Introduction

The writing of Henri Lefebvre on the Right to the City (RTC) has given rise to a whole new field of academic discussion and speculation about his precise meaning, particularly in the light of recent developments of neoliberal societies of the Global North after the financial crisis of 2007–8 (see for example Lefebvre 1996; Purcell 2002; 2013; Merrifield 2011; Butler 2012). The debate continues about how far Lefebvre’s writing on the RTC represents an impossible utopian aspiration which can only be realised after a complete social revolution or an aspiration and inspiration which can empower citizens to argue for new forms of local democracy which increase their influence over decisions that affect their lives in the city.

Differences of perspective and interpretation vary over time. Lebas, for example, reminds us that Lefebvre was writing at a time of political turmoil in France and questions whether his writings on the city are appropriate now. She argues: ‘Henri Lefebvre’s The Right to the City isn’t about compromise; “planning gain”, “participation”, “putting right” or “best practice”, but about revolution’ (Lebas 1996: 184). On the other hand, Purcell argues:

The right to the city is one vital element of this movement towards the urban. That movement is set in motion when inhabitants decide to rise up and reclaim space in the city, when they assert use value over exchange value, encounter over consumption, interaction over segregation, free activity and play over work. As they appropriate space, as they develop the ability to manage the city for themselves, they give shape to the urban.

(Purcell 2013: 151)

A third interpretation acknowledges that Purcell’s writing represents ‘The most sophisticated account of how Lefebvre’s right to the city can be incorporated practically into a new form of spatial citizenship’ (Butler 2012: 149), but Butler goes on to assert that the RTC must be seen as only one element of Lefebvre’s writing on the ‘urban’ (158).
This debate about how far the RTC is relevant and applicable today raises interesting questions for those engaged in the study of social movements, public participation and community engagement. How far are legal and administrative provisions which promote citizen engagement a genuine shift towards recognising that citizens have a right to contribute to decision-making and deliberation about the structuring of urban spaces, or do they merely represent a cynical concession to placate and at best inform the public (Arnstein 1969)? What changes have occurred in the local context that have given rise to new opportunities for citizen engagement, and how far do these represent a genuine shift in power relations? The RTC has been adopted by both global social media-based organisations such as the Occupy Movement as well as more traditional organisations such as UNESCO which has produced a World Charter for the Right to the City (UNESCO 2005). A similar declaration was made for the Habitat III conference in Quito in September 2016 (UN 2016). There are many other similar statements produced by global assemblies and forums (Mayer 2009), but it remains uncertain how far these have been adopted and implemented by national governments at central or local levels.

This chapter aims to review the relevance of Lefebvre’s work to current practice in England. The UK has a long history of experimenting with mainly local consultative and participatory organisational arrangements in relation to planning and urban development. The chapter begins by discussing some of the key concepts linked to the RTC and then explores in more detail three examples of community engagement in the field of urban planning and development. The conclusions attempt an evaluation of how far the examples identified might best be defined as procedural concessions and how far they challenge the dominant neoliberal consensus which privileges unconstrained profit-orientated urban development. Is the RTC merely a utopian rallying cry or does it offer insights which are relevant to current practice today?

Interpreting the right to the city

Lefebvre’s key works on the city and urban space set out both an analysis of the current urban predicament and suggestions about how a fully liberated society might be created. First, he distinguishes between the ‘city’ and the ‘urban’. The right to the city is a vital element towards creating the ‘urban’. The urban is ‘a possible world, a society yet to come. It is what Lefebvre calls an urgent utopia, which involves a style of thinking turned towards the possible in all areas’ (Lefebvre 2009: 288; Purcell 2013: 151).

Closely linked to the RTC is a second spatial demand, the right to difference. This right emerges ‘from the essential qualities of the urban as a place of encounter and simultaneity, and as an ensemble of differences’ (Butler 2012: 152). The right to difference has been applied successfully to the urban scene whereby the needs and aspirations of particular sub-groups are asserted – those defined by age, gender, race and sexual orientation. But it can also be applied spatially in that under the neoliberal capitalist system certain groups – often the poor and ill-housed – can become excluded from the centre of urban areas and marginalised socially, politically and geographically. Fundamentally, the right to difference enables citizens to fully engage with others of all kinds, to go beyond the RTC in building the fully ‘urban’ society.

