SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORM FOR STIMULATING URBAN CHANGES

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Images have always been an important part of city planning – current images of place, images with planned improvements, maps and sketches. Some time ago all that was a private property of stakeholders like planner and client. But nowadays this confidentiality rather much has vanished – no copyrights or competition is noteworthy. Plans do not have their privacy anymore. They are exposed even before they got implemented. This article will display why city planners share the images of their ideas, of their dreams in public (mostly in blogs and social networks) – why it is important for them and what kind of feedback they are waiting for. This article is based on case study where 12 respondents (urban planners, architects, lecturers) were interviewed. They explained their own experience and how this type of communication with a wider public inspires some new initiatives and even realisation of some plans. This article is an insight of nowadays communication between planners and society that can result in some practical outcomes.

Keywords: city planning, communication, idea sharing, images, indirect communication, urban planners, visual imagination.

Introduction

The Internet has become the most powerful source of communication that can mobilise huge human sources. The issues developed in this paper differ by topics (human rights, animal welfare, politics etc.), dimensions (local, regional, global), auditory (one certain ethnical or religious group, men or women, youth or older people etc.) and planned effect (giving information, create platforms for discussions, evoke changes or even revolution). Nowadays people can get involved in processes and discussions that do not necessarily refer to their own lives, their own comfort zone. Still people involve in discussions and communication with people around

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the world about the topics that are interesting for them, where they are in some way experts.

In urban studies, this kind of communication became a significant tool to evoke processes that in the end results even as a practical implementation of some kind of projects or even development of certain urban element. The global processes in urban issues request quick perception and reaction as urban processes are one of the main and fastest developing that relate to process of globalization as such. Academic work has not the instantaneous character that is requested in nowadays urban studies and development today. Now those who are quicker and sometimes louder succeed on this "stage". In addition, to be loud cannot refer only to those who are most shocking or impudent. More and more it is about the quality of the statement and arguments that can prove possible success of the idea. Moreover, response capability and flexibility is more important. That is why those activists and specialists that communicate and present their ideas through Internet sources have become more powerful developers of discourses in urban studies.

One of the most powerful and easily decoded materials has become visual materials. Photography, drawing, sketch, map or video. Nevertheless, visual perception is the strongest of all senses for person to perceive the information. That is why they also became most common used tool for urban activists and specialists to talk about urban development issues. There are more reasons for the success of visual materials in this case:

- it directly shows the images that certain audience can identify, in that way the recognition of the problem and understanding of importance to solve it also is more possible;
- it can point out problems that are unnoticed in daily rush by giving a detailed look and description as a proof of the need to address this problem;
- it can make an impressive comparison between different cases that would be an exchange of best experience;

- it can create a clear vision of how certain case could be developed to reinforce confidence that this project would be successful.

Also the difference from previous decades is the wish to share not only to present some ideas but also to evoke discussions, to receive feedback – even from people who are not involved in any level of the implementation of the project. These ideas are not secret anymore – they became available for everyone who is interested in the topic (not potential stakeholders or end-users). That is why some plans were publicly displayed even before the project has started or even certain stakeholder had approved his/her interest in the project.

That is why it became interesting to consider why the wish to share plans, visions and even just desires with wide audience – with an audience that maybe is not be so much informed about the place and situation in it. Is it a wish to find out the opinion of others? Do the creators of the idea want to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to others? Or, do they want to share with their dreams of better places so that others could also have the same dream, the same ideas about what a good place should look like? Answers to these questions should be found in this article.

Communication about urban issues in social media

City – the place that grows, the place that is chosen by more and more people. "In 1950, 30 per cent of the world's population was urban, and by 2050, 66 per cent of the world's population is projected to be urban" (United Nations 2014: 1).

