument to influence the outcome in a process where *"no force except that of the better argument is exercised"* (Habermas 1975:108). Power differentials between participants should therefore not affect the outcome of deliberative processes. Such decision-making processes only exhibit communicative rationality when they are free from coercion, deception, strategising, and manipulation (see Dryzek 2000). Deliberative processes aim to achieve these conditions by having a neutral facilitator and giving participants, whether citizens or key stakeholders, equal status in determining urban form outcomes. The concept of a neutral decision-making forum may not, however, be feasible within participatory processes organised and designed by planners.

Participatory processes offer citizens a degree of influence over decision-making. Planning in recent years has seen a shift from the decide-announce-defend model of participation to more collaborative approaches. Arnstein's (1969) much cited 'ladder of participation' argues that public participation in planning can be viewed on a continuum from non-participation to citizen control, depending on the level of power that citizens are given. Citizens therefore only have real influence over decisions when they are given power in partnership-style relationships. The 'Dialogue' case, which was presented as offering citizens significant influence, gave participants a choice of options for the future shape of their city. Providing a choice of options in public participation exercises overtly suggests that the public have a degree of power in choosing which option they would prefer. However, as discussed previously, planners may use information to direct participants toward their preferred option.

Participation processes that purport to give citizens influence over decisions can be considered manipulative if they seek to legitimise a decision that has already been made. As Arnstein

(1969) argues, public participation can be used to mask the real intentions of involving citizens in decision-making, whereby citizens are asked to participate so that their support can be engineered. Participation can be manipulated for the strategic purposes of planners (Flyvbjerg 1998) in order to ensure that their preferred option is chosen. Some participatory processes have the aim of developing a legitimate public mandate for a pre-determined planning decision.

...planning runs the risk of becoming a reinforcing exercise for predetermined decisions, where participation serves as window dressing, lending credibility to the decisions rather than actually helping to construct them.

(Hanna 2000:399)

The motivations behind such processes are therefore only pragmatic and do not seek to give citizens decision-making influence. Although participation is advocated by theorists for democratic reasons, as Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) argue, a preference towards participatory democracy is not a value widely held by practicing planners or politicians. In accordance with a preference for expert decision-making, participatory processes can be initiated to 'educate' citizens on planning matters. This intention, Arnstein (1969) argues, is also manipulative as planners decide the preferred option and design participation processes to lead participants toward that option.

Research of deliberate decision-making refers to the concept of informed participation as critical to the nature of such processes. Weeks (2000:361) states that being informed requires "*a knowledge of the basic elements of the problem...and about the consequences and tradeoffs associated with alternative policies*". Some studies of deliberative processes (see Smith & Wales 2000; Weeks 2000) refer to informed participation as a benefit of deliberation. The process of discussion with others is considered to result in participants having a broadened and more informed viewpoint. Practitioner accounts of deliberative processes indicate that educational materials are required to ensure participation is informed. Deliberative processes require that this material be: neutral and fair to all perspectives; represent the full range of

options; allow citizens to create new options; and have credibility with all stakeholders (Lukensmeyer & Brigham 2002). Who produces this information? Who decides the range of options? Decisions about what to include and exclude in information packages given to participants are strategic and are likely to conform to the argument those organising the process want to convey.

Information, whether verbal, written, or visual, has a powerful role in influencing the outcome of participatory processes. Most studies concerned with the communicative work of planners focus on written and verbal discourse. The role of visual images, such as maps and plans, are pivotal to planning yet visual information has largely gone unexamined. As Throgmorton (2003) argues, images can be powerful emotional tools used to persuade others. This paper examines a set of images used to direct participation in the 'Dialogue' deliberative forum.

The participatory design of 'Dialogue': deliberative democracy in action

Perth's previous metropolitan plans (Stephenson-Hepburn Plan, 1955; Corridor Plan, 1970; Metroplan, 1990) have been formulated by planners with little public input, limited to comment on the finalised documents. 'Dialogue' was presented by the Western Australian Government as departing significantly from previous metropolitan planning processes:

...for the first time in WA, citizens have been given the opportunity to be involved in planning decisions that shape their suburbs.

(MacTiernan 2003b)

It was a process that promised citizens real influence in the decision-making process. 'Dialogue' was initiated with the *"aim of making Perth the world's most liveable city by the year 2030"* (MacTiernan 2003a). The Planning Minister also referred to 'Dialogue' as a *"process to determine what to do about our urban sprawl"* (MacTiernan 2004a:14). The process was initiated by the Government in the context of high costs of servicing development on the fringe

of the city and increasing opposition to planning proposals to increase density within existing suburbs.

