

## Book review

### **Creative Community Planning: Transformative Engagement Methods for Working at the Edge**

Wendy Sarkissian and Dianna Hurford. Earthscan, London, 2010, ISBN 978-1-84407-703-8, £19.99, 336 pp.

It has probably not escaped your notice that we now live in a world where no single group, faction or power interest wields unilateral control over planning and change. Gone are the days when politicians and corporations, counselled perhaps by lawyers and scientists, made plans and took decisions independent of the opinions and wishes of those affected by such interventions. You may miss the good old days but 'consult and adapt' has largely replaced 'command and control' as the dominant planning paradigm. The associated transformation in the function of professional and lay communities in planning processes necessitated new techniques to ensure that previously ignored voices were given the opportunity and tools to articulate their concerns, aspirations, ideas and views. We are not short of labels to describe such techniques; but we are short of evidence that they are effective or valuable; in fact, we struggle to define what it means for such techniques to be effective or valuable.

Sarkissian and Hurford's contribution is illustrative of the growing literature reporting experiences with collaborative planning and engagement. Eschewing any pretence at theory, they immerse the reader in a series of case studies which demonstrate how they and their colleagues have helped communities 'talk about beauty, poetry and dreams alongside arterial roads, public parks and housing'. Their emphasis on 'working at the edge' appears to relate to both the working practices they adopt (rooted in the creative arts) and the conformity-breaking journeys on which they accompany communities. This is very much a book about, and largely for, engagement practitioners; perhaps not to be read linearly – as the format frustrates extended concentration – but as a series of motivational vignettes. However, the book deserves a slightly wider readership and would be of interest to anyone with ambitions to explore options for change collaboratively.

However, readers should be prepared to distinguish between the practical and scholastic merits of this contribution. As a descriptive catalogue of creative community engagement experiences there is little to fault. A multitude of richly expressive stories are presented and the 30 odd pages of technique narratives, guidance, references and so on at the back of the

book are an excellent resource for practitioners. There are also plenty of novel ideas and concepts which readers may not have encountered (e.g. heart-storming). The ability of the creative arts to provide an expressive and blame-free environment for individual and communal exploration of problem sets and desirable futures is repeatedly demonstrated throughout the book.

The lesson appears to be that not only do the creative arts have a role to play as a form of expression, but that they function as a discourse through which contrasting views can be negotiated. Such claims are only implicitly voiced in the text but they do spawn some nagging questions. Do these experiences engender better outcomes (in any sense), and how would we know? Does the use of the creative arts yield qualitatively different outcomes to those achieved using other approaches to participative planning? Do creative arts-based processes attract a particular type of participant? (Linking people and planet through art, poetry, drama, role play and so on would, I suspect, drive many people away.) Although the authors have not set out to answer these questions, their contribution would be all the more convincing if they had engaged with it. From this perspective, the experience of reading the book verges between disappointing and exasperating. There is too little detail provided on how facilitators steer and shape engagement processes, no discussion of how techniques and tools were selected, and little appreciation of the limitations of specific techniques under specific circumstances.

In terms of content, format and composition, the volume has conflicting features. It is host to a good index but a rather worthless set of supporting photographs, which do nothing to enhance understanding or illustrate described processes. The incidental poetry and conversational script style of composition started off as a mild distraction but soon became wearisome, and the preface would have benefited from a brief passage explaining the point or value of each chapter.

As noted above, this is first and foremost a book by and for practitioners. If you yearn for the good old days when consultation was something your doctor undertook and engagement involved no more than two people and a ring, you may find it a rather disagreeable read. If, on the other hand, you are interested in how to stimulate imaginative dialogue on planning issues, you need look no further for inspiration.

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