3.3

RESEARCHING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN POST-1997 HONG KONG

Collaborative or manipulative practice?

Mee Kam Ng

Introduction: “seeking truths”

“What story do you want to tell?” my mentor, Professor John Friedmann, used to ask me when I was his graduate student many years ago. In our good “Asian” tradition, scholars are expected to tell the “truths” – we are not supposed to be just storytellers! It took me many more years to realize the value and fun of storytelling in various truth-seeking expeditions. The following is one of them.

Post-1997 Hong Kong had been hit by the Asian financial crisis that degenerated into an economic depression, exposing social polarization and inequity issues; health threats such as bird flu, red tides and, most tragically, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003. In that fatal year the government announced its intention to pass a national security law that threatened to undermine freedom of speech in the liberal city; the result was that half a million people took to the streets to demonstrate and protest on 1 July, a date that marks the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. The protest eventually brought down the first chief executive of the postcolonial Special Administrative Region and his Health and Security ministers. Emboldened, the civil society has become more proactive in making their voices heard on various planning-related issues. In the face of its severe “legitimation crisis”, the government then made bold attempts to engage the community on various fronts, most notably in urban renewal, the planning of a new cultural district in West Kowloon, and harbour reclamation and planning. However, if we look at the legal and institutional framework, the formal urban planning system remains intact and as top-down as ever and allows limited citizen participation. So I am intrigued to seek out the truth about the more bottom-up as well as the government’s community engagement activities in post-1997 Hong Kong: Are they genuine collaborative planning experiments? Or are they just manipulative practices, to “legitimize” and “rationalize” the status quo of an unpopular
government? These become my initial questions of inquiry in the aftermath of the fateful year of 2003.

The need for an appropriate research framework

To seek “truth” about the nature of the spree of community engagement actions, I applied for a small research grant to carry out the research from 2005 to 2007. Crafting a good research framework and developing an appropriate strategy and suitable methodologies were important first steps, and this is even more important in the Asian context as many of the theories developed in the urban field are based on western contexts that could be fundamentally different from the Asian ones. In most cases, a preliminary theoretical framework can serve as an effective “lens” for us to develop a perceptive understanding of seemingly sporadic and incoherent events. However, given the fluidity of our studied phenomena and likely limitations of our conceptual construct, theoretical framing has to be done flexibly, allowing for modification as the research and reflections on research findings proceed.

To explain the intriguing phenomenon of an unpopular executive-led (top-down) government suddenly embracing widespread community engagement in planning activities, I started to explore the concept of “collaborative planning”, and the meaning of “manipulative practice”, “legitimation” and “rationalization”, pertinent theoretical issues that have grown out of earlier discussions in the planning field on community participation (Arnstein, 1969; Long, 1975), the roles of urban planners (Friedmann, 1987; Gunder, 2003; Smith and Blanc, 1997) and the importance of a transparent and inclusive planning processes (McClendon, 1993; Webler, Tuler and Krueger, 2001). As I did not start with a clean slate, I did have the advantage of understanding the “communicative turn” of urban planning and the origin and evolution of “collaborative planning practice” in the western literature. The questions for me then are related to the need for examining the genesis and development of “collaborative planning” in the specific context of Hong Kong as a postcolonial, non-democratic, “liberal” market economy. Is the government genuinely embracing “collaborative planning” or is it just a calculated exercise? The answer to this question requires the formulation of a tentative evaluation framework on the processes and results of public engagement.

