

‘Situating’ Western Planning Ideas Within the Post-Soviet Realities. The Case Study of Perm, Russia

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1. Introduction

While the past several decades have witnessed major changes in urbanisation patterns across the whole world, in Russia and other post-socialist countries these changes were absolutely drastic. The abrupt transformation from the command into a market-oriented system brought dramatic changes to all spheres of life and introduced an entirely new urban context – new actors and new rules of the game (Molodikova and Makhrova, 2007). The early 1990s became the period of *laissez-faire* public policy, which was characterised by a broad legitimacy crisis of planning and proliferation of uncontrolled development. The volume and effectiveness of planning work has fallen and planning as a profession has lost its importance and, together with it, a whole generation of professionals (Golubchikov, 2004).

Post-2000, the importance of planning as a societal function has finally been recognised and a planning system has been re-institutionalised across most of the transitional countries. The reforms of the last decade completely changed the urban planning system, handing the initiative in developing planning documentation over from the national to the local authorities. It has, however, contributed little to a real transformation of urban planning culture and practice. The gap in expertise between planning authorities and their new responsibilities is still evident today.

While the planning system is undergoing a slow recovery process, many cities continue to be in a terrible state. Given the current shortage of trained planners it will probably be decades before Russian cities will be able to handle these problems on their own. Inviting foreign professionals, therefore, may potentially become a quick solution for many post-Soviet cities in Russia and beyond. Today planning consultants and consulting firms play a major role in exporting Western expertise to other countries. Planning has become ‘a marketable commodity’ (Banerjee, 2009) and transferring planning expertise through the work of overseas consultants and advisers is now practised in different parts of the world.

2. Case Study

Despite the fact that Russia has a long tradition of applying European planning ideas (St Petersburg, which was designed along the lines of Amsterdam, is perhaps the most well-known example), in contemporary Russia there is essentially no practical experience of such efforts (Schukin, 2010). This study examines an unprecedented effort of transferring Western planning expertise to post-Soviet Russia through the work of foreign consultants, which was recently undertaken in Perm, a city in the North-East of the country with one million inhabitants.

Like many other Russian cities, Perm is a sprawling city with various problems ranging from dilapidated housing stock to fragmented urban fabric and lack of connectivity between the city areas (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Poorly maintained streets and open space of limited value, Perm Strategic Masterplan

The last General plan of the Soviet era was developed in 1972 and, while only 15 per cent of its recommendations were implemented, it survived until 1988 without any alterations. Through the entire 1990s Perm went without any proper urban planning documentation. In 2004 the first contemporary General plan was produced, it was soon legally ratified but never acted upon.

The pressing need for a new plan was fulfilled in 2010 by a Dutch company of planning consultants. The client of the project was the Planning Department of Perm City Administration. To avoid placing additional duties on the Planning Department, a special planning agency - City Project Bureau – was created to support the development of the new plan. In the core of the Perm Strategic Masterplan (further referred to as the PSM or the Masterplan) is the concept of Compact City. As the area within the existing city limits was considered to be sufficient given the current population decline, the Dutch planners proposed concentrating effort and investment in and around the central part of the city and focusing on the renewal and rehabilitation of the city centre (the Red & Green Strategy). As a part of the consolidation and densification strategy, the Masterplan involves the transformation of the existing built environment, taking 'the perimeter block' as a basic unit of urban fabric (the Block strategy).

Despite the fact that the local government was completely satisfied by the work of the invited professionals finished in March 2010, the foreign proposals met with unanimous hostility from a major part of local professional community. It has attracted and continues to attract a great deal of criticism from the local planners and architects as well as from the local developers and representatives of the building industry. Today voices of discontent can be heard with new vigour, which is most likely due to the recent resignation of Oleg Chirkunov, the former governor of the Perm region, who initiated and energized the whole process of the plan development and was, in fact, its main locomotive.

The evidence from the various studies (Healey and Upton, 2010) shows that implementations of the large-scale planning projects launched and supported only by politicians in power, is highly dependent on the continuity of the regime. Thereby the danger of full withdrawal of the plan proposals, long predicted by the plan opponents, may soon come true. Even the supporters of the PSM agree that the success of the Masterplan was largely defined by its official acceptance, the commitment of Perm City Administration and personal interest of the Governor. Therefore, without wider support among developers and general public, it is likely to be abandoned with a change of the current regime, as happened with previous projects executed from above (Banerjee, 2009). This means that the successful implementation of the plan is highly dependent on the ability of the government to get local stakeholders and also wider parts of society involved in the process.