The 'Dialogue' process consisted of a number of participation events, with the key component being a deliberative community forum held in September 2003. The forum's overall design was based on a '21st century town meeting' model, developed by non-profit organisation AmericaSpeaks (Hartz-Karp 2004; MacTiernan 2003a). The day began with several oral presentations from the Government and its guest speakers. The participation then proceeded with individual and group discussion and feedback to specific questions about planning for Perth, see figure 2 below.

Figure 2: 'Dialogue with the City' deliberative forum questions

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1. What are your key hopes for the future of metropolitan Perth?
 2. To become the world's most liveable city, what aspects of metropolitan Perth do we need to make sure we keep?
 3. To become the world's most liveable city, what changes would need to be made?
 4. What scenario would best help us achieve the aspects we have prioritised to make Perth the world's most liveable city?
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The second part of the forum was based on the format of a 'regional planning game' designed by Fregonese Calthorpe Associates (Hartz-Karp 2005). The game required participants to 'role-play' a planner (WAPC 2005) by deciding where an additional population of 650,000 (forecasted in 2030) should live and work.

The nature of visual information in 'Dialogue': balanced or biased?

The Western Australian Government considered informed participation as a key feature of its deliberative forum. A more informed knowledge of planning issues for Perth was to be achieved by: sending participant's information packs; having presentations on the forum day; and getting

participants to take part in a role-playing game. This information was intended to get citizens to understand the trade-offs and complexities involved in planning for a growing city. Providing participants with information on the issues was seen as an important way to “encourage deliberation rather than relying on opinion” (Government of Western Australia 2003:1). Written, verbal, and visual information was therefore a pivotal component of the 'Dialogue' forum. The specific types of information provided to participants are documented in figure 3 below.

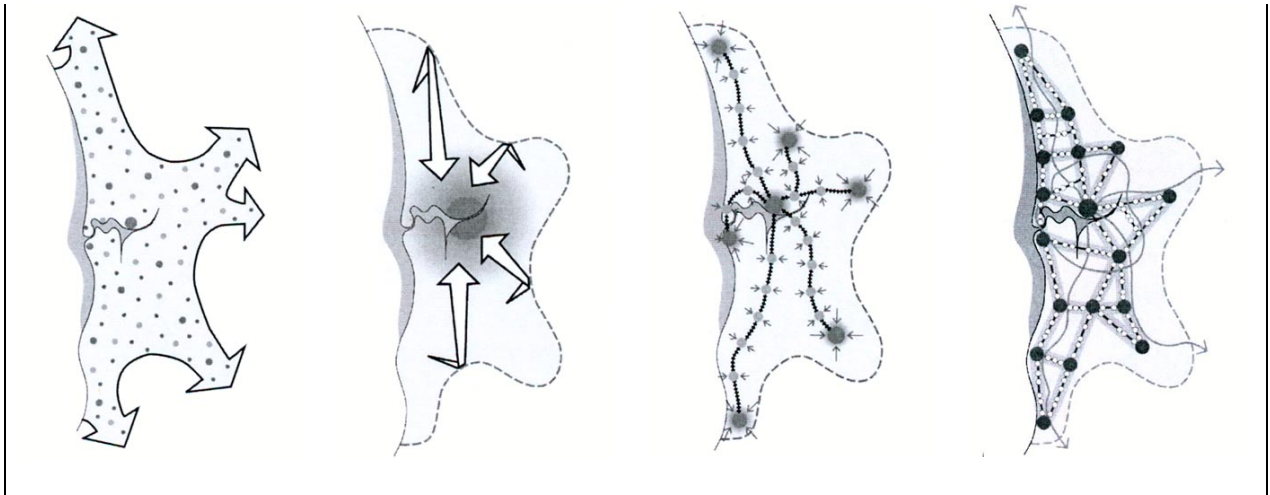
Figure 3: Information for 'Dialogue' forum

Written	Verbal	Visual
Issues papers	Oral presentations	Video footage
Brochures	Verbal instructions	Urban growth models
Website material	Facilitator contribution	Game map
Written instructions	Participant discussion	Game chips

The key piece of information provided to participants was a set of four urban growth models that they were to choose from to guide the future planning of the city. Participants were provided with four urban growth choices for Perth: the dispersed city; the compact city; the multi-centred city and the connected networks city (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Urban form options used in the 'Dialogue' community forum
(Government of Western Australia 2004a)

DISPERSED	COMPACT	MULTI-CENTRED	CONNECTED NETWORK
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The visual presentation of these models, as shown above, clearly increases with complexity from the dispersed city model to the connected network city model. The dispersed and compact models are rather cartoon-like in comparison to the multi-centred and connected network models. The higher level of visual detail in the connected network option suggests a greater degree of sophistication in this urban growth model, which is more likely to appeal to participants. Given the way these images are presented, it is not surprising that the connected network was the preferred model of the author of these images, as indicated in the author's own research.