Formulating a research framework

Professor Patsy Healey at the 2010 AESOP Conference explained the origin of her thoughts on collaborative planning as a plausible and indeed more desirable alternative to what we now call “neo-liberalism”, deregulation and reliance on market forces to resolve urban issues (Healey, 2003, p. 102). She emphasized that the idea was developed to answer a specific context in England, though it did subsequently travel around the globe and was implemented in other parts of the world. This anecdote is an important reminder for all “truth-seekers” or “storytellers”, as it is our duty to search for the origin, emergence and evolution of a concept in time and space, a methodology not unlike the principles of “historical specification” underlined by Korsch (1938) or the kind of genealogical studies exemplified by Foucault (1977). Hence before we can answer the initial research question, we have to examine how the origin of “collaborative planning” in Hong Kong is different from its western counterpart. This will help us appreciate the uniqueness of the “collaborative planning” experiment in the city and identify more accurately the impacts such a move has produced.
To assess whether the collaborative planning experiments were genuine or manipulative, a framework needs to be developed to evaluate the format, contents and outcomes of “collaborative planning” (Flyvbjerg, 1998, 2001; Innes and Booher, 1999; Healey, 1997, 2000; McGuirk, 2001; Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000). Interestingly, the relevant literature reveals an intense debate on the possibility of collaborative planning, especially within an existing skewed power structure, also a central issue in the case of Hong Kong. And these debates point to the importance of not just understanding the collaborative planning processes and outcomes but also developing a sensitive and vigilant awareness of the wider contexts of power relations that give rise to collaborative planning practice and its implications.

The seemingly competing schools of thought constitute rich ingredients for setting the research directions with reference to the two key aspects of research outlined earlier: the origin of collaborative planning practice and the format, content and nature of the experiment.

**On the origin of collaborative planning practice**

In England, collaborative planning can be seen as a reflexive response by a group of academics to “salvage” and defend a long-established planning system in face of “high Thatcherism” (neo-liberalism) and deregulation in the mid-1980s (Healey, 2003, p. 102). It was an attempt to redefine planning as a strategic way out for collective transformation in the governance of places (op. cit.). The story is totally different in Hong Kong. A version of “collaborative planning” was advocated by activist groups, and it was eventually adopted by the then rather desperate government as a way to “salvage” itself from a severe “legitimation crisis” (Ng, 2008, 2011). It was nevertheless a bold experiment in the city’s planning scene, made possible at a unique space-time when the new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government encountered relentless opposition from a maturing civil society as the city slid into deepening crises on various fronts. It was an experiment to promote planning rooted in the collective wisdom of different stakeholders in a society that has always privileged the market and the executive-led government.

In other words, while “collaborative planning” was put forward as a means to transform a planning system that the British government then tried to deregulate, the experiment in Hong Kong was instigated by members of the civil society as a way to establish a more inclusive planning system when the government was relatively weak and its established top-down and exclusive mode of development and planning could not function properly in face of the economic and social crises.

**Is collaborative planning possible at all?**

“Collaborative planning” as a concept is simply an ideal type (Weber, 1949). Healey (1992) puts forward ten propositions (pp. 154–156) to characterize the “communicative turn” of planning theory and practice and suggests four questions to audit the collaborative planning process itself (Table 3.3.1). Interestingly, subsequent arguments in the literature help shed interesting light on my research questions. On one hand, critics argue that the planning context is full of “conflicting rationalities” shaping and maintaining certain power structures (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Watson, 2003), and hence communicative planning practice, ignoring contexts and power relationships, is seen as too naive, idealistic or simply impossible (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000). On the other hand, advocates of communicative practice and collaborative planning repeatedly argue that situated communicative analysis can help expose the dominant power relationships and point to critical spaces of possible resistance – that is, using communicative planning
practice as a platform for a critical review of multi-sectoral and multi-scale power plays to grope for sustainable futures (Healey, 1997, 2003). These two contradictory schools of thought provide valuable resources in the development of a framework to evaluate the collaborative planning experience in Hong Kong.