The biggest danger is in fact that it sometimes seems that cities are growing only in quantitative way but not in qualitative one – there are more inhabitant rather than citizens, more of territory rather than space (especially in big cities territory is so overloaded with buildings that there is less and less place for

open space), more roads for mobility rather than qualitative public space for people and their leisure and socialization. In movie *The Human Scale* (2012) Danish architect and urban design consultant Jan Gehl said that after a while there will be dilemma – it will be or human or cars. Thought cities are meant for people as the place where they would live, work, spend their leisure time and have their social life, cities in many features have become human-unfriendly. There is less place and space for human and more for infrastructure, buildings and transport. If place is empty, mostly it could mean that place is not qualitative and even doomed for distraction.

This situation more and more is one of main concerns for city planners and urbanists. More and more people (not only professionals) are concerned about use of public space in wider meaning that it is used right know. And for this concern should initiate changes. There has become stronger the idea that people have to have qualitative space in the city, mainly for having a possibility to have qualitative time there. There are many reasons for reaching for more "human-friendly" space:

- People are the main source and force that creates the city;
- In the base of the idea the cities are meant for people;
- Quality of space effects quality of life;
- People are social creatures and they need a space and place where to communicate and find new social connections;
- Some people use public space to proclaim their political views.

Media is one of the tools that promoted awareness of urban issues. Already since middle of 20th century,

"there has been a growing acknowledgment of the ways that the media and the built environment work together to shape and alert public perception of places. For decades, urban sociologists have noted how community identity is socially constructed not only by local residents but also by a wide variety of outsiders including newspaper reporters and editors, civic boosters, developers, realtors, and city officials" (Vale 1995: 646).

Still that was a one-way communication – a monologue of authors where there was a declaration of a thought and a fairly conditional response to that.

Internet, and social media in precise has become one of the most powerful tools in nowadays communication. It is a platform where different ideas, worries and wishes come together. It is a platform where different people of diverse backgrounds and territories can come together and join for same purpose, to discuss same issue or even collaborate for the same purpose. And it is not only about the fact that it is possible – it is about the fact that this possibility is more and more actively used to take down borders – both physical and mental. "While cultures around the world value their individual traditions, beliefs, and norms that make them unique, social media links people around the world regardless of differences and geographical boundaries" (Sawyer 2011: 1). And it is also pragmatically most powerful tool as

"it allows someone with few resources to multiply their audience reach and connect with people through the use of innovative technologies, and to inform them about important issues affecting their lives and their communities" (U.S. Agency for International Development 2014: 11).

As Nicholas Gane has concluded, "it is possible to argue that globalisation marks not the death of the social, but rather birth of a new era of rights and citizenship, or what might be termed the era of the hyper-social" (2004: 8). Society now has a possibility to be involved in processes that are taking place outside their physical sight. And the global communication has become both the source of information, and the catalyst of action.

The reason for that could be in the fact that we live in new society. Tuomo Kuosa and Leo Westerlund defined that history of human kind can be divided in four periods (2009):

– prehistoric and agrarian society;
– industrial society;
– service society;
– ubiquitous society.

Nowadays society is experiencing shift to the type of society that is called "ubiquitous society". The main feature of this society is that "the mode of the economy is more participatory in comparison to the service society" (Kuosa, Westerlund 2009: 24). The main idea of nowadays society is to take part in processes that concern their own wealth, wellbeing and future. Those were issues that were out of society's power of influence for long time, until now when social power becomes more visible and influential. People who were discharged from the influence to these important issues now try to reimburse the time of powerlessness. Also urban planners, activists and so called enthusiasts (so both professionals and in some way amateurs) start to use Internet as a platform for communication, generator of ideas and making possible solutions. It is more and more in not only to make someone's voice to be heard – it is about start some move towards development. It can be concluded that social media has become also the most effective platform. It is a space where people can give an instant reaction to any situation, changes, danger. There could be started the fastest brainstorming while, for example, in magazines or books published articles are characterised with time offset.

So, this develops search for action. One of the strongest tools today is visual material that shows the present situation and can show the possible future scenarios. As it was concluded before, this is the most used tool in contemporary urban development and studies.

