



CONVERSATION: "Democratising urban planning"
5.30pm to 7.30pm Wednesday 24 February 2010, in the
Members' Study at the
Royal Commonwealth Society,
25 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AP Tel: 020 7930 6733

Democratising urban planning – conversation introduced by Tom Cohen, 24th February 2010

I start from the proposition that it would be good if we made progress in democratising urban planning, on the basis that it is not yet as democratic as it might be and that a more democratic planning process would be a better planning process. I do not propose here to attempt a justification of these statements, though much could be said about all of them.

I think it is helpful instead to imagine for a moment what a democratic urban planning process might be and how it might work.

I picture a scene in which the community deliberates constructively on planning questions, considers alternatives and gravitates towards a preferred way forward which is then implemented. This is easy to say but it immediately generates a host of very interesting questions:

- Who is the community? In the case of an urban planning question, this may appear a relatively straightforward matter: the residents and businesses in the area affected. But then there are those others who use the space or simply pass through. If the question is predominantly about transport, this suggests that the those who pass through become central to this community. And do we take those who choose to participate as the community's representatives or is the exercise valid only if the entire community, in some way, has been canvassed or has taken part?
- How are planning questions generated and according to what timescale, if any?
- How are the community's deliberations influenced by realities such as available funding, legislation, technical feasibility?
- Can we assume that any deliberation will indeed be constructive? Might not conflict be as likely?
- What is a decision? It is not likely that everyone will agree so what degree of consensus is sufficient? And how do we weigh the perhaps strong feelings of some against the less pronounced feelings of others?
- What follows the decision? Someone presumably implements but what is the role of the community from this point on? And what role for "professionals" and "government" in this new order? Are they necessary at all?

Just in case the above is not enough to keep us going, I offer a conjecture.

When thinking about transport, people become business-like and appear motivated by concepts such as speed and efficiency; when thinking about "place", people are driven by a wider set of quality-of-life measures and are (I suggest) more relaxed, playful even. Given that a great deal of urban space is *both* lived in and travelled through, the community discussed above might end up reaching distinct conclusions about the same space depending on the way in which their question has been phrased.

Of the various things that might flow from this, I ask whether we can and should aim for a harmonisation of perspectives or, failing that, seek a means to reconcile the distinct positions.

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