In order to verify the foregoing “truth” claims, we have to develop some measurable or researchable aspects for the drafting of research questions and methodology. Flyvbjerg (1998, pp. 227–234) argues that power defines reality, rationality and knowledge and hence he challenges the transformative power of planning and discourses in face of skewed power relationships. In other words, while Healey searches for possibilities of alternative transformative practices in the collaborative planning process, Flyvbjerg cautions continuously about the power play that will keep thwarting such a search. The appreciation of the existence of this real tension is helpful in framing the research. And Innes and Booher (1999, p. 419), consensus building advocates, offer a useful framework to evaluate the quality of the processes and outcomes of “collaborative planning” experiences. Such evaluation will be instrumental to decide if the planning processes and outcomes are results of collaborative or manipulative practices. Table 3.3.2 attempts to employ Innes and Booher’s framework (1999, pp. 419) to aid the operationalization of Healey’s “auditing questions” into a set of research ideas.

### Generating a set of research questions

The foregoing research directions contributed to the development of the following sets of research questions that aim to discover whether the spree of “community engagement” experiments was just manipulative practice or genuine practice with collaborative outcomes.

Healey’s first two “auditing questions” relate to “stakeholders and arenas” and “routines and styles of discussion” (Table 3.3.1). Two specific contextual questions were set to examine how different stakeholders perceive the evolving roles of the government, the various private sectors, lawmakers, professional bodies, civil society organizations, etc. in the planning and development
Researching community engagement

Table 3.3.2 Auditing and measuring the collaborative learning process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders and arenas</th>
<th>Contextual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who are the key stakeholders in the current planning process?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the “existing arenas of political, administrative and legal systems”?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative planning experiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did it include representatives of all relevant and significantly different interests?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it driven by a purpose and a real and practical task shared by the group?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routines and styles of discussion</th>
<th>Contextual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do different stakeholders evaluate the planning context and systems?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative planning experiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was there high-quality information of many types with assured understanding and agreement on its meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the process self-organizing, allowing participants to decide on ground rules, objectives, tasks, working groups and discussion topics?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the process engaging, keeping participants at the table, interested, and learning through various means?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making policy discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the process encourage challenges to the status quo and fosters creative thinking and learning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maintaining consensus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did it end stalemate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the discussion thorough and solutions responsive to differences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there a high-quality agreement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was social and political capital created?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there changes in attitudes, behaviors and actions, spinoff partnerships, and new practices or institutions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the experiment result in institutions and practices that are flexible and networked, permitting the community to be more creatively response to change and conflict?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


processes since the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule; and to gauge their views on the utility of the urban planning system in Hong Kong in effectuating positive changes. Understanding different stakeholders’ points of view on these issues would add to my own evaluation of the existing political, administrative and legal landscapes and, as Healey argues, “making difficult chains of connection between what bothers people, what causes this, and what could be done about it” (1997, p. 270). Auditing the practices then helped sensitize me and my interviewees about emerging practices or discourses in the various engaging exercises.

The main set of research questions aimed to examine if “collaborative practices” with characteristics highlighted in Innes and Booher’s framework existed, contributing to “a new policy discourse”:

- Who was involved in the “collaborative planning” experiments?
• What were the characteristics of the experiments in terms of the quality of information shared, the formats of engagement and the autonomy of the participants in shaping the objectives and agenda of the “collaborative planning” process?
• Were there efforts to allow in-depth discussions and debates among different stakeholders?
• Did new “discourses” emerge in the process? Were participants “allowed to voice their needs, aspirations and priorities” and did they “challenge the status quo”?
• How did the participants evaluate the results of the experiments? Did they develop or change their positions in the course of the engagement exercise? Would they agree that the process had produced “a quality outcome”?
• How would different stakeholders evaluate the costs and benefits of the experiments?

Developing a research methodology

Identifying strategic research materials (SRM) is very important, and Merton (1987, pp. 10–11) defines SRM as

the empirical material that exhibits the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such advantage and in such accessible form that it enables the fruitful investigation of previously stubborn problems . . . the (location) strategic research sites . . . and the (temporal) strategic research event.