This paper will try to examine the range of factors that caused negative reaction of the local stakeholders and the ways to improve the current situation. It will also try to figure out what

can be done to facilitate the better implementation of the PSM proposals and, most importantly, what in general needs to be changed to facilitate better planning in Russia.

The study draws on primary data from the fieldwork in Perm, for which the major source was interviews with representatives of local authorities and local planners. It also involves analysis of secondary data, including interviews with Dutch planners, mass media materials and the plan produced by the Dutch firm.

The rest of the paper will consist of three parts, reflecting the three features characteristic of the current planning practice in Russia and other post-Soviet countries (Figure 2). These are the persistence of old system of planning rules and regulations; the cultural inertia and commitment to the customary practice within the planning community; and the weak participatory tradition.



Figure 2: Diagram showing the structure of the study

3. The PSM and the Post-Soviet Planning System

Even after the development of the Masterplan was finished in 2010, it could not be brought into action straight off. The local government was to find the proper mechanisms or levers for its implementation, which turned out to be a complex process, given the differences between the institutional and political structures among the two countries.

The vital question raised soon after the completion of the PSM was the legal base for its implementation. Since such a document is not included in the Russian system of urban planning documentation, it has no legal force and may be regarded only as a general guidance or a basis for development of other planning documents. Therefore, one of the tasks of City Project Bureau was to produce the General plan, which would reflect the ideas of the Masterplan yet would meet all the requirements of Russian planning legislation.

A positive thing in this situation was that the development of both strategic and general plans was guided by the same team – the planners of City Project Bureau. This eliminated the risk that the two documents would end up as parallel rather than connected documents, which often happened in other post-Soviet cities where planning laws do not legally mandate production of strategic plans (Hirt and Stanilov, 2008).

Generally the lack of strategic level in the post-soviet planning system may be regarded as one of its main drawbacks. Being included in the system of planning documentation strategic plan can serve as a key 'umbrella' document providing frameworks for the rest of city planning documentation.

As can be seen from the diagram (Figure 3) the principles of the PSM had to be spread out over several legal documents of various levels, which required, inter alia, changing of the existing legislation, for instance adjustments to the Zoning Map.



Figure 3: Perm Strategic Masterplan in the system of planning documentation

Having been transferred to the General Plan the principles laid down in the PSM became legally binding and now cannot be ignored by the local developers or the professional community. A major problem of this project and many other projects of this type is that neither the actual plan nor the process of its implementation is embedded in the local institutional culture. The Masterplan is not fully integrated with the existing system of national planning standards and rules, or SNIIP, which are still in wide use in planning education, among practising planners and architects and, more importantly, among local authorities, due to the lack of other national standards. While local planners are often tied by these norms and standards, the Dutch planners did not seek to develop the Masterplan in compliance with all existing planning rules, which is stated (albeit indirectly) in the actual document: *“The Masterplan recognizes that several limitations exist within current town planning, land use, building and other legislative norms. ... It is, however, beyond the scope and ability of the Masterplan to resolve these normative issues in isolation”* (PSM, 2010). As the case study demonstrates, the outside planners are often not troubled by the fact that the plan is not fully integrated within the local planning system, expecting instead that the system will be reformed in compliance with it.

Indeed, one of the priority project proposed by the PSM – the redevelopment of the area in the North-East of the city - aiming at illustrating the principles of the Block strategy, was not executed in compliance with the planning regulations. Moreover, within the limits of the proposed 70X70 development unit it is not possible to find room for all the elements (playgrounds, parking, areas for dog walking and waste containers, etc) required by the system of SNIIP, created for organising the *microrayon* (the analogue of a neighbourhood) space and grounded on this model of urban development. As a result, the local practitioners now find themselves trapped between the requirements of the national planning rules and the Masterplan proposals.

4. The PSM and the Local Planning Community

As already stated, most of the Masterplan proposals were heavily criticised by the local planners and architects on the grounds of their irrelevance, infeasibility or utopian nature. The Dutch team was accused of incompetence and ignorance of local realities and their plan was named *“a collection of lectures on urban planning for educational institutions of The*

Netherlands". In their desire to emphasise how the proposals were unsuitable for local conditions, some local professionals use lavish metaphors:

"Masterplan is a Dutch flower, which they are trying to grow up in our soil ... it will not take root here"

"This city is sick ... but the doctors came with predetermined diagnosis and prescriptions"

Whether these claims are valid or not is a subject of a separate study. This paper will focus on exploring the reasons for the outright rejection of the local professional community. This continuing confrontation may hinder the process of city transformation; it is, therefore, of great importance to reveal the real reasons rooted in the persistence of the Soviet-style planning practice inherited by the current generation of planning professionals.