Still –

"while arguing that new social movements are actively articulating new spaces of cultural production and political participation (and there-in lies the glimpse of potentialities and optimism) they also reveal the extreme difficulty of such a position, even at the level of the sheer amount of work needed to occupy a 'productive', rather than simply 'resistant' or 'oppositional' space" (Kirkham 2003: 294).

It can be concluded by the circulation of visual information became a significant tool for initiating and provoking new discussions in urban development issues. Visual materials are more effective to convince in correctness of someone thought. In next chapters will be given description of methodology there was used for this research and also analysis of received data.

Methodology

As it is rather unexplored question and there had made research questions at the beginning, it was decided to use interviews as research work. The main purpose of the research was to understand the reasons not the tendencies, so the qualitative methodology was the right choice. There were 12 interviews to discover the answers to the questions of interest. Most of the them (8 of 12) were made via e-mails, in written form.

The selection of respondents were based on their activity in Internet – whether they have homepage, blog, popular account social in one of the social media (in Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Academia.edu etc.). After discovering those people, the search continued with understanding whether these people have published some visual material, plans of still not implemented project, maybe even some utopic dreams. In the category of those visual materials were included maps and other cartographical materials, computer designed images (2D or 3D), photography with supplementary sketches in it (when sketches or drawings were made on the base of photography with the actual view), drawings and sketches. Visual materials as type of communication were chosen, as it is

unique and creative approach how to deliver the message and to provoke discussions with the audience. It also shows some scale of readiness and certainty of the ideas that could lead to the implementation of them.

Reason to investigate the activity in social media rather than publication of visual design was possibility to ensure that this person could have also some response from other people, wide society. As this research seeks for communication between the person, who posted some material, and receivers of the information, it was important to find respondents who had:

– profiles only about urban planning (it was important that person is concentrated only on one topic so it also gives sort of status of expert to the person);
– active profile (posts at least once a month, so it could be ensured that the person is purposeful to create communication with the society);
– followers or readers (for example, in blogs it could be comments that prove the communication was bilateral);
– posted qualitative information (the quality was measured by rather person posts only his/her thoughts or it was also some summarisation of theory, researches and praxis – work could be characterised as scientific).

The result of searches found 21 persons with potential respondent. E-mails have been sent to them asking to give an interview. 12 of them agreed and answer the questions – 8 of them via e-mail and 3 of them in face-to-face interviews. There are some disadvantages of interviews via e-mail:

it is threat that respondents will give short answers if they have to give them in written form. It also excludes some kind of improvisation and flow of thoughts where sometimes most interesting ideas appear;
– process of interviewing cannot be flexible and researcher can ask supplementary questions only after all answers are received;

– any sign of emotions are excluded from the story.

It could be concluded again that there have been received interesting and full of information answers that give possibility to make qualitative research and conclusions. As it could be conceived, respondents have given full and honest responses that had no need to be supplemented. The topic of the article was not mentioned so the answers would not be tendentious. It was asked whether they would agree to the answer about their experience to publish their ideas of the Internet (whether in one of social networks, blog or other way). The interviews were conduct during December 2014 and April 2015.

Table 1. The list of respondents of the case study (Author: Evija Zača)

Abbreviation	Country	Profession	Has/has not published some visual designs of urban space
R1	Latvia	Architect, Urban planner	Yes, more than once
R2	Latvia	Urban planner	Yes, once
R3	Estonia	Architect, Urban planner, Lecturer	No
R4	Latvia	Urban planner	No
R5	Finland	Designer, Urban planner	Yes, more than once
R6	Germany	Architect, Urban planner	Yes, more than once
R7	Latvia	Urban planner	Yes, once
R8	Estonia	Architect, Urban planner	Yes, more than once
R9	United Kingdom	Designer, Urban planner	Yes, once
R10	Latvia	Urban planner	No
R11	Lithuania	Architect, Urban planner	Yes, once
R12	Finland	Urban planner	Yes, once

Some of the respondents preferred to stay anonymous – they let to mention the country

of belonging and their profession. Because of some commercial obligations or wish not to be identified, some of respondents asked not give their real names. To do have any confusion all respondents had codes. In the table below there is a description of each respondent, by country of origins, profession and whether he himself/she herself have published some visual material that would propose solutions for future development of urban area. The codes used in next chapter are the results and will be analysed by identifying which quote made by which respondent.