A further important element of the RTC is participation. Lefebvre argues that citizens rarely have more than a nominal role in making decisions. He calls this the ideology of participation, which:

Lefebvre calls for ‘real and active participation’ whereby residents ‘come into consciousness of themselves as inhabitants, as embedded in a web of social connections, as dependent on and stewards of the ‘urban’… allows those in power to obtain, at a small price, the
acquiescence of concerned citizens. After a show trial more or less devoid of information and social activity, citizens sink back into their tranquil passivity.

(Purcell 2013: 150-1)

This process of the active engagement of all citizens leads Lefebvre to assert the principle of *autogestion* or self-management. Rather than advocating the Marxist assumption of the withering away of the state after the revolution, Lefebvre assumes that citizens will increasingly challenge centralised forms of the state which will be replaced by more transparent and collaborative modes of state activity. As Brenner argues, the question is less one of:

The erosion of state power as such than the possibility of its qualitative transformation into a non-productivistic, decentralised and participatory institutional framework that not only permits social struggles and contradictions, but actively provokes them.

(Brenner 2008: 240)

In Lefebvre’s view, to be fully effective and meaningful, participation has to be linked to the concept of self-management and under the direct control of residents:

Without self-management, ‘participation’ has no meaning; it becomes an ideology, and makes manipulation possible. Self-management is the only thing that can make participation real, by inserting it in a process that tends towards the global.

(Lefebvre 1976: 120)

Thus Lefebvre appears to be arguing that the RTC can best be understood as a ‘transformed and renewed right to urban life, which links to the essential characteristics of the urban as both a creative work and a space of ‘centrality’, ‘gathering’ and ‘convergence’ (Butler 2012: 144). Through initially engaging with participation and celebrating the right to difference, residents can take on responsibilities of self-management and assume democratic control of the city. The dominance of exchange value over use value is reversed, the right to difference prevents social and political exclusion and power is more widely dispersed through self-managing organisations. Lefebvre’s vision is based on a combination of Marxist, anarchist and utopian philosophies born out of the milieu in which he was writing. He takes us beyond simply the RTC and asserts that the ‘urban’ is only achieved when the much larger national and global commanding heights of capitalism have been secured. However, he offers relatively little guidance on how this can be achieved, particularly when real dangers exist of falling into the ‘local trap’ of privileging democratic change at the easiest, most local level first without addressing higher-tier powers (Purcell 2006).

**Applying Lefebvre’s conceptual framework to planning and urban development in England**

In order to explore the implications of Lefebvre’s conceptual framework more fully, the following examples of community participation and engagement in England have been selected for more detailed evaluation:

- Public participation which is limited and partial and enables residents and interested parties to object to planning applications and to comment on the preparation of development plans.
• Provisions where neighbourhoods and parishes can prepare neighbourhood development plans based on extensive public engagement and consultation.

• Opportunities where local residents and other interests form autonomous organisations to acquire assets and carry out their own development to meet locally determined needs.

The key questions arising here are: how far does each option enable citizens to challenge the neoliberal status quo in property development and house building? How far are citizens in control of the participation process and in the production of urban plans which affect them? And, to what extent is there evidence of participation leading to self-management (autogestion), the right to difference and what might be called the right to the city?

Public participation in development management and statutory plans

In the year ending September 2016, 483,600 planning applications were submitted to local authorities in England. Of these, 434,600 were determined, and 88 per cent were approved, although this proportion varied significantly between local authorities (DCLG 2016). Of these applications, almost all could be subject to public consultation, and major developments could have been determined by an Inspector or even the Secretary of State of the Department for Communities and Local Government through a complex appeals procedure.

At least since Town and Country Planning Act 1968 in England and Wales, the public and a variety of statutory agencies have had a right in law to be consulted about both individual planning applications and a right to be involved in the preparation of plans (Baker et al. 2007). The same year the Skeffington Committee was set up ‘to consider and report on the best methods, including publicity, of securing the participation of the public at the formative stage in the making of development plans in their area’ (Skeffington 1969: 1). A number of potentially far-reaching recommendations were made in the Skeffington report People and Planning, although many were not pursued with any vigour or had no resources attached. Local residents, amenity societies and parish councils receive regular notification of planning applications and draft plans affecting their area, but it was often the case that few were motivated to respond. As one commentator noted:

The propensity of citizens to engage with planning is typically in direct proportion to the distance from their home, and often manifests only when a development becomes visible, i.e. when a bulldozer or planning application notice appears on site.