An approach, completely different to the one employed by the foreign consultants, dominated the practice of urban planning during the Soviet era, when most of the current local planners began their careers. For years, the discipline of town planning was subservient to the system of economic planning, considering people as a part of industrial production, the object rather than subject of planning. Housing and social infrastructure were allocated according to the standard norms of minimum individual needs (Golubchikov, 2004).

Hirt and Stanilov (2008) in their study of planning in transitional countries confirm that the current generation of planners is used to the Soviet practice of physical master planning that is still in place in many cities. These plans are blue-prints, usually covering a 20-year time span, and are inflexible and unresponsive to change. Scholars also point to the slow pace of change in the planning practice and the cultural inertia within the planning profession in post-Soviet countries (Iyer, 2003). Based on this it may be argued that it was conservatism and the 'inertia of thinking' of local planners that did not allow them to accept the ideas of foreign consultants. Long established in the European planning school, and familiar to western planners, concepts turned out to be too radical and innovative for local practitioners.

For instance, the idea of densification and compactness runs counter to a communist 'big-is-beautiful' mentality' and may have caused disapproval from the local planners due to the long-standing tradition of expansive development and focus on urban growth.

Another possible explanation for the rejection, suggested by the evidence from the academic literature (Verdeil, 2003), may lay in the fact that the foreign proposals may threaten the viability of the long established and customary planning practice. The local planners may be not against the actual ideas of the Masterplan but against the changes in practice, which are likely to come with the shift to a new model of city development. Most Russian planners, especially in the provinces, continue operating with the same out-dated set of methods and approaches, while many planning principles and methods developed under the centralised Soviet system have lost their relevance and become inadequate in the new situation.

One of the striking examples of it is the commitment to the '*microrayon*' (the analogue of a neighbourhood) as a main unit for city development. The *microrayon* has been the main method of urban space development since the 1950s. Some of the local planners remain its strong proponents, calling it "*the greatest achievement in the field of urban design*" and naturally do not accept the Block strategy proposed by the Dutch. Given that two generations of urban planners, up until 1991, were looking for optimal decisions for organizing *microrayon* space, it will probably require some time to change this approach and to get accustomed to a new development unit.



Figure 4: A basic development unit: microrayon vs perimeter block, adapted from PSM, 2010

However, resistance from the local planners and architects cannot be explained solely by ideological opposition. In most cases presented in the academic literature, the intervention of foreign consultants meets with considerable resistance not only on the grounds of idea confrontation but because of limitation of local influence on planning. Sometimes, external advisers are blamed for their ignorance of local realities, or the unfeasibility of their proposals in the local circumstances. This criticism by local experts often implies that they would have done a better job only if they had a chance.

In the case of Perm the rejection of the Masterplan proposals was not probably based on theoretical disagreement alone; it was partly due to the resentment and jealousy of the local professionals. One more reason for the opposition of the locals might be the subservient role imposed on local experts and professionals by an inherently asymmetrical relationship (Nasr and Volait, 2003). In general, the previous studies on the issue identify the fact that local planners' reaction to foreign proposals is highly dependent on the type of relationship established between foreign experts and local professionals that is collaboration or resistance. What is interesting, and indeed very instructive, in the Perm case is that we are able to observe the effects of both variants. While the CPB planners, who were working hand in hand with the Dutch consultants, have ardently embraced the proposals of the Masterplan, other local planners were practically excluded from the process and have become its strong opponents.

The involvement of other local planners (external to CPB) appears to be insufficient. According to one of the interviewees, some of the local experts made initial attempts to participate in the preparation of the plan, but the way they were treated as well as the lack of payment created a rather asymmetrical relationship between the parties, which made them eventually abandon the project. Such neglect of local planning capacity is considered to be a significant shortcoming of the project as it could have at least partially mitigated the opposition of local planners and would have made it possible to better reflect local realities and the interests of the community. All in all, the findings of the current study highlight the importance of establishing an effective and symmetrical relationship between foreign and local experts.

