Women and the Changing Scene of Planning

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This paper deals with women’s role in participatory planning and environmental politics. The latter are major platforms where societal and ecological change is dealt with. Women’s opportunities to contribute to the new “strategic planning” are analysed on the basis of the author’s experience with participatory planning with children and women in Finland. The conclusions indicate that the use of a flexible methodological “tool kit” and the consideration of planning as part of environmental politics may contribute not only to the participation of women, but also to an alternative version of strategic planning from different positions. In the long run, it may have an impact on environments to become more congruent with the needs of women and those of nature.

Keywords: participatory planning, strategic planning, feminist research, methodological tool kit.

How to manage change and diversity is one of the key issues facing the world today. This is also an area where expectations for contributions are high from women. The world is changing so rapidly that any new approaches or ideas are welcome.

Feminist research is currently at an interesting phase. It accepts diversity among women as a starting point. Different kinds of women’s knowledge due to varying backgrounds and contexts is at the core of a new epistemology. The latter aims at legitimising political and theoretical action, not with reference to universal values, but to specifically situated and therefore accountable positions (Braidotti, 1994:43). How can this diversity be turned into a strength? How can a new collectivity of differences be built? How can this diversity contribute to the planning of supportive environments?

A partial solution can be found in Rosi Braidotti’s plea for a participatory theory of development from different positions. This approach implies a continuous negotiation or even struggle over meanings and representations of different fields. Planning and environmental politics are major platforms where societal and ecosocial change and development are dealt with. On the basis of feminist literature and my experience with development research on participatory planning with children and women in Finland I will analyse women’s opportunities to contribute to the new planning system and methodology. This contribution may enhance the building up of a participatory theory of planning and environmental politics from different positions. In the long run it may have an impact on environments to become more congruent with the needs of women and also those of nature.

TRANSFORMING THE PLANNING SYSTEM

An opportunity or menace for women?

Regional/spatial planning and the varying systems of planning have always reflected the current styles and regimes of governance. The rapid change in western societies is coupled with pressure to develop a democratic infrastructure which will match the needs of various new interest groups wanting to participate in the shaping of their living environments. The organisation of urban planning in societies, which are based on political systems of representative democratic constitutions, takes the form of representative planning by experts and by a few selected key groups. This classical, hierarchical, regional and urban planning system, which was suitable to society and the state of economic and technological development in the early days of this century, has now become obsolete (cf. Fassbinder, 1995; Figure 1).
As an instrument it is too slow and rigid to be able to respond to the rapidly increasing timeschedules and demands of new actors.

After a shift towards iterative project planning in the 1970s and to a later ideological abandonment of “planning” fostered by slogans, such as privatisation, deregulation and decentralisation, the 1990s are faced with a public discourse on “strategic planning”. As the development of regions and cities can no longer be steered through well-timed, deductive sequences with the classic instruments of land-use planning and zoning, it is hoped that strategic planning will give a better solution.

In strategic planning, the urban development or master plan is no longer a description of how the city will be when it is finished. Instead, it is a large, graphic vision of the whole area, which serves as an input and orientation for discussion and interaction among all planning levels and participating parties. The latter may be private actors with different origins and interests as well as organisations for the common good and public authorities.

Strategic planning deals with a new legitimized interplay of different kinds of plans and means of creating vision and consensus (Fassbinder, 1995). Some of the classic planning instruments of control and their legal implications are retained and they continue to serve as a means of land use control and final regulation. They are, however, supplemented by different kinds of graphic analyses in the form of design options and competitions, and an array of discursive planning modes, such as planning forums, partnership groups, round-tables, forums, and charette (cf. Figure 2). The different measures to improve decision-making and vision-formation are not ranked according to hierarchical ideals, but enter the “planning game” simultaneously. The result can be called “A Neural Net”, which is a metaphor for a phenomenon that can be seen from varying angles.

In strategic planning, the strictly spatially oriented definition of urban planning and development has to give room for social, ecological, organisational, and cultural approaches. The broad discussion — communicative dialogue — is the building block and glue of the methodological framework of planning (Fassbinder, 1995).

The procedural characteristics of this new regional and urban planning are transparancy, communicability and citizen influence. It must also be able to stand a great deal of internal conflicts and a continuous dialogue without one coherent goal.

Consequently, there is hope that regional and urban planning will become a playground open to all. It is no longer the exclusive domain of experts, the government and business. The role of the public authorities will be that of a visionary mediator in the dynamic urban network. In addition, care for the public good (including the “interests” of nature) and supervision of the rights of weak groups remain the tasks of the public authority.

The model of strategic planning seems to be able to expand opportunities for women to participate in the development of their living environments. This has been the case in local municipal planning, for instance in Norway, where women have succeeded in altering the process and content of planning (Saeterdal & Tackle, 1991).

What about the large scale strategic projects, such as Rem Koolhaas’ EuroLille. The latter are conceived as major building blocks of regional economic development in Europe. They have an impact not only on the lives of millions of people but on the balance of the surrounding ecosystem as well! These gigantic projects are often imbedded in larger, preeminent planning con-
cepts, which often are contrary to the goals of women interested in the impact on weak groups and nature.

One condition for the involvement of women in strategic planning is the provision of appropriate tools for participating in the negotiations over meanings and infrastructures.