In other words, SRM can effectively reveal the structures and operations of the studied phenomena. As I would like to evaluate the “collaborative planning” experiments in postcolonial Hong Kong, I identified four major cases as SRM to study. These cases were chosen because they were then representative and exhaustive of the controversial urban development and planning issues (Ng, 2013). These projects were all initiated by the government and were strongly objected to by the civil society, forcing the government to return them to the drawing board. Two of these projects represented the government’s efforts in “collaborative planning” and two of them involved more autonomous community inputs:

• Redevelopment of the old international airport at Kai Tak;
• Redevelopment project of the “Wedding Card Street” (Lee Tung Street) (see Figure 3.3.1);
• The development of the West Kowloon Cultural District; and
• Harbourfront reclamation projects.

A three-pronged approach was developed to proceed with the research. The first one was desktop research to trace the origin and evolution of these projects against broader socio-economic and political changes in Hong Kong as a whole. The interpretations gained in this archival research were cross-examined by the contextual questions asked in the stakeholders’ interviews. Not only did thorough archival research reveal the specific developments of each project, but also such works allowed the research team to identify stakeholders for interviews and follow-up actions. For each project, a list of potential interviewers was therefore developed and interview requests were sent out.

The second approach of the research involved twenty-five systematic interviews with different key stakeholders in the government, the professionals (intellectuals), NGOs and social activists, to compare and contrast their views on their perceptions of the collaborative planning experiment in post-1997 Hong Kong; their first-hand experiences in community engagement
activities; and their assessments of the process as being collaborative or manipulative. These semi-structured interviews not only provided systematic feedback to the research questions derived from the theoretical debates, but also helped provide a wider contextual understanding of the changing societal trend towards community activism and engagement.

As a third approach to verify the foregoing research findings, efforts were made to participate in various engagement activities related to the identified projects. Some of these engagement activities were organized by the governments while others were organized by different networks of NGOs. Besides physically participating in the engagement activities, information and communication technology (ICT) has allowed me to be part of the virtual networks of various groups, which have provided yet another set of perspectives with reference to the formulated research questions. Furthermore, I was particularly fortunate to be a member of the then tripartite (comprising government, private sector and NGOs) Harbourfront Enhancement Committee in Hong Kong and was able to witness the engagement of communities in some harbourfront reclamation projects: some were promoted with the ideal of collaborative planning in mind and others were dominated (manipulated) by the government (Figure 3.3.2). The opportunities allowed me a better understanding of the complexities and challenges of promoting collaborative planning in an institutional set-up that “facilitates” manipulations by high-level government officials. When unchallenged, a fully fledged manipulative approach could easily unfold in a government-dominated process. In at least two incidences, we were successful in reversing the engineering approach adopted by the government to carry out a road-led reclamation project and allowed different stakeholders to reflect and discuss about the desirability of harbourfront planning and the incorporation of a main road on the reclaimed land. The whole process, in a sense, has transformed people’s views on the harbour as “a unique natural heritage worthy of protection by law” rather than just a reserve for further land reclamation (Ng, 2011).
As a result, the whole experience prompted me to reflect deeply on the critical roles of intellectuals, particularly in a non-democratic political setting (Ng, 2011).

In other words, the triangulation of these three sets of qualitative methodologies has allowed me to develop a much more nuanced understanding of the important roles played by the built-environment–related professionals as knowledge “bearers” or “workers” within or outside the government and the lay public as potential “power holders” in the planning processes embedded within the wider manipulative and contesting power relationships. Their perceptions and evaluations of a situation, especially in exposing dominant power relationships, and their active choices of consequent transformative actions to point to critical spaces of possible resistance (Healey, 2003) will make a big difference to the outcomes of events.