(Cullingworth et al. 2015: 509)

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 added a further refinement whereby local authorities in England and Wales were required to publish a Statement of Community Involvement. This sets out for each local authority the procedures to be used in consulting residents and other interests about all aspects of planning. When it became recognised that the planning system had become overloaded with guidance and policy documents, a shorter, simplified statement was introduced called the National Planning Policy Framework (DCLG 2012; revised 2018) for England. This continued to assert the often repeated rhetoric that:

Early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses is essential. A wide section of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and a set of agreed
priorities for the sustainable development of the area, including those contained in any
neighbourhood plans that have been made.

\( \text{DCLG} \ 2012: \ 37 \)

Public and community participation in the English planning system remained for at least 40
years from 1968 excessively bureaucratic and rule-bound. Moreover, practitioners and adminis-
trators often lacked adequate academic training in this important aspect of their work (Shipley
and Utz 2012). There was no attempt to shift the balance of power away from the major devel-
opers and house builders and towards the much less well resourced local interests, despite occa-
sional support from central government to fund voluntary ‘planning aid’ services to residents.
Moreover, it required both a high level of motivation and professional skills to launch a success-
ful campaign against public sector and commercial interests seeking to carry out development
in the face of strong opposition from local opinion. As a result, cases where major developments
were successfully resisted were few and far between. In fact many groups found greater success
through attempting to influence elected members or committee structures rather than engag-
ing with highly paid barristers and consultants at, for example, planning inquiries. As successive
British governments deregulated planning controls over development, the influence residents
and amenity societies could bring to bear was at best very marginal and at worst ineffective.

**Neighbourhood planning**

The UK Coalition Government of 2010–15 introduced a number of policy and legislative
changes in order to both liberalise urban development while also devolving decision-making
to lower levels (Clarke and Cochrane 2013). The Localism Act 2011 (England and Wales) ena-
bled local communities – either existing civil parish councils or newly formed neighbourhood
forums – to prepare and seek approval for neighbourhood development plans. These required
local authority approval at several stages: in defining the boundaries of the ‘neighbourhood’, in
forming a suitable organisation and in ensuring that the draft plan was in general conformity
with the strategic policies of the local authority. In addition, the neighbourhood plan could only
become part of the statutory planning framework after an examination by a suitably qualified
person (an Examiner) and a referendum of all residents living in the designated area. By March
2017, 2,052 neighbourhoods had been designated in England, 316 had held referenda and 293
plans had been ‘made’ or achieved statutory status (PlanningResource 2017).

Neighbourhood plans differ from previous initiatives in that their preparation is entirely
voluntary, and only very limited resources are made available from central government to assist
in collecting the evidence base and preparing suitable policies. The expectation is that much of
the preparatory work is done by volunteers. Civil parish councils in more affluent rural areas
(Brookfield 2016) tended to respond first to this opportunity, and a number had the resources
to employ consultants to prepare the draft plan and undertake public consultation. This is an
important element of the process in that a ‘consultation statement’ is part of the documentation
to be submitted to the local authority and formed part of the examination. After this stage the
Examiner could authorise the referendum to proceed if it was determined that the submission
meets the ‘basic conditions’ defined in the legislation.

It has been argued that neighbourhood planning is part of a wider trend towards neoliberal-
ism and the withdrawal of the state from its strategic planning functions in an era of growing
austerity (Davoudi and Madanipour 2015). On the other hand, there is growing evidence that
it has opened up new opportunities for public engagement in the planning process. Indeed, a
number of neighbourhoods have pursued innovative approaches to consulting, engaging and
involving groups and interests in their neighbourhoods who have not previously participated (Bailey 2016). This may be because designated neighbourhoods often have relatively small populations, making intensive participation processes more manageable, and because of the need to ensure a good turnout when the referendum takes place. There is limited research to date into the impact of neighbourhood planning on levels of engagement and on the planning process itself. A survey of neighbourhood planning groups carried out by Parker et al. (2014) found that they often found the process over-complex and bewildering and wished to see more guidance on processes and procedures. Yet the ability to influence planning policy for their local area proved a strong motivation to exert as much influence as possible within the legislative constraints.