The analysis of all the interviews in next chapter will make emphasizes on most common and some significant ideas.

Analysis of the research

Analysis of receiving empirical data will be constructed so that the main part of the chapter will be quotes from the interviews so that also a reader can read the answers to him/her own. This may also make to create his/her own opinion about the answers that were given. As it was mentioned before, the topic is quite unexplored. It looks like there should be more emphasised original ideas not their interpretation.

Firstly, it was asked why respondents think that they have to give they opinions and ideas on a wide platform like the Internet or social media. Most of the respondents mentioned that it is a natural way when taking consideration that circulation of information is very easy access and a powerful phenomenon today:

"Today nothing happens behind closed doors […]. Well, at least what concerns to city planning and the place they live on. So I think municipalities, cities have realised that they have to share the information. It is part of today governance" (R7).

"For something to be solved, we have to start talking about it! There are so many places

invisible for majority. Still are people who relates. If they do, we will not talk about things, things will not happen" (R3).

All of the respondents were aware of the message that they are trying to communicate, is not for all society but sometimes just for a part of it. It refers both times when message read by a few of it and when the target group of that message is not whole society but just one specific group of people:

"I know that, most of the time, what I am saying is only for small part. It's maybe just two for who will read my message. No matter how hard I worked on this particular idea. The most important is someone will read it! They will start thinking about it. Maybe they will go to the place to explore it. They may take pictures and will share with others. There we go, this place become visible! The problem will be noticed" (R6).

"Most of the time, I don't even want my message to be read by many people as possible. Why do I have to reach the audience that would just only read it? I would rather prefer that my message be read by the only one person who will be able to do something about it and try to solve the problem mentioned" (R5).

Most of respondents were showing their interest by posting the information. They were all trying to base their ideas in other author's ideas and researches. Respondents revealed also that every time they were planning to post their own information, they wanted to make the best they could. At the same time, they realised that it could make a clash of opinions:

"Sometimes I think about how clear my idea is, how important and to whom it is addressed. Then I start to think, whether I have to post it online where all those judges appear. I always take a risk and if my idea was wrong, and gets load of negative reactions, then I start to think

about next level of it. I really forget the idea only when I am going to the wall. Until then, I will try to make my point" (R1).

"I don't like those posts or declarations with 'no point'. I am sure that you have to make a good argumentation just to start the communication. If you are not making the right point at the beginning, I guess none will listen to you afterwards. They will have this conclusion that you cannot say anything important or useful. I do not need that! I want to make an audience already by the first time! Then I have to prepare it quite well" (R2).

Basically, the visual material mainly is made on their subjective attitudes. The idea to emphases some urban element comes spontaneously, for example; by exploring new areas or new cities. Respondents agree on the fact that most of their ideas began with some short post such social media like Facebook or Twitter (also sometimes Instagram). After seeing the post, they also read the reaction of the others. If they start to get some response to those posts, they understand the meaning of the place, and then start the beginning of activity. In addition, the activity can begin when there occurs some personal interest in the place by trying to revitalise or develop it. After that the visual material is planned as a vision for developing places and worked out with serious concerns and argumentation:

"Actually some of my 'point of interest' appeared really spontaneously. They just got in my way somehow. Some of my first reactions is to make a picture. Then I fix the place where the precise object is. Posting in some social media is different. Sometimes I am so excited about finding that I make a post immediately. But sometimes I go home and work on to make it a little bit more descriptive and clear post" (R2).

"What make me laugh is those places find me by themselves! I like to change the way I walk, even to some well-known places by me. Then I have the chance to see the city from a different angle. Sometimes I miss it. Actually, I still do not know what makes place attractive to me; otherwise, I would start to have more interest in it. When the interest comes, I start to work with place quite actively. I try to find some historical element about it. I make a full documentation (both photo and video) of the place. I start to tell about it through my social media channels. Sometimes it turns into some project or topic for a conference" (R1).