The written and verbal information accompanying these models also suggested that the connected network model was the preferred option. The dispersed city model was referred to in this material as the 'status quo' for Perth, defined as the urban form that had created all the problems that the city currently faces. The other three models advocate increased density within the existing city boundary. Of these, the compact city model, which increases density in central areas, was presented as being unrealistic for Perth, given the city's existing low density form. The multi-centred city, which increases density in centres along major transport routes, was identified as the model that guided Perth's previous metropolitan plans, *The Corridor Plan* and *Metroplan*. Participants were informed that these plans had failed to achieve their aims. The connected networks model, which increases density in many smaller centres along major public transport routes, was presented as a new urban form model that could be realistically

achieved in Perth. While this framing of the options suggests to participants that one option is the most suitable, it is also recognised that providing balanced information on planning issues is problematic because the profession often has a dominant view on what makes a good urban form.

The role of planning: information, education, or manipulation?

The Government has argued that providing perspectives from all groups is critical to deliberative processes (MacTiernan 2004a). The information provided to participants, however, focused on the negative aspects of low-density development. The issues paper given to participants prior to the day posed the question: *“Should Perth grow outwards or should we make better use of existing land?”* Perth's urban sprawl was presented by the Government as the source of the city's problems. This framing of the problem affected participants' interpretation of the best urban form option. Not surprisingly, the connected network city model was the preferred option of participants (35%), followed by the multi-centred city (29%), the compact city (22%) and the dispersed city (13%) (see Government of Western Australia 2003).

A number of concerns were raised by participants about the content of the information presented to them during the forum. Some participants felt that the information was biased against low density urban form: *“the forum was direct against urban sprawl”* (forum participant). Others argued that the forum directed participants towards the connected network model: *“the organisers of the forum had already decided on the best scenario and delegates were cajoled into accepting it”* (forum participant). The Government therefore influenced which 'facts' participants were given and hence promoted an option that they preferred, in accordance with what planning theorists say about the strategic actions of planners (see Forester 1989; Hillier 1993; Throgmorton 2003).

The concept of an informed public was linked to the educative role of planning. The planners identified the process as representing a move away from the decide-announce-defend model of public participation to the profile-educate-participate model. Educating participants was

therefore seen as an important part of the deliberative process. Planners deciding what information citizens should be 'educated' with assumes, in accordance with a technocratic concept of rationality, that planners should decide what urban form is in the public's interest. Throgmorton (2003) argues that planning is necessarily strategic and planners should use information to encourage their preferred vision for cities and regions. Is education toward a preferred view a legitimate role for planners in deliberative processes? Arnstein (1969) argues that participatory processes that have the aim of educating participants in order to gain support are manipulative. If participatory processes do not have the aim of giving citizens some influence over planning decisions, then what purpose do they serve?

The 'Dialogue' case indicates that the need to educate citizens toward a preferred outcome reflects a pragmatic need of governments to gain support for their planning proposals. The deliberative forum was seen by the Government as necessary for generating a mandate for government action.

There are considerable advantages in large-scale community deliberation...Government acquires the legitimacy to carry out plans that otherwise they may not have been able to achieve.

(MacTiernan n.d.)

The outcome of the 'Dialogue' process, the *Network City* strategy for Perth, was referred to as "*a community-generated planning vision*" (MacTiernan 2004b). This suggests that it was important that the outcome of the forum was seen to be developed by citizens rather than government planners. This was necessary to reduce potential opposition to policies for increasing density that would inevitably occur from implementation of the *Network City* strategy. While the rhetoric of the process suggests that citizens were given a full choice and the outcome was their vision, a decision had already been made as to what the outcome should be. The 'Dialogue' forum was therefore designed to gain support and legitimacy for the Government to increase densities within the existing boundary of the city.

Conclusion

Deliberative processes adopt the concept of communicative rationality, as opposed to technocratic rationality to guide decision-making. In the 'Dialogue' case, however, scientific urban form models were employed to direct participants to a preferred option - the connected network city. The use of different levels of visual detail in these images, as well as the verbal and written explanations of these urban form models, encouraged participants to choose the preferred option of the planners. The process therefore carried only an illusion of choice for participants. The examination of the 'Dialogue' deliberative forum raises an important, yet unresolved, question for planners: should planners use their power in participatory processes to promote a preferred urban form outcome for cities and regions? And, perhaps more importantly, does the use of this power represent manipulation?

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