5. The PSM and the Broader Public

Various studies have repeatedly shown the importance of mobilizing indigenous support in order to facilitate successful implementation of planning decisions. Meanwhile, in the countries with underdeveloped planning traditions, the participation tradition is usually

correspondingly weak (Hirt and Stanilov, 2008), and the citizens, excluded from the planning process, are mostly sceptical or apathetic towards its final product. Gaining the support of the local stakeholders is often a fairly difficult task too, since introduction of new policies in many cases inevitably leads to disadvantages for some parties, who in all possible ways resist innovations, seeking to protect their own business and land interests (Verdeil, 2003).

Since the Masterplan has no legal status, it did not have to pass through the procedure of public hearings, but needed only to be approved by its client – Perm City Administration. Thus the level of public participation in this case has been hardly more than informative, which, nevertheless, was considered as an achievement by the representative of Perm City Administration: *“The development of the plan was held in several stages and all the intermediate versions of the document were published on a specially devised website. We also had several presentations ... It is a considerable departure from previous practice”*.

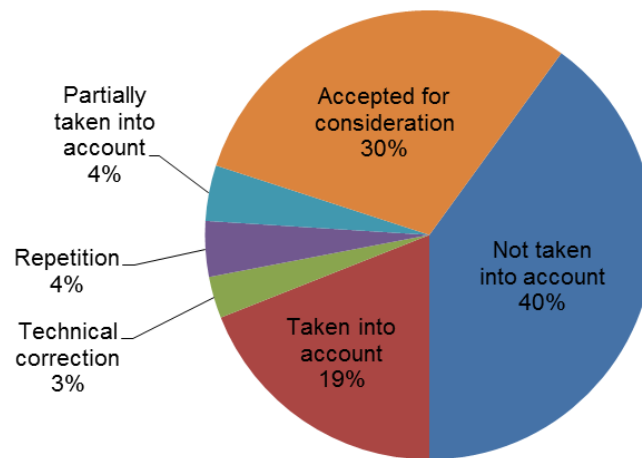


Figure 5: Questions, comments, suggestions received during the public hearings

Although the General Plan has gone through the public hearings as required by law, it has not resulted in any serious amendments to the Plan. Slightly more than five hundred comments and suggestions were received during the procedure and most of them were not taken into account (Figure 5). As stated by Hirt and Stanilov (2008), there is still a weak participatory tradition in Russia left from the Soviet era and the procedure of public hearings is often a mere formality.

Most of the Perm residents are said to be sceptical and negative about the project or, at best, indifferent towards it (Schukin, 2010). The citizens generally cannot understand why the city needs strategic planning documents and blame the local government for wasting money. From their point of view, the money would be better spent on, for example, repairing roads.

Reaction of the public towards particular planning proposals generally depends on the economic and political conditions under which the plan is produced, and on the so-called 'nature of people'. This 'nature', or the way people from different countries respond to particular government initiatives in the field of planning, is the result of a long history of events that together with traditions and social patterns has moulded a local culture (Van Dijk, 2002). While some ideas might be well received in one country, their introduction in another country may pose serious difficulties. In some cases, public opinion might simply be unprepared to be receptive to a concept (Golany, 1984).

The idea of Compact City caused considerable dissatisfaction among the local residents. According to local newspapers people are concerned that their neighbourhoods will get over-

crowded and will lose their amenity. It should be noted though that the negative reaction of the general public towards the idea of compactness is quite typical. Evidence from various studies (Breheny, 1997) suggests that while the overall logic of the concept might be right and desired, it does not mean it will be accepted on the individual level due to the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) attitude.

However, even if it is not the particular proposals that are not accepted by the general public, the success of implementation may be undermined by the overall crisis of legitimacy in planning. As generally known, for decades, urban planning work in Soviet countries lacked legal status, being part of economic planning. This has resulted in the current low status of planning as a cultural institution and the negative attitude of towards any planning in society (Golubchikov, 2004). While urban planning as a discipline is slowly re-establishing itself as an important development instrument, the attitude of the general public towards it is still, at best, apathetic. People in Russia are not ready to accept planning restrictions as a matter of course and have yet to learn to put the common good above their own individual interests.

As regards the local developers, bringing their support has become probably the most difficult part of the plan implementation. The changes, which the Strategic Masterplan proposes making to the regulations and the restrictions on building in new areas are leading to significant changes to the established way of doing things in the construction sector. Projects for expansive development of new territories no longer receive support of the local authorities. The old business schemes that have been exploited over decades are suddenly becoming ineffective and many areas of the construction business such as development of high-rise panel housing may become obsolete (Lozhkin, 2010).