A particularly contentious issue is the designation of sites for housing development in a neighbourhood plan because it is often assumed that local communities, particularly in urban fringe or rural areas, resist new house building which may reduce their perceived level of amenity. Two surveys of the recent neighbourhood plan suggest that some groups see the neighbourhood plan as an opportunity to challenge the monopoly of the big house builders who often prefer to develop large greenfield sites or urban extensions (Bailey 2017; Bradley and Sparling 2017). Instead, local communities tend to favour more housing provision so long as it is well designed, affordable and preferably developed on small-scale infill sites. There is also growing evidence that government ministers and the Planning Inspectorate tend to uphold neighbourhood plans when challenged by major developers whose sites are not designated for housing (Bailey 2017: 7).

Just how far there has been a shift in power relations towards neighbourhoods and away from the impersonal market forces which are often reinforced by the neoliberal planning system remains hard to determine. Clearly the procedures for adopting neighbourhood plans are heavily prescribed by the legislation, regulations and guidance where this is provided and not least because of the local authority approvals and examination which are needed. However, they do legitimise in many cases more intensive and systematic processes of participation which generate positive responses from residents who feel they can exert some influence over planning and housing processes which have a real impact on their locality and quality of life. As Bradley and Sparling conclude:

Neighbourhood planning endorsed the spatial practices of lived or representational space in contrast to the exchange values promoted in the current market model. It directed citizens to an awareness of housing needs not the market needs of the volume house-builders. The balance between community engagement and spatial liberalism appeared to have undergone a similar qualitative shift with empowerment and sense of place emerging as new arbiters of development planning.

(Bradley and Sparling 2017: 117)

In some cases local communities form organisations which can go beyond influencing the planning process and actually exert more direct control over the provision of services and the use of land and buildings by acquiring assets for development themselves. These organisations will be discussed in the third example in the next section.

**Community-based developments**

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of social enterprise going back to Robert Owen’s construction of a new industrial settlement at New Lanark in Scotland and the formation of the
co-operative movement in Rochdale in 1847. More recently, and again possibly a response to changing economic relations and neoliberalism, there has been the growth of social enterprises which have operated as ‘hybrid’ organisations between the public and private sectors. Pearce (2003: 25) identifies six defining characteristics fundamental to social enterprise:

- Having a social purpose or purposes.
- Achieving the social purpose by, at least in part, engaging in trade in the marketplace.
- Not distributing profits to individuals.
- Holding assets and wealth in trust for community benefit.
- Democratically involving members of its constituency in the governance of the organisation.
- Being independent organisations accountable to a defined constituency and to the wider community.

There are many forms of organisation which meet this definition, including co-operatives, housing associations, credit unions and other mutual organisations (Mayo and Moore 2001). A subset of this sector are community-based enterprises or community businesses. These organisations meet the criteria above but also are established in order to benefit a defined locality or section of the population. They can take a number of different legal forms, such as by registering as a company limited by guarantee, which protects the trustees from any debts arising from trading activities. Most also become charities, which provides certain tax advantages. Many are located in areas of high levels of deprivation and may contribute towards local regeneration strategies (Bailey 2012; Healey 2015).

Community-based enterprises have emerged in both urban and rural areas largely as a result of bottom-up community aspirations rather than top-down government policy. They are supported by a national organisation called Locality with a membership of about 600. In a number of cases they were a community response to urban interventions such as road building or ‘slum’ clearance, while in others funding opportunities or sponsorship provided a catalyst. For example, the Westway Trust was one of the first in London and was formed in 1971 in order to acquire a lease on 9.3 hectares of vacant land under an elevated motorway. The Londonderry Inner City Trust was established in 1981 as a non-sectarian organisation to provide training and employment at the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In Central London the Coin Street Community Builders was set up in 1984 when 5.3 hectares of vacant land was transferred to the Trust by the soon to be abolished Greater London Council. All three organisations represent areas with long histories of community activism, and this was a characteristic of many more recent examples. Each has developed land and other assets to provide a mix of commercial space to generate an income in order to cross-subsidise community and sports facilities and in some cases affordable housing.

