

Exploring the interplay between urban governance and smart services codesign

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Abstract. The large spreading of e-democracy and e-participatory tools and environments showed, and is still showing, that technologies offer new direction for dealing with the challenge of scaling the deliberative democracy perspective up to the urban governance scale [10] [20]. The recent growth of ULLs and Human Smart City initiatives is disclosing a promising bridge between the micro-scale of decision and the urban governance mechanisms [17] [18] [4]. In coherence with these perspectives, the paper reports on the interplay between urban governance and smart services co-design in urban transformation as it has been observed and analysed in two European projects, namely Periphèria (www.periphèria.eu) and MyNeighbourhood (www.my-neighbourhood.eu). It also discusses the value of service co-design as a strategic practice to experiment new participatory governance in smart cities.

Keywords: co-design, planning, public services, urban governance

1 Introduction

Urban transformation is widely recognized as a complex phenomenon, rich in uncertainty. It is the unpredictable consequence of complex interplay between urban forces (both top-down or bottom-up), urban resources (spatial, social, economic and infrastructural as well as political or cognitive) and transformation opportunities (endogenous or exogenous). This awareness has since long produced a significant attention on the role of deliberation [8] [9] [1] as well as on the related deliberative democracy models, as relevant for the infrastructuring of urban governance. While deliberation appears operational at the scale of people interaction, small group work and micro-decision making, it is still far from representing a decision making resource at the scale of urban collectivity [14] [6] [7]. It is more and more clear that:

“Deliberative democracy is a model growing out of small-scale face-to-face interactions. To apply it to any larger scale –even modest-sized towns, much less the world at large- requires some different institutional structure. Deliberative democrats need to find ways of linking the virtues of small-scale deliberation with decision making for larger scale society” [13].

The large spreading of e-democracy and e-participatory tools and environments showed, and is still showing, that technologies offer new direction for dealing with the challenge of scaling the deliberative democracy perspective up to the urban governance scale [10] [20].

At the same time, the recent growth of ULLs and Human Smart City initiatives is disclosing a promising bridge between the micro-scale of decision and the urban governance mechanisms [17] [18] [4]. This bridge is represented by collaborative and creative environments [21] [12] [11] where processes of smart service co-design take place through dialogic interaction with and among citizens within a situated and cultural-specific frame [22] [15].

As a response to new emerging needs and ways of generating value, during the last decades the design discipline - traditionally bound to the development of tangible artifacts (“posters or toasters”) - has expanded its focus on intangible artifacts such as signs, interactions, processes, and services [2]. This evolution entailed the generation of a wide set of tools and methods, primarily meant to help designers giving shape to intangible outcomes, such as processes and interactions, and to their tangible substrates, usually called “touch-points” in the service sciences. The active involvement of users is the main trait of originality in the designerly approach to services:

“Service design is a user-centered, participatory practice, based on the adoption of co-design methods to involve prospective users in the development of solutions” [16].

In quite a few cases giving shape to these new intangible outcomes requires the contextual development of a network of actors who will contribute to their realization [5]: The need to align on a vision actors and stakeholders who may have different and sometimes conflicting needs and goals characterizes the design practice in some of its most recent developments. Complex participatory methods were thus developed and experimented in the field of service design, giving birth to a wide set of tools for the involvement of the actors, the construction of the networks, the definition of the underpinned business models, the prototyping and testing of the services [3].

This evolution completely changed the causal relations between products and services, by introducing a new generation of products that are designed “as consequences” of the services they are meant to support. It also led to a considerable expansion of the fields of interest of the design discipline, introducing design methods and thinking into different contexts, starting a fruitful dialogue with other disciplines. Among these, one of the most interesting is the relation with urban planning, that has a long tradition of dialogue with actors and stakeholder, primarily based on the idea of aligning municipalities and citizens on the strategic decisions bound to the transformation the urban environment. The massive introduction of digital services, which generated a new intangible layer of the city, was the natural meeting place for design, urban planning and smart services. The concept of “smart city” boosted the relation between the three disciplines, and introduced the idea that the harmonious

development of contemporary cities must be based on the capability to design and manage the interaction between their traditional physical structure and the new digital information infrastructure, through the introduction of “smart” service ideas and solutions for the emerging needs of citizens. These new urban services invert the relation between the material substrate and the digital layer of the city: they do not just fit in the existing spaces, but actually modify the physical substrate and remodel the city by changing the ways in which people interact.

My Neighborhood and Periphèria Projects

In coherence with these perspectives, the paper reports on the interplay between urban governance and smart services co-design in urban transformation as it has been observed and analysed in two European projects, namely Periphèria (www.periphèria.eu) and MyNeighbourhood (www.my-neighbourhood.eu). It also discusses the value of service co-design as a strategic practice to experiment new participatory governance in smart cities.

Specifically both projects have shown as Living Labs may represent complex deliberative environments where to experiment new opportunities to re-think urban governance models and practices, integrating the macro scale of policy making and the micro scale of public participation (Fig. 1).

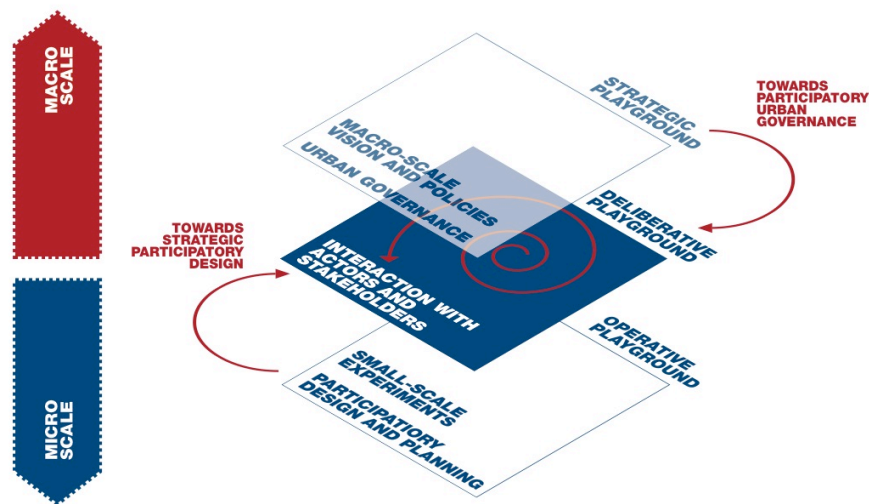


Fig.1. Deliberative Spaces to bridge Micro and Macro Scale of Urban Decisions

Through the small co-design activities conducted in such contexts both Periphèria as well as My neighborhood developed innovative partnerships that deeply challenging public institutions by involving them in unprecedented dialogic and interaction activities.

Both project worked on the assumption that by enhancing the deliberative side of service design processes taking place in Living Lab environments one can fill in the effectiveness gap between micro and macro scales of urban decisions. Specifically service design, carried out in coherence with Living Lab approaches, emerges as a process that is able to generate unexplored governance frameworks so “naturally” expanding deliberation potentials from the micro to the macro scale of urban decisions. This assumption requires the introduction of a systemic perspective, where the role of society and individuals is recognized as integrated with that of technology. This new integrated perspective gives the opportunity of interacting and dialoguing with citizens without losing contact with the real problems (bottom-up trajectory), while at the same time defining priorities and building solutions around a meaningful long-term vision beyond the acknowledgement of local needs (top-down approach), thus revealing unexplored space for deliberative governance.

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