

Participatory Action Research on Affordable Housing Partnerships:

Collaborative Rationality or Sleeping with the Growth Machine?

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Carolyn Whitzman, Professor of Urban Planning, University of Melbourne

Transforming Housing is a university-community research partnership led by the University of Melbourne (Whitzman, 2015a). Its aim is to increase both the quantity and quality of affordable housing in Metropolitan Melbourne. The composition of this partnership – state and local government, private developers, community housing providers, and investors – are not the ‘usual suspects’ one thinks of when discussing Participatory Action Research [PAR]. Indeed, working with these powerful actors might seem opposite to the intent of empowering “‘ordinary people’ in and through research” usually associated with PAR (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010: 1). In this paper, I wish to be deliberately provocative. If the theme of this conference is ‘translating urban research into policy and practice’, why not start with policy actors as ‘co-researchers’, having them help set research questions and analyse responses, as occurs in PAR? Does a PAR stance turn researchers into consultants or agents of the growth machine? Or does it lead to research outcomes both intellectually honest and capable of increasing social justice far more effectively than the traditional “hierarchical relationship between research and action, between ‘researchers’ and ‘researched’”? (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010: 1).

The problem(s) with planning research

A flurry of recent articles (Troy 2013, Randolph 2013, Taylor and Hurley 2015) has lamented both the decline in both traditional competitive Australian urban research funding and relevance of that research to policy debates. Troy (2013) for instance, points to the decline in Australian Research Council (ARC) funding for FOR 1200 codes (Architecture, Planning, Construction) since 2010 as a result of a number of factors, including the increasing irrelevance of the planning profession in a neo-liberal age. With developers as major contributors to both political parties and newspapers, Troy contends that the Australian version of the Urban Growth Machine (Molotch, 1976; McLeod, 2011) resists evidence-based decision-making. Similarly, Taylor and Hurley (2015) argue that the low status of research amongst planning decision-makers is due to both the politicisation of planning and the incompatibility of many research outputs with day to day reality of professionals within a neo-liberal environment. They also argue that academic journals privilege theoretical or comparative work that is not directly applicable to practicing planners’ everyday problems, while applied planning research is harder to fit into academic peer review process. In current university hiring and promotions processes, there is little reward for academics who try to distill their findings into the

(non paywalled) media or popular policy brief products necessary to reach time-poor practitioners without university access to academic journals.

None of these authors particularly examines the traditional top-down stance of the research being described, focusing on research translation and dissemination rather than research production or engagement at the problem definition stage of research. Finkel (2014: S77), taking a broad-based approach to Australian research, points out that Australia is the lowest ranked of OECD countries for researcher-university engagement. This is in part because there is a “fundamental misalignment” between researchers under pressure to produce virtually the only output recognized by the Excellence in Research Assessment process, internationally ranked academic papers, and an understandable desire by those who fund universities and research (not only ‘politicians’ but the ‘community’ in its broadest sense) to see some social or commercial benefit from research. He wonders what it would be like if Australia, like Germany, had twice as many PhD students in industry as in universities, instead of the opposite. Both Troy (2013) and Finkel (2014) point out that many ‘wicked problems’ require an interdisciplinary and also a cross-sectoral approach, yet these collaborations (such as Collaborative Research Centres) are sometimes shunned by researchers, concerned that this industry engagement work gets in the way of academic publishing outputs.

Participatory Action Research and collaborative rationality

Perhaps a more radical critique comes from the margins of research. Kindon, Pain and Kesby (2010: 9-10) define Participatory Action Research (PAR) as “a collaborative process of research, education and action explicitly oriented towards social transformation.” In this process, theory is generated and tested through practical interventions, there is a consistency between means and ends, and those means and ends are determined by a ‘community of interest’, which may be geographic or may be on the basis of a shared concern. In contrast to the traditional understanding of research, where knowledge is assumed to reside within formal institutions such as universities, PAR assumes “a plurality of knowledges in a variety of institutions and locations” (idem). Researchers working within this epistemological approach often seek to bridge action and reflection, theory and practice, using traditional methods of data generation but also story-telling, dialogue, and collective decision-making. With antecedents ranging from community organizing in low income US communities in the 1950s, to the revolutionary education techniques of Paulo Friere in the 1960s, to feminist organizing in the 1970s and international development in the 1980s, there is a rich 50 year tradition of PAR (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010: 10-11). However, it should be noted that most of these applications have been with groups that are oppressed or marginalized, and most research has been based in the very local level community concerns.