A common concern of local experts is that, in the light of these changes, investors and developers may simply move to other cities and start building there, where it will be easier and more cost-effective. To avoid this the local government should play a central role in providing diverse incentives and guiding the development in the right direction.

In exploring the local press, it becomes obvious that the project is getting support neither from the professional community nor from the local residents. Thus, it may be argued that it was executed from the top down and failed to involve the wider city population. Rejection and misunderstanding of the Masterplan shows that the explanation of its ideas has been given insufficient attention.

There is, however, some progress in this area. A recent positive example is the launch of the social project "Discover the General Plan" aimed at popularizing the ideas of the General Plan and the involvement of the inhabitants of Perm in the process of its implementation. As part of this project the city will held a cycle quest introducing participants to the historical places in Perm, as well as the changes that must occur in the city according to the Masterplan and the General plan.

Another possible way of promoting the PSM philosophy is the priority projects proposed in the Masterplan, which should be implemented as soon as possible in order to demonstrate the quality and possibilities of the application of the Masterplan strategies and to create a momentum for further city transformation.

All in all, it may be argued that the project of Perm's transformation has so far failed to build strong support of its population, which may be considered as its main drawback, given that this support is crucial for its long-term success. Only if the people of Perm become convinced of the need for change, it will become possible to accomplish the difficult task of city transformation.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, it is difficult to make a definite conclusion whether the project was a complete success. The consequences of today's planning decisions will become obvious only when years, or even decades, have passed. Whether all the Dutch planners' proposals, or at least some of them, will be implemented still remains an open question but the very fact of creating a plan with its emphasis on peoples' needs and harmonious urban environment is incredibly important as a precedent.

The case of Perm allowed an opportunity to observe the clash between the latest European planning trends and the out-dated planning practices still bearing the features of the Soviet model of urban planning and development. Despite possible national and regional variation this experience may be instructive and useful to other post-soviet cities in Russia and beyond, which are willing to take the path of borrowing foreign ideas and practices. The last part of this paper will introduce good practice guidance for applying Western planning expertise in post-soviet realities and will try to propose some recommendations for the future development of the Russian planning system.

7. Good Practice Guidance and Recommendations for Further Development

- Considering the locality and the locals
Borrowing of ideas that proved to be effective elsewhere does not always guarantee their successful application amid the specificities of local context. In fact, transfer of planning knowledge has never been 'a smooth journey' and usually becomes a serious challenge for outside experts. The assumptions and predilections they arrive with can prevent them from grasping the uniqueness of each particular problem they confront. What might seem universal for Western planners may turn out to be unfeasible in the entirely different conditions of a post-Soviet city like Perm. 'Travelling experts' should learn to become reflective practitioners, capable of reviewing their assumptions in the light of their experiences in the new context. In order to probe deeply enough into the local specificities, external planners may seek to consult with indigenous experts.

As regards the Perm case study, the Dutch planners seem to have paid sufficient attention to the specific problems and needs of the city and managed to propose strategies grounded in the local context, at least from the spatial point of view (only time will show whether these ideas will turn out to be feasible economically). Their ideas, however, were not accepted by the majority of the local experts, owing to the failure of the foreigners to establish an auspicious interaction with them. The current study highlighted the importance of establishing an effective and symmetrical relationship between foreign and local experts.

- Thinking 'out of the box'
Now that city development has become a multifaceted and complicated process, planning has to become more pluralistic and flexible instrument than before. Having got used to doing the same thing for many years town planners in Russia have developed the inertia of thinking, which prevents them from recognising unfamiliar ideas and techniques of outside origin. They need now to free themselves from the obsession with obsolete rules and regulations and to take new perspectives towards their day-to-day work.

National and cross-national exchange of ideas on best institutional practices may become an easy way to open one's eyes to what is happening outside the local professional community. The simplest, yet one of the most effective ways of such exchange is academic and professional publications, which support the expansion of networks of research exchange and serve as 'the basic media' for exporting planning experience. Various promotional activities like conferences, study tours and training programmes also play an important role

in bringing the products of planning practice to the attention of potential consumers in other countries. Following the example of other countries (e.g. the British Royal Town Planning Institute in the UK) post-Soviet countries can create their own professional associations to promote national and international networking in the field of planning.