As it can be seen in Table 1, not all of the respondents have posted or published visual elements that would show plans of development at some precise place. However, I have to admit that all of these respondents have posted visual elements. For example, as mentioned earlier, cases of fixing some interesting places.

Nevertheless, in next part of the document I will tell more about those who have posted or published some visuals about possible development plan of particular place. Visuals like maps, photography, 3D constructions or some other visual elements that shows possible improvement of the place. This is my particular interest as I am interested of how respondents started to think about the proposed changes and about how to visualise them.

Four of the respondents pointed out some instant reaction that they have already just seeing the place:

"To be honest – I do not know how it works, but my ideas, my visions about the place come immediately! By standing there, I start to see the possible improvement. I see where benches should be placed, in which colour a wall should be. What kind of bush or tree should be planted and actually, the first idea is the strongest and in the end does not change a lot. Just some modifications are applied" (R1).

"I have this instant reaction to the place I see. I am there and I start to think what I would

change here. Every time the process is a little bit different. Sometimes I begin with some global things like streets, common visual image or buildings around the place. I also think about the connectivity of the place with surrounding. I think whether make the place more opened or make it more closed from the outside, or just to keep it as it is. But sometimes I start with details like where I would put some lightning equipment, benches or a tree" (R5).

Most of respondents agreed that planning of future development is not a case where a person can speculate with ideas and facts. They are arguing also with fact that they have a wish and hope that their vision could be notice once and viable:

"I do not make any sensation or loud announcements. I think that this is not the case to use that kind of tactics. I think that in some way aggressive attitude will wake up an aggressive response. What I want is a dialog. Whether I will be the one who talk most of the time, I still need to have that other one on the other side of monitor or in one-to-one connection. I have to be honest and I believe that it is the truest way how to succeed. Any kind of lies or speculations will fade away quite soon. The only true ideas and true values will stay. At least I am sure that these scheme works in urban planning, where you have to have strong and clear appointment to make a change" (R5).

"I think if idea is good, it will be heard and understood. If you start to overreact or lie, it will bring you to nothing. Because, at the moment, where the action should be started nothing will be able to be done. In that way, you can ruin your authority forever. Thought once I overreact about the situation of one building, then when people say that it is not as bad as I described, I could turn to my subjective feeling, saying that I felt that way" (R9).

This statement shows that we cannot decline the posts of urban planners and activists or accept them as trivial. They even sometimes could be considered as semi-scientific. It is also important to find and conclude as someone write PhD thesis, as most as the theoretical base is made upon different articles and posts in the Internet and social media.

There is a question, is their aspiration reaches the people that can evoke an actual activity? I can say probably, unfortunately only four of respondents affirmed that their aspiration leaded to some activity. This activity was evoked both from Government (one case) and society (three cases):

"I have had also some success. For half of year, I have talked about the place and finally local government has noticed this completely destroyed space. They started work of revitalisation there. I was invited as an expert, and now, I help them with the research and the creation for the ideas of development" (R1).

"I think that sometimes it is even better that society (mainly – the local one) is the one that replies with some kind of action. They are the ones that live in this space. They know this place better and they know what they need there. So in the end the place becomes more organic and more socially used as if someone form 'outside' would make these changes (sometimes even by force)" (R12).

To finish I have to come to the main question of the article; could it be possible to share possible developments and dreams? As mentioned before, I did not say to the respondents the possible title of the article as also did not describe my hypothesis. I wanted to see if it would come out, if I may say, in natural way. I can conclude that eight of twelve have mentioned this keyword: dream. They concluded by their wish is to expose their ideas, connected with wish to create more qualitative space for themselves and next generations:

"Public place is huge with many layers and different possibilities. This is the place, where people are going to have new experiences. Search for this experience becomes more and more vital as people are just tired of earning money and watching TV. We have to create more ideas of improved public space. We have to dream and hope that it will come true!" (R1).