The relevance of these organisations to a discussion of the RTC is that they represent opportunities for local residents to play a direct role in contributing to and managing these enterprises not for personal gain but in order to generate new opportunities for employment, social and leisure activities, arts and entertainment which would not otherwise be available. The ability to control the type and speed of development is much greater with full legal ownership rather than through the planning system, and in areas where property values and development pressures are low there are considerable opportunities for community enterprise. Additional provisions in the Localism Act 2011 enable community organisations to register an interest in ‘assets of community value’ for which there is a ‘right to bid’ should they come up for sale. Many buildings which are surplus to requirements, such as schools, community centres and libraries, have been transferred from the public sector to community enterprises.
Healey (2015) argues that there are two main reasons for the growth of ‘small-scale civil society initiatives’ in the UK. First, there is the realisation that the state can no longer provide and there may be previous experience of public services poorly co-ordinated or delivered in the past. Second, there has been a shift in public attitudes whereby the dominance and authority of certain professions has been challenged and those representing or working for public agencies have become more willing to facilitate independent, civil society initiatives. There can also be symbiotic relationships established with local authorities whereby trust is developed in order to promote mutual benefits. For example, the local authority can transfer land and buildings at below market value whereas the community enterprise can access funding from other sources and draw on goodwill in the community, for example through volunteering and crowdsourcing.

On the other hand, community enterprise is open to questions about representation and accountability. There is always a danger that these organisations become inward looking and exclusionary and do not fully reflect the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve. In many ways they enter a local political arena where the only real defence is the need to take extraordinary steps to ensure they remain in touch through regular consultation and by encouraging a regular turnover of key representatives.

Thus although community enterprises can acquire greater control over resources in their area, and a stronger sense of empowerment, they must still operate in the wider commercial context of property development and a pro-commercial development planning system. They must also ensure that they remain viable and sustainable, which means operating on a commercial and sometime profit-making basis. This can cause resentment and opposition from those residents who only favour community-orientated facilities.

Of the three examples outlined here, none fully meets Lefebvre’s definition of the ‘urban’ but might just trigger the revolutionary imagination which could constitute urgent utopia: ‘For Lefebvre the urban constitutes a revolution, but one that requires millions of everyday acts of resistance and creation’ (Purcell 2013: 151). What the examples do illustrate is that in many different arenas, and with varying levels of commitment and engagement, citizens are confronting arbitrary decisions that impact on how they wish to live and the quality of life in their locality. Rather than attempting to overthrow agencies of power in the public and private sectors with Lefebvre’s concept of the urban, the examples above tend to suggest an alternative approach, which is about enabling change through deliberation, collaboration and what Gaventa calls ‘deepening democracy’ (Gaventa 2006). This has also been described as ‘progressive localism’, whereby struggles are not merely defensive but can ‘reconfigure existing communities around emergent agendas for social justice, participation and tolerance’ (Featherstone et al. 2012: 179).

Closer collaboration with powerful agencies of either public or private sectors brings real dangers of co-option and legitimisation through weak and ineffective processes of consultation. Those seeking improvements through democratic change and collaboration need to walk a fine line between adopting the interests and perspectives of those in authority and knowing when to oppose and argue for more equitable and inclusive strategies. This also relates to the concept of co-production (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012), which has been defined as delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals and people using services (NESTA 2011). Innovative approaches to developing governance systems based on co-production have been particularly associated with the third sector throughout Europe and other developed economies (Pestoff et al. 2012).

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the meaning of Lefebvre’s key concepts and then sets out three case studies of different types of community engagement in the urban context in England. It
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has reviewed the powers available for residents to comment on planning applications; to form
eighbourhood forums to prepare neighbourhood plans; and to establish community enter-
prises able to operate as developers in the community interest. The relevance of Lefebvre’s work
to residents’ involvement in the urban realm is that it provides a glimpse of what might be, and a
rallying cry for those seeking change. For example, he stresses that the urban is already here and
operating in the present city. ‘Every space in the city… bears within it the seeds of the urban,
a not-yet-realised potential for urban life’ (quoted in Purcell 2013: 151). This is a common
right, argues Harvey (2008), since ‘this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of
a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation’ (2008: 23). What is not so clear in
Lefebvre’s writing is the road map to achieving the urban, given the trends towards neoliberal-
ism and the growing power of multi-national corporations, which increasingly determine the
quality of everyday life and where wealth and life chances become increasingly polarised.

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