

Preface

Most first books are autobiographical, and this work is no exception. My interest and commitment to the topics addressed in this book were inspired and shaped by my early experiences as a graduate student at MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning. MIT introduced me to the power and potential of new technologies and nurtured my optimism in the positive uses of information technologies. While working with young people in Boston, I became confident that digital technologies like GIS could be used to understand and solve complex social problems. Initially, I believed that the tools and the analyses were central to problem solving. However, during the short time I worked as a neighborhood planner at the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), I learned the hard way that the best tools, techniques, and analyses could not ensure the survival of good planning ideas. One had to understand how planning was actually done, both in the trenches, and in City Hall. From that time, I have been attuned to the complex interplay between the technical/analytical and the institutional/political aspects of day-to-day planning practice. The opening chapter of this book frames some of these complexities.

It's no secret that day-to-day planning can be quite banal – meetings and more meetings, internal discussions, public hearings, glitzy presentations, punctuated with an occasional knock-down-drag-out war of words between irate citizens and hapless professional planners. At the most interesting and productive of these meetings, described in the case studies that form Part II of this book, something very special occurs; ordinary citizens reason together, share data and information, they ask analytical questions of professional planners. Professional planners who participate in these community meetings are respectful, articulate without being condescending, well prepared, and willing to share useful information with the community. It was while attending these meetings that I discovered the real power of digital technologies like GIS. People came together to look at maps and data and the tools, rather than being a hindrance, improved the quality of community conversations. The theoretical discourse about planning practice and the digital revolution, including the promise and some of the intended and unintended consequences of technology adoption for planning are discussed in Chaps. 1 and 2.

In the early 1990s, many community-based organizations (CBOs) were becoming interested in using digital technologies. There seemed an inherent contradiction – watching poorly funded grass roots groups go hi-tech. Intrigued, I

conducted a research study through which I learned that community-based organizations (CBOs) were using digital technologies to improve organizational efficiencies, facilitate group processes, and influence negotiations. Since the time I first conducted my research in the mid-late 1990s, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of community organizations that use digital technologies to encourage and support public involvement in planning. The factors that facilitated this growth and the resultant impacts are discussed in Chaps. 3 and 4.

Until recently, mainstream planning practice has had an ambivalent relationship with the notion of public participation. Very often, professional planners are likely to limit discussions about participation to a single empirical question – how many people showed up? “Bums on seats” is a measurable indicator, but very often an irrelevant one. Sometimes, even the people who call the meeting are unclear about the significance of high or low attendance numbers. Did the outreach strategy work well? Is the issue being considered a hot-button issue? Are people participating because they are afraid of change or because they embrace it? The three case studies in Chaps. 5, 6, and 7 provide some answers to these questions.

Fortunately, the culture of planning is changing. One of the first Executive Orders that President Obama signed upon taking office in 2009 concerned itself with transparency and open government. It states:

“Government should be participatory. Public engagement enhances the Government’s effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions. Knowledge is widely dispersed in society, and public officials benefit from having access to that dispersed knowledge. Executive departments and agencies should offer Americans increased opportunities to participate in policymaking and to provide their Government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information. Executive departments and agencies should also solicit public input on how we can increase and improve opportunities for public participation in Government” (Presidential Executive Order on Transparency and Open Government, 1/21/2009).

Even with these hopeful winds of change in the air, one wonders how does Government go about creating an open, transparent, and participatory planning process – is it feasible, is it sustainable, and more importantly, are the decisions made through such open processes fundamentally better than those decisions made by the power elite? Chapters 8, 9 and 10 provide some strategies to implement participatory and open planning as well as strategies for assessment and evaluation.

Who should read this book? Over the past 20 years, I have observed that there is a persistent digital divide in planning research, practice, and education. The worlds of the “techies” and the “activists”, i.e., the advocates of participatory planning do not intersect as often as they should. In this book, I strive to bring these two communities and the work that they do closer together to demonstrate the necessary convergences that must occur if we are to improve the quality of civic engagement. I want my research and writing to both usable and useful to practitioners; for this reason, the book blends theory with practice in every chapter. The primary audience for this book is practicing planners, particularly those working within local/regional planning agencies, policymakers, agency heads, public involvement professionals, community organizers and activists. Likewise, researchers working to develop

digital tools to support participatory planning and those working to improve the quality of public involvement in planning may benefit from reading about my experiences in the field. Anyone who wants to design and implement participatory planning activities can use this book to consider the pros and cons of integrating GIS and other technologies in these activities.