"I realise that sometimes, the entire thing that I am doing is to reach a dream where city consists of many more qualitative space for humans. I just hope that this will not only stay as dreams. I hope that sooner or later these dreams will become real projects" (R8).

My opinion that those are wishes to share their dreams of a better place. But definitely there is also a hope that wish or dream would become real as project and results would be accessible to future generations.

Conclusions and discussions

When we witness communication in our society, we see how the borders get more blurred. So we can agree with Gane (2004) and say that we indeed live in hyperactive society. People from different parts of the world create and share information that is received and understood by other people in the world.

Person needs to be involved in processes who are taking place in this world, and it is not always the person local area. However, he/she understand that involvement as a sign of governance. By starting the communication, person has the feeling of taking part to the processes that began without their influence and now are directly or indirectly shaped by them.

Nevertheless, involvement proves also some very personal feature – person's interest in certain thing. All respondents made the communication about local urban planning questions – whether it was certain city or whole country. Thought they have possibility to talk about global questions they were mostly talking about local problems (global trends and problems mostly were only as background or example).

This brings to the idea of embeddedness. Now individualised society people are concerned by things that affect them directly or affect elements that are important to them (people, things, processes or places). If the person makes greater effort to affect processes, taking place in certain area, it could show that they feel embedded to the place. Today, global society the embeddedness is the key to not so globally recognised places to keep their value and to develop.

All the respondents agreed on the idea that beginning to talk is an important part of development. Some processes are not taking place because of no one cares, but because no one is aware about the problem. That is why to start the communication and be heard by someone is one of the key aspects for problem to be solved in short or long term.

Still respondents concluded that sharing their visions is like sharing dreams. Those could be concerned by dreams of places that they would like to see in nearest future or at least sometimes, (the differences in time were defined by dimension of the space and difficulty of the project).

As an end, I would like to conclude by; this article at the beginning was concerned more as scientific essay, as I did not know how many practical causes would appear. The end the paper became a scientific research that shows different strategies and patterns of how today urban planners communicate with society (both governance and civic society) and how they try to evoke the progress in developing the urban space. I think there are still many things to do for the research of the communication, learning strategies, discourses, reception and effectiveness is a part of it.

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SOCIALINĖS MEDIJOS KAIP URBANISTINIŲ POKYČIŲ SKATINIMO PLATFORMA

Evija ZAČA

Vaizdai visada buvo svarbi miestų planavimo dalis – dabartiniai vietų, planuojamų patobulinimų, žemėlapių ir eskizų vaizdai. Prieš kurį laiką visa tai buvo suinteresuotųjų, tokių kaip planuotojų ir klientų, privati nuosavybė. Tačiau mūsų dienomis tokio konfidencialumo beveik neliko – nebesvarbios nei autorių teisės, nei konkurencija. Planai daugiau nebėra privatus reikalas. Jie atskleidžiami dar prieš juos įgyvendinant. Šiame straipsnyje parodoma, kodėl miestų planuotojai viešai dalijasi vaizdais, atskleidžiančiais jų idėjas, jų vaizdinius (daugiausia interneto tinklaraščiuose ir socialiniuose tinkluose), t. y. kodėl jiems tai svarbu ir kokio grįžtamojo ryšio jie laukia. Šio straipsnio pagrindą sudaro atvejo tyrimas, kuriame buvo apklausta dvylika respondentų (miestų planuotojų, architektų, lektorių). Jie pasidalijo savo pačių patirtimi ir kaip šis komunikavimo su platesne publika būdas inspiruoja plėtoti naujas iniciatyvas ir netgi realizuoti tam tikrus planus. Šis straipsnis – tai įžvalga apie nūdienį planuotojų ir visuomenės komunikavimo būdą, galintį tapti tam tikrais praktiniais rezultatais.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: miestų planavimas, komunikacija, dalijimasis idėjomis, netiesioginė komunikacija, miestų planuotojai, vizualioji vaizduotė.