**General research findings**

The research was done when Hong Kong was in a rather long-drawn economic depression triggered by the Asian financial crisis in the first decade after her return to Chinese rule. Besides economic hardship, the city experienced environmental and health crises, including air pollution, red tides, chicken flu and SARS. Interviewees shared their observations on the general aspirations of the lay public, especially among the younger generations, to have a larger say in the city’s development process. The economic depression and a slower pace of life had allowed professionals and the general public alike more time and resources to participate in the planning process. Many had adopted various approaches, including applying for land use changes, launching protests, staging community–based public hearings, exhibitions, discussion fora, etc., in order to have their voices heard. Due to losing its legitimacy and rising public sentiment in various planning-related issues, the government embraced “collaborative planning” experiments with reference to a number of controversial urban development projects.
Although Hong Kong had experimented with collaborative planning, the degree of the inclusiveness of the engagement process in the four studied projects varied (Ng, 2013, 2011, 2008; Ng, Tang, Lee and Leung, 2010; Tang, Lee and Ng, 2011). The research showed that engagement activities by local communities were the most inclusive but those organized by the government varied according to whether there was a degree of urgency or the existence of preconceived ideas by the public sector. Hence, some engagement activities were dynamic and served to nurture creative ideas to challenge the status quo and develop a “new discourse”, while others were seen as having a “hidden agenda”. Excluding those activities organized by the local communities, all the engagement works were controlled by the executive-led government. However, this does not mean that people were not allowed to express their needs, aspirations and priorities. For the urban renewal project, participants contended that there was no real dialogue. Yet for the replanning of Kai Tak airport, the interviewees believed that people had good debates and discussions. Yet even for highly controlled and “manipulated” ones, participants considered it a good venue to “vent their frustrations”. In fact, one interviewee complimented the change, as in the past, only a selected few would be “consulted”. Through the engagement process, views were openly expressed and those participants who first joined the activities with their own self-interests in mind began to learn about the significance of wider public concerns, such as heritage issues and the importance of the local economy, etc.

While almost all interviewees were not happy with the quality of information nor the amount of time for discussion, they could all offer pertinent recommendations, such as the importance of a detailed and thorough understanding of the place and its meaning to local people and other stakeholders before the engagement activities, and the efficacy of asking good questions in order to obtain quality information. Most of the interviewees felt a lack of sincerity on the part of the government and believed that the government should provide real options for deliberations or at least explain why it was not willing to consider other alternatives. The engagement experiments did allow participants to practise majority rule or use evidence and facts to aid collective decision making. However, this took place only in projects with little urgency or controversy. As the collaborative endeavours had lofty goals, participants in general were not too happy with the final recommendations, especially when the engagement experiments were not part and parcel of the established institutional set-up and hence the eventual impacts of the recommendations could be limited. Similarly, most of the interviewees did not think that the agreements reached in the various projects were of particularly good quality. Yet they all admitted a change of position in the process, such as appreciating the merits of public interest or broader community views; witnessing the utility of the process; or encountering good quality information.

Although most interviewees pointed to a varying degree of intervention and control by the government in the collaborative planning experience, their evaluation of the whole exercise, surprisingly, leaned to the positive side. While they all agreed that engaging the public had cost implications and they expressed frustration at the process as it served largely to legitimize the government’s actions, they were quick to point out that the experiments provided good training for the community to learn to be tolerant and respect others’ views and to empower them through cross-sector networking to fight for their needs. The deliberations, no matter how manipulated, helped the participants appreciate the complexity of the planning process that went beyond land use planning, inspiring them to ask more and better questions and to demand quality information, thus boosting their capacity as good citizens. As a result, community groups have become more experienced in forming alliances and in using the mass media to advance their demands in the planning and policymaking processes.
Going back to my initial research questions, the answers are interesting because to a large extent, my interviewees perceived that the collaborative experiments were generally manipulative exercises, serving basically to legitimize the government’s actions. However, there are surprises because the experiments did produce results that have helped intensify the changing political ecology of the city. Of course, without the wider socio-economic and political changes in the first place, the government would not have experimented with the collaborative planning approach. And once changes take place, outcomes depend on how individuals grasp and maximize the available opportunities for the public good.