Transition to a new kind of planning culture and practice will require a significant renewal of the expertise of those locked onto the ways of thinking and acting of previous practices. This new era presents a number of challenges for planning practitioners who need to develop new skills and competencies and change the whole thinking rooted in the conventional practice. Many will require further education or professional retraining. Thus reshaping education in the field of planning will become one of the most important steps towards restructuring the current planning practice. Planning degrees continue to be architecture-based and oriented towards physical planning. They do not imply fostering awareness of social and economic dimensions of planning work, which inevitably poses a threat of preserving dominance of physical over social component of planning. Although some universities like PNIPU try to develop their curricula and to offer degrees resembling those taught in the leading European universities, the time of properly integrated planning degrees is still to come.

- Changing the constraining regulations

An array of planning methods and regulations of Soviet origin, which are still in use among many practising planners in Russia often do not allow them to move away from traditional approaches and hamper innovative solutions. Occupied with fitting the projects within the narrow limits of the SNIIP system practitioners have to sacrifice originality and innovation in favour of the full compliance with the existing national town planning standards and rules. A major part of the SNIIP system should be revised and some parts of it may be completely abolished.

- Gaining public support

The failure to build support among the public may become one of the obstacles to the implementation of the plan (regardless of whether it was produced by foreign or local planners) and may undermine the diffusion of ideas incorporated therein. Despite the fact that public support holds varied benefits for planning including substantial increasing the odds of successful implementation, the voices of citizens are often neglected with local authorities ensuring only token public participation instead of the real influence on the process of plan development. Employing the classic "ladder of participation" (Figure 7) proposed by Arnstein (1969) the current planning system in most post-soviet countries is stuck in-between level 3 and 4. The degree of public involvement in the planning process is fairly low and participation is often limited to merely informing the public, or, at most, consultations.

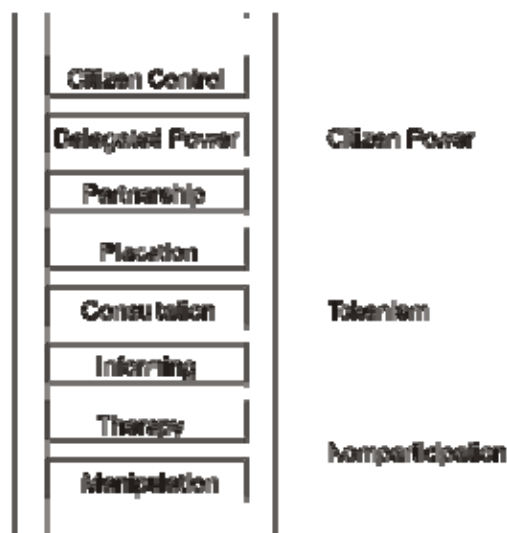


Figure 6: The "ladder of participation", Arnstein, 1969

In order to fulfil the powerful potential of public participation a shift from expert-driven to more participatory approach should occur in post-Soviet societies. Shaping the city development should stop being the prerogative of the selected few – local authorities and experts – and should be taken over by a wider range of actors – all those concerned about the future of their city.

In line with the global trend towards collaborative planning – the most influential planning model of the time implying recognition of the full range of stakeholders and open access to decision-making process - post-soviet planners should learn to listen and consider all the voices even if they run counter the opinion of those in power.

To develop this participatory approach within the Russian planning system it has to be more transparent, democratic and oriented towards finding a social compromise. National planning legislation must be changed in order to expand the current minimum requirements for participation and to ensure consultations on every stage of the planning process from the very start to the final point. At the local level, planners should employ more diverse ways of involving the citizens including such techniques as surveys, workshops and focus groups. Practitioners in the private consultancies producing planning documentations should make it a rule to set up a programme of public events as a part of a schedule of plan development.

Furthermore, it is important to overcome the residual effects of the legitimacy crisis of planning and to raise awareness among the community reluctant to participate or claim this right. Today, above all, broadening of planners' role involves promoting the very notion of planning and educating the public about the importance of involvement in the process of shaping their environment.

It should be understood that before any changes can be seen in the urban setting, changes should occur in thinking of politicians, planners and even ordinary community members. The successful implementation of innovative planning decisions, first of all, requires the commitment and strong political support of the local authorities, which should move from an urban administration with consolidated control to an urban administration that collaborates with its inhabitants and the local business society. The key to successful transformation of the city is in the joint efforts of local politicians, city administration, developers and investors, architects and urban planners and, last but not least, the citizens themselves.

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