Participatory Action Research has come in for its share of criticism, with perhaps Cooke and Kothari’s edited volume, *Participation: the New Tyranny?* (2001) being most comprehensive and insightful. Kothari (2001), for instance, argues that PAR reproduces some simplistic binaries. For instance, power is considered to be concentrated in centralized institutions, while local communities are where the powerless are found. Like Kothari, I would hold a more Foucauldian view of power, wherein power (and powerlessness) constantly circulate through circuits and are mediated through countless micro-practices. Likewise, the notion that local knowledge is somehow pure and waiting to be tapped through participatory processes, ignores the fact that power is constantly being

culturally, socially and politically produced. In short, both the researcher and the 'researched', especially if both are included in the research decision-making process, are conduits of power. However, both researchers and researched often perceive themselves to be powerless, in the context of complex and opaque governance systems: this is true whether speaking about a Professor such as myself, a senior bureaucrat, or the head of a private sector lobbying organization.

The conceptualization of PAR bears strong resemblances to the literature on deliberative planning, or 'collaborative rationality' as it is termed by Innes and Booher (2010). Innes and Booher argue that in complex governance systems, power is fragmented, so that even powerful individuals and institutions cannot produce the results they want. A collaborative process, wherein the problem is defined by an interdependent yet diverse set of actors, can have the benefits of reaching across diverse values and understandings. Outcomes can include agreements with mutual benefits, but also sustainable relationships, and newly generated learning. Other outcomes discussed in the literature (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999; Flyvberg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter, 2003) include developing shared values; improving implementation through private sector, civil society and various scales of government 'buy in'; mitigating risk; and including otherwise marginalized voices in the strategic planning process. So the goals of collaborative rationality, as is the case with PAR, include a variety of normative outcomes at several scales, from improved social capital of participants, to more robust information guiding local or regional actions, to societal change.

Similarly, the process of PAR has much in common with deliberative planning. In both cases, participants are brought together at the problem identification stage, in order to design research that will guide decisions. Legacy (2012: 78-79) talks about the first stage being 'Choosing Our Future' in Greater Vancouver, before 'Creating Our Future' was able to commence. Forester (2006) speaks of the role of planners in facilitating mutual learning about the parameters of possible solutions, while Innes and Booher (2010: 78) frame 'the praxis of collaboration' as a continual process of developing alternatives and reflecting on their success.

The criticisms of deliberative planning and PAR are also similar. Rydin (2007) expresses concern about the ability of powerful interests to subvert deliberative processes, while she shares with Alleminder and Haughton (2012) a critique that deliberative planning, like PAR, papers over conflict with the desire for a false neo-liberal and post-political consensus approach. These critiques harken back to Young (1990) and her criticisms of the 'ideal of community', in a world where power is both complex and opaque, and where the celebration of difference is at best tokenistic, can genuine dialogue take place between actors of widely differing power and authority?

Participatory Action Research in Affordable Housing Partnerships: the case of Transforming Housing

The approach that Transforming Housing uses is based on my previous work with 'marginalized' groups, as well as government and private sector institutions, in a partnership approach. For over 20 years, I undertook research in local contexts around the world, helping to develop and evaluate government-community partnerships for women's safety with an action research collaborative, Women in Cities International (see, most recently, Whitzman, Andrew and Viswanath 2014). From 2010-2013, I worked in another 'unusual suspects' partnership, with AusAID, the PNG government, a large infrastructure consultancy (Cardno) and a Disabled People's Organization (the PNG Assembly

of Disabled Persons) undertaking research on disability inclusive road development (see, most recently, Whitzman 2015).

The impetus for Transforming Housing was a conversation with the heads of both private development and community housing association peak bodies when the three of us were involved in the review of grants for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute in 2012. Both individuals expressed frustration with the relevance of the research topics to their interests in affordable housing. Later that week, I was speaking on a panel with another private developer and a local government planner and realized that we were all talking about the same barriers to diverse and affordable housing.

The resultant research program has been a community-university planning research partnership (Hart and Wolff 2006) which is problem-centred, transdisciplinary, heterogenous, and highly entrepreneurial. The research, which has been co-funded by the University of Melbourne's urban sustainability hub, Carlton Connect, along with state and local government, private developers, and philanthropic investors, with community housing associations as key members as well, have developed a set of research questions related to the project aim of more and better affordable housing in metropolitan Melbourne.

The first phase of research (then called 'Getting to Yes'), from March 2013 to June 2014, began with the question: 'Are there commonly identified barriers and enablers to family-friendly affordable housing in central Melbourne amongst the various actors?' with the key actors at this point identified as private developers, government, investors, and built environment professions. These questions were answered through a survey distributed by the Urban Development Institute and the Planning Institute (Martel et al, 2013). The survey suggested that a similar range of finance, policy and design barriers and enablers were being identified across sectors. It was surprising to the original researchers how little was known about international best practice in this field.