**New tools for planning and development**

If participatory planning and development work are taken seriously, they should be based on a communicative learning process, which is enhanced by appropriate tools and techniques (Kukkonen, 1984; Horelli, 1995). Kolb's model of experiential learning provides an example of the hermeneutic-action circle which is at the core of participatory planning (cf. Figure 3).

Each phase ranging from action to personal experience, reflective observation and conceptualisation should be enhanced by a variety of enabling methods or tools, which allow the facilitator — planner or designer — to be sensitive to differences of age, gender, class and ethnicity.

The tools consist of the following group of enabling methods, which may facilitate the process of change on the individual, group, community, and even regional level:

1. **Creative and expressive techniques**, which, on the one hand, sensitize or liberate individual participants from the constraints of their experiences with traditional designs, such as fantasy trips, open scores, sensory walks, etc. These tools can also comprise methods, such as topoanalysis, which may enhance the construction of self via space. On the other hand, these methods urge participants to express their ideas through different means, such as drawing, modelling, drama, poetry, and video. Information technology and telematics are major instruments belonging to this group in the future.

2. **Situational techniques**, which structure the collective situation in a way that learning becomes easier, conflicts can be negotiated and new ideas are communicated. Examples are “futures workshops”, stadtfora, democratic dialogues, panels, exhibitions (Jungk &

![Figure 3. The circle of experiential learning facilitated by appropriate tools (Kolb, 1984).](image-url)
Mullert, 1987; Fassbinder, 1995). These techniques provide means for the facilitator to be sensitive to class, cultural and gender differences. There is, however, no general rule to decide whether a group should be mixed or homogenous.

3 Conceptual strategies, which assist in dealing with socio-cultural, organisational and societal issues of the community. These often consist of the application of new conceptual models, which help to set about re-organising the local traffic system, renovating neighbourhood facilities or assist in understanding available strategies (cf. Figures 1 and 2). Thus some of the techniques in this group are theoretical tools, which comprise the use of local theories or even concepts of feminist theories, which in the form of feedback expand the learning potential of participants.

4 Political techniques are an area that is rarely dealt with in planning literature. They comprise all the methods with which participants can influence the political choice of the focus, defining of the goals, etc. The use of media, arrangement of public happenings, modes of organising and networking are major means of raising attention and coming visible.

5 Traditional research and evaluation methods consisting of data gathering techniques (thematic interviews, questionnaires, focused groups, the use of archives) and methods of analysis and interpretation are also important because of their provision of feedback.

PLANNING AS PART OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Participatory planning is thus conceived as a combination of action, communication and research (Wisner et al., 1991). The elaboration of a rich methodological package is one prerequisite for women to have access to the new planning arenas. The focus on the application of methods and tools does not, however, mean that the planning question can be reduced to a methodological issue. Feminist writers (Kaul, 1995) give evidence of the importance for women to put planning into a larger historical and societal context.

The societal context in which women can start raising new important questions with consequences for the content of planning, is environmental politics. A recent study on women’s perspectives in environmental politics in Finland (Horelli, 1995) reveals that women have a multidimensional, holistic and bottom-up approach to environmental issues. It covers, in addition to the the “big” questions dealing with energy, agricultural and industrial policy, also the pre-occupation with nature, the near environment, and above all the infrastructures of everyday life. Although “environmental politics” is not a familiar concept to women, its scope and meaning seems to be close to a survival strategy, which may provide conditions for a more ecological and human culture — even for a good life. Thus, women associate environmental politics with equal opportunities and ethics.

The study reveals that women have many different and even conflicting views. Not only does the focus of issues vary from the direct near environment to structural and societal solutions, but the level of action also extends from personal involvement with environmental care to functioning as an activist in pressure groups, as an administrator or a political decision maker (cf. Figure 4).

Women tend to prefer strategies which transcend different sectors, views and levels of action. These include new administrative praxis, such as sending bureaucrats out in the field, various kinds of experiments, the “greening of the economy”, local, regional, national and international networking, and above all a new concept of knowledge. The latter entails a constructive and pragmatic knowledge which increases the capacity to act and solve problems (Gibbons et al., 1994).

Women seem to have a great need for theories, which combine both ecological and sociocultural aspects of the living environment or which show the mediating mechanisms between macrolevel decisions and the ecosocial and spatial conditions of everyday life. Consequently, environmental politics expand the scope and depth of interest and contribute to the substantive theory of planning.

CONCLUSIONS

The transforming system of planning may be an opportunity for women, if they are sensitive to the new require
ments for communication and negotiation abilities. The adoption of a new methodological tool kit, presented in the paper, may offer one solution to the new situation. Another solution is the expansion of the concept of planning to become part of environmental politics. The former is a contribution to the procedural theory and the latter to the substantive theory of planning.

The requirements above are, in fact, great challenges to both women and men. This paper is based on a women-centered approach, which advocates that women have to be critically avant-garde by adopting new planning systems and by developing multidimensional environmental and urban theories capable of transcending different levels and sectors. In addition, women have to be conservative by applying an ethic which is based on a rationality of ecosocial responsibility. The social shaping of planning and development will most certainly profit from expanding the women-centered approach into the gender perspective (Levy, 1995). Then the diversity of current situations can be dealt with by taking into account the different roles, access to and control of resources, and the varying personal and strategic gender interests of women and men.

**Figure 4.** Women’s environmental strategies transcend different views, sectors and levels of action.

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**REFERENCES**