Reflective practice

Hong Kong has been in interesting times. As an administrative, no-party, postcolonial city “quarantined” by the “one country two systems” policy initiated by socialist China, the undemocratic political system lags far behind the aspirations of its citizens. Lacking legitimacy and facing incessant social and health crises, the government chose to experiment with collaborative planning. Hence, in retrospect, it was inevitable that the attempt was made out of desperation to maintain control and earn legitimacy for the unpopular government rather than to share power and to seek creative and innovative ideas from the community as a way to move forward. Indeed, critics have been condemning the various engagement activities as smokescreens and accusing participants of their naivety in being exploited by the shrewd government officials. These arguments have prompted this study and, while the “charges” are proved generally correct, there are surprising results! In the collaborative planning experiments, power could potentially be exercised by everyone, not just by those who were in positions to manipulate it. Participants had to be vigilant to identify dominant power relationships and points of possible resistance. In fact, not all chose to “manipulate”, and some planners and government officials genuinely engaged participants and came up with quality planning outcomes, especially in projects that had less pressing deadlines. And many of the community members have been empowered, through the government’s and their own engagement activities, and become better citizens!

The concrete case studies have allowed a grounded evaluation of the theoretical debates surrounding collaborative planning in skewed power networks in the specific context of Hong Kong, allowing us to appreciate a more nuanced and realistic picture regarding the “bright” and “dark” sides of collaborative planning practices. The manipulated or otherwise engagement processes have constantly confronted the conscience of everyone within and outside the established institutions to use their knowledge and expertise to maintain or challenge the status quo (Ng, 2011); they enabled participants to experience and realize the complex relationships between land use planning, socio-economic considerations and abstract concepts such as public interest, social justice and environmental sustainability! However, the frustrating point is that the established institutions remain unchanged and the government goes back to “business as usual” when their projects are approved formally (Ng, 2013). This will require another study that probes the relationships between enhanced capacities of citizens and opportunities for transformative place governance, which inevitably would invoke debates on the concepts of development rights, the right to the city, etc. (Ng, 2012).

The study also reveals the strengths and limitations of the selected methodologies. Triangulating research findings through archival studies, interviewing stakeholders, and participating in engagement activities and government-facilitated committees have not only provided the author with first-hand experience in the collaborative planning experiments, but also presented
Researching community engagement

different important perspectives for the evaluation of the whole process. As most of the collaborative planning theories have their origins in the western context, practising representative democracy, the study provides a better understanding of the utility and limitation of collaborative planning practice in a non-democratic polity. While it is not groundbreaking, it helps engage Asian scholars to reflect on issues that need to be reflected upon when western concepts are adopted in understanding urban issues in Asian contexts. The methodologies adopted certainly have their limitations. For instance, since not every stakeholder was interviewed, the perspectives gained were bound to be selective and hence the conclusions drawn need to be further deliberated in the public domain for the critical scrutiny of the various stakeholders.

The result of this research inquiry should prove to be very important to participants in a planning process. The projects show that the choices of action in utilizing our expertise and knowledge would make a big difference to planning outcomes. In an undemocratic setting, it is all the more important to have professionals who realize and practise their roles as “public intellectuals” and work with the lay public to generate locally grounded knowledge, pointing to avenues of practical and transformative actions that help develop a more sustainable future for human flourishing (Friedmann, 2000; Ng, 2011, 2012)! Hopefully, for those in similar contexts, they will find our stories relevant and inspiring!

Acknowledgement

The work described in this chapter was partially supported by two research grants from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project numbers CUHK749309 and CUHK750610).

Note

1 The collaborative planning experiment in replanning the old Kai Tak Airport, “Planning with the community – Kai Tak: real people, real places and real results”, received a Hong Kong Institute of Planners’ Certificate of Merit Award. The announcement can be seen at www.hkip.org.hk/admin/ewebeditor3.7/uploadfile/20071105162025306.pdf (accessed 5 August 2014).

References


