The Planners’ Dream Goes Wrong? Questioning Citizen-Centred Planning

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We are delighted that our paper *The Planners’ Dream Goes Wrong?’ Questioning Citizen-Centred Planning* has won the 2017 John Stewart prize for best paper in Local Government Studies.

The paper emerged from an empirical study focused on the at the time emergent policy of Neighbourhood Planning. On the basis of a small research grant we set about conducting fieldwork in contrasting urban settings whose differences would tell us something important about the ways in which that policy was being implemented. We were interested in addressing three questions through the research. Firstly, we wanted to know why the policy took root in some places but not in others. What were the drivers of/barriers to neighbourhood planning becoming established in particular areas? Secondly, we were interested in how communities had responded to the request for ‘them’ to take on what was in effect a new semi-professional role, that of citizen-planner. What had to be in place for individuals to take on this role? Thirdly, we wanted to understand the local government perspective on this particular rebalancing of state-civil society-market relations following the election of the Coalition government in 2010.

We are hugely indebted to those who participated in the work and enabled us to answer the questions we posed by showing us what was happening where they were. In the course of our fieldwork we interviewed citizens, community activists, planners, business people and politicians. They gave up their time willingly and for no recompense.

In trying to make sense of all the information we eventually gathered, all four of us spent a great deal of time together comparing notes and discussing findings. As a group, we represent two urban planners and two urban sociologists. Whilst there is an overlap between us in terms of our interests and our work, we brought separate skills and reference points to it and that interdisciplinarity was itself of benefit to the research.

Following these meetings we produced a first draft of the paper. The central device of writing it around song titles came from an article one of us had read about the ‘Jam Generation’ of which then Prime Minister, David Cameron, was said to be a part. The Jam song, ‘The Planner’s Dream Goes Wrong’ suggested itself from there. It chimed with us for several reasons. Citizen-centred planning had indeed long been the cherished dream of some (academic) planners. But given what we had seen of neighbourhood planning in action, we found it hard to imagine they now had what they had been dreaming for.

The final published version continued the trope of using dream-related song titles as sub headings. Some are more obvious than others. The rest of the paper was developed in the traditional iterative manner whereby documents sequentially appended ‘version xx’ were passed between the four of us over a number of months. In deciding on a journal to submit the final iteration of the paper to (’version 23’) we very quickly decided on LGS. So much of what we had to report on spoke to the devolution of power from professional planning vested in the democratic institution of local government to putatively ‘self-assembling’ arrangements of citizens and businesses. Themes of statutory retrenchment and de-professionalisation were all bound up with political theory and the live testing of a policy. LGS was the obvious place to go.

When we learnt that *The Planner’s Dream* had won the 2017 John Stewart prize we were suitably chastened but delighted. The experience of publishing with LGS has been nothing other than positive and we definitely hope to do so again in the near future – perhaps using movie titles as the structuring device next time.

What we might focus on in any future article is hard at this point to say: the political landscape is particularly volatile at the moment and both central and local government could be said to be in a near permanent state of crisis, or at least crisis management, leaving us unclear as to what policy is, or what it might be, in many important areas. What is clear, however, is that the underlying issues the article spoke to remain. As Wendy Brown has noted, devolution “frequently means that large-scale problems, such as recessions, finance-capital crises, unemployment, or environmental problems, as well as fiscal crises of the state, are sent down the pipeline to small and weak units unable to cope with them technically, politically or financially” (cited by Roy Scothorne writing for the LRB in Dec 2017). Insofar as devolution continues to be the preferred solution to a whole series of issues, not just planning, planners are unlikely to be the only ones whose dreams will be going wrong.