The book is organized in three parts: In Chap. 1, I establish my case for the need to consider the role of digital technologies in participatory planning and decision-making in the context of planning practice. In Chap. 2, I review the literature about digitally enabled planning practice, with a particular focus on spatial technologies, discussed under the rubric of PPGIS. The myriad contradictions of PPGIS are more rigorously examined in Chap. 3 in order to provide a more coherent understanding and synthesis of the literature. In Chap. 4, the state of PPGIS practice, the results of a national survey of PPGIS activities are discussed to delineate the tensions and disconnects from the world of theory.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are case studies, describing events and activities that are quite different from each other. Chapter 6 provides some insights into community-based planning, specifically the work of an organized coalition working in one Boston neighborhood. Chapter 7 describes the experiences of a university acting as a facilitator of collaborative planning in the Village of Oak Park. Chapter 8 provides the tremendous efforts taken by a regional planning agency to engage the citizenry in envisioning the future of the region. In each of these situations, different types of technologies and modalities were deployed in the service of the participatory planning ideal. I selected cases where I had extensive in-depth knowledge, lived experiences, a good understanding of the context of the case itself, and personal familiarity with many of the activities undertaken to achieve project goals, as a researcher, a participant-observer, or as one of the activist-academics engaged in project implementation. One of the shortcomings of this approach is the possibility of bias, of reading into the situation, particular meanings and interpretations that confirm to previously held opinions. To avoid this from happening, I have corroborated my observations as extensively as possible. The conclusions I draw, are mine, supported with evidence drawn from archival materials since many of the participants and initiators of the participatory activities are no longer involved with the projects. In one case, one of the key initiators of the participatory work is no longer alive. I compare and contrast the case studies using a meta-evaluation framework in Chap. 8. My goal is to develop and use this evaluation framework to take a critical look at many more PPGIS implementation efforts, so that we can develop a robust understanding of PPGIS implementation.

The discussion in Chap. 9 discusses the demands that participatory planning approaches place on planners and planning institutions. In Chap. 10, I provide a synthesis and a set of guidelines that can help practitioners create and sustain effective participatory planning projects that incorporate a wide range of digital technologies.

Although I formally began working on this book only 2 years ago, I have actually been writing this book in my head for a long time. A very special thanks to

Bill Huxhold for writing *An Introduction to Urban GIS*; it inspired and opened up a world of possibilities for me. Along the way, I have been influenced, stimulated, advised, and challenged by educators, professional colleagues, community activists and mentors. My thanks to Alex Alexander, Cheryl Ajirotutu, Tom Angotti, Mike Barndt, Mike Batty, MacCanon Brown, Paul Bloyd, Will Craig, Uri Cohen, Judy Colby-George, Andrea D'Amato, Antonia Darder, Ralph Gakenheimer, Joe Ferreira, Roslyn Foskey, Jill Gross, Nacho Gonzalez, Dick Klosterman, Charlie Hoch, Joyce King, Mel King, Leigh Kunde, Melinda Laituri, Ian Masser, Hubert Morgan, Gary Moore, Tim Nyerges, Tom O'Malley, Amos Rapoport, Sue McNeil, Aimée Quinn, Eswaran Selvarajah, A.N. Sengupta, Mike Shiffer, Vonu Thakuriah, Harry Van Oudenallen, Steve Ventura, Doug Walker, Karen Witten, and the late Don Schön, who inspired me and sharpened my thinking about participatory planning practice using digital technologies. The conclusions in Chap. 9 are my own, but they are in all likelihood influenced and shaped by these interactions.

At Hunter College, formal and informal conversations with my students, especially Stephanie Camay, Kate Ervin, Scott Giering, Jason Nu, José Pillich and Deb Stattel have kept me thinking about public participation and the role of digital technologies even when I was not actively working on the book. Richard Amanna, my research assistant helped me immensely in implementing the PPGIS survey discussed in Chap. 4 and in analyzing the data. Brock Doerr, my former student and research assistant provided invaluable assistance by creating publication-ready figures and charts. My academic colleagues at Hunter College, particularly those in the departments of Geography and Urban Planning have encouraged and supported my professional development since I came at Hunter College in Fall 2004; they deserve my thanks and appreciation.

Since I began my academic career, many administrators have helped me with practical advice and assistance; special thanks to Mary Bates, Bob Buckley, Adjie Henderson, Peter Hosking, Albert Schorsch III, and Richard Stayner. The PPGIS conferences I attended and helped to organize under the auspices of the Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (URISA), as well as other synergistic activities sponsored by the National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis (NCGIA) and the University Consortium of Geographic Information Science (UCGIS) have been invaluable in facilitating connections to an active community of scholars and practitioners.

A special shout out to my friends, especially Alberto, Aimée, Brinda, Gowri, John, Len, Mel, Siva, Susan and Sue. Amma, Appa, and Erika, your words of encouragement will always be appreciated and cherished. Last, but not the least, this book is dedicated to my most loyal friend and fiercest critic, Jochen Albrecht. Thanks for reading draft chapters, providing both encouragement and useful feedback, and helping in a thousand different ways so that I could finish this project.

I have participated in many community-based planning initiatives in the United States and abroad. Over the years, I've acquired firsthand experience about the power and value of doing participatory planning using a variety of digital tools. I am delighted to share some of my insights with you. In reading this book, I hope

that you come to recognize that participatory planning, with or without GIS, is difficult, messy, and time-consuming work. But it is work that must be done to achieve the goals of fairness, equality, and social justice.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-540-75400-8>

Geographic Information Science and Public
Participation

Ramasubramanian, L.

2008, XIV, 163 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-540-75400-8