When discussing the survey results in one of the first quarterly meetings of the Advisory Committee, the representative from the Planning Institute suggested a study tour of similar cities, with low proportions of social housing and severe housing affordability problems, compounded by disinvestment from federal government, but with potentially promising affordable housing partnerships, might be a good idea. After a literature review, a two week study tour in February 2014 comprising roundtable interviews with 50 key housing actors from government, private and non-profit development and investors, was organized, with self-funded participation from two local government housing officers and a private developer, as well as two researchers. Having the local government housing officers (one of whom had also worked for a community housing association) and the private developer asking questions as well as the planning and architectural researchers, meant that a full range of relevant concerns were being addressed.

The idea of an interdisciplinary design studio to gain student ideas for family-friendly housing in central Melbourne was proposed by researchers. The Advisory Committee suggested one important modification to the original proposal: including construction management students as well as architects and planners, in order to get some costings of ideas. They also were insistent that a very broad definition of family was used, including accessible units and considering the needs of both children and aging people. Aside from providing guest lectures and moderation assistance, the City of Melbourne provided a site and Housing Choices Australia, a community housing provider,

provided a brief with a sense of affordable housing yields. The Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation came in to provide a guest lecture and some comments on the final design, and ended up funding the next phase of the project.

Due to feedback from the Advisory Committee and a new set of funders, the next phase of the project (July 2014- November 2015) has included a much broader geographic and demographic mandate. Now the focus is on affordable housing for all low and moderate income households, in all locations close to public transport, jobs and services. The Metropolitan Planning Authority became the state government partner instead of the government-owned developer Places Victoria, and provided a much stronger interest in planning policy, especially after the state government change in November 2014. An increasing number of local governments became interested in the research, and started applying it to both local (City of Moreland) and regional (Eastern Affordable Housing Alliance, a coalition of eight local councils) policy work. The Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation asked for more information on social investment partnerships, which led to an invitation to a keynote speaker on low income tax credits in the US. The emphasis in the second stage of the project was moving beyond partnership development to concrete policy outcomes. A series of background papers – on taxation and investment policy, on partnerships, and on housing expositions as ways to encourage innovative approaches – were drafted and discussed at Advisory Committee meetings. By the end of April 2015, a two day heavily facilitated Affordable Housing Summit moved the partnership towards some concrete commitments. Much of the taxation and investment policy paper found its way into the housing chapter of the 'refreshed' metropolitan planning strategy, Plan Melbourne, partly due to the fortuitous timing of the Affordable Housing Summit, and partly due to wide buy-in and frank discussion by the range of actors. Despite an unsuccessful Australian Research Council Linkage grant proposal, the support of the industry partners means that the project can continue into the next three year phase without traditional research funding.

As part of the latest phase of research, In February and March 2015, I interviewed similar actors in three comparable cities to Melbourne (Vancouver, Portland and Toronto) as well as Melbourne itself. The cities were chosen to because increasing housing affordability problems and decreasing federal commitment to social housing were leading to multi-sectoral partnerships to collectively improve affordable housing outcomes. Seven to eight key government housing actors (metropolitan or state/provincial and local), private and philanthropic investors, developers and/or development peak bodies, and community housing providers, were interviewed in each of the four cities, for a total of 30 interviews. They were asked about their definitions of affordable housing, what they saw as barriers and enablers to more and better affordable housing, who they worked with in partnership, how and why, and whether they used the conception of the 'right to housing' in their organizational work. As the final question, I asked for them to tell me a story of a successful partnership for affordable housing.

A number of the respondents focused on collaborative research as an example of success. For instance, VanCity Credit Union has partnered with the Urban Development Institute in Vancouver to map homeownership affordability. This, in turn, led to a collaboration called 'Getting to Groundbreaking' led by Associate Professor Meg Holden of Simon Fraser University, and co-funded by MITACS (an industry-university roundtable), the Urban Development Institute, and the provincial government on improving residential building approval processes. VanCity Credit Union has also partnered with the British Columbia Non-Profit Housing Association on a parallel rental affordability

rental mapping process, leading to a new partnership with the UDI and several local governments (Vancouver, New Westminister) to scale up affordable rental housing near new train stations. The two representatives of the UDI were certainly in favour of more collaborative and proactive research on housing demand between communities, local governments and the provincial government in relation to transit-oriented design:

“Another idea, is that there is an agreement between the municipality and the province about minimum average densities around stations. The usual story is that [provincial] government builds lines and then municipalities have to work out increased densities afterwards. And residents go: ‘hey, we didn’t expect that.’” (interview with two policy officers, Urban Development Institute, Vancouver)

The VanCity interview participant talked about the creation of a new social investment fund, Catalyst, as well as a new community land trust. These mechanisms, which increase the investment capacity in affordable housing, arise from collaborative action research involving philanthropic funders, local, metropolitan and provincial government, and community housing providers:

“If the problem is exciting policy-makers, developers, investors and the general public with a compelling discussion about private rental housing affordability, then impact investment is part of the answer.” (interview with manager, VanCity Credit Union, Vancouver)

In Portland, the Meyer Memorial Trust, a philanthropy, has funded two housing officers to work with private developers, community housing providers, local and county government to explore ways to deliver more affordable housing less expensively, as well as develop new funding streams at the regional and state scales. They also have partnered with all levels of government (local, metropolitan, state and federal) and a plethora of agencies to develop a targeted plan to eradicate street homelessness by 2017, called ‘A Home for Everyone’. This was seen by several Portlandians I interviewed as participatory action research: co-investigating a series of problems (how to find accommodation within shelter allowances when a deposit is required by private landlords, how to obtain employment or health care without a phone, how to scale up low cost rental housing) in partnership with Portland State University.

In both Melbourne and Toronto, there was considerable frustration expressed about collaborative research projects that had been derailed by politics. One example was the DASH project in Melbourne, where Monash University collaborated with state and local government to model an affordable, sustainable housing project in Ringwood, only to have the state government sell the master planned land after a change of government in 2010. Similarly, the evaluation of the Regent Park public housing redevelopment, which had involved a large private developer working with the Toronto public housing agency, municipal community development officers, and private sector partners like the Toronto Dominion Bank, got derailed by the election of Rob Ford as mayor in 2010 and the appointment of a new ‘risk averse’ board (interview with Toronto Community Housing official).

Still there were stories about how partners had investigated problems and developed solutions successfully. An example of good solutions and trust developing through mutual problem-solving comes from a community housing provider working with a social service agency, an architectural firm and a local government to develop housing for people with intellectual disabilities:

“The [social service agency] really understands housing, because of having to look after people in different housing arrangements. And we were able to ask what is your demand, and they came up with this project for people with highly complex problems, a ladder from high support to when they are gaining independent skills... [working with the architect] Through looking together... at other properties that worked well (low turnover, high satisfaction rating), they had an element of private space- residents could choose to be by themselves.... Through this design process we also designed innovative, high quality staff quarters as well. The [state] government at the time said this is too big, we said ‘well the staff are usually stressed and need some private space’... We also worked with neighbouring residents... We spoke to them with the support agencies- and explained what would happen, and to dispel any fear... [the council] also came in and expedited approvals.”

This is classic design-based research, whether it involved academic researchers or not (and in this case, it did not).

I also spoke (informally) to researchers in all four cities about their partnerships. I did not formally interview them because my focus was on industry partners. I now regret that decision, because I engaged in many ‘juicy’ discussions about the ethics of working in industry funded projects. The phrase ‘sleeping with the enemy’ did come up more than once, as did more serious discussions about the purity of applied research funded by private developers and government. While I am afraid this short article cannot really respond to the critique of Allmendinger and Haughton (2010: 90) that deliberative planning is ‘not so much an empowering arena for debating wide-ranging societal options for future development, as a system focused on carefully stage-managed processes with subtly but clearly defined parameters of what is open for debate’, I would also caution that the world of academic peer reviewed research might be open to the same criticism.

Conclusion

As this article makes clear, I would agree that planning is, by its nature, applied and normative, and thus well suited to university community collaborations (Hart and Wolff 2004, Straatemeier, Bertolini, and Boemelstroet, 2010). In a series of discussions about the future of Australian planning education in the late 2000s (Gurran, Norman and Gleeson, 2008, Budge 2009, Whitzman, 2009) the question of how to balance the needs of ‘the academy’ and of industry in both teaching and research was a common theme. If the purpose of 21st century planning is to improve environmental sustainability and social justice outcomes in the face of climate change and ever-widening human inequalities (Global Planners Network, 2006), then one of the most effective ways to influence these outcomes is to engage with community, in its broadest sense. This includes low income people, and those marginalized by age, gender, sexuality, and ethnic origin, as well as the agencies representing these groups. It also includes people involved in government, private sector development, and other ‘industry’ actors often seen as the agents of neo-liberalism.

In the examples cited in this paper, industry partnerships, with or without academic researchers, developed research questions out of problems they faced, gathered data, and analysed this data. In contrast to most academic research, these projects (excluding the two derailed by politics, in Melbourne and Toronto respectively) led to concrete improvements in terms of better quantity and

quality of affordable housing. They exhibit many of the hallmarks of good PAR. They build on grounded knowledge, or the 'expertise of experience'. They engage a range of diverse but interdependent actors at all stages of the research process, from defining the questions to publishing the results. Although the examples I have given do not directly engage with those most marginalized (homeless people, people with intellectual disabilities), they are informed by research that does so, as well as working with agencies that do provide front-line interaction with the end-product beneficiaries of action research. Perhaps most importantly, they translate urban research into policy and practice, and thus, arguably, their contribution to a better society goes far beyond most traditional academic impact factors so cherished by our current university systems.

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