



Places for People

Land use policy strategies
for urban futures





Introduction

Land use policy is the defining issue facing cities today. With housing shortages, racial and economic wealth gaps, gentrification, and the impacts of climate change, land use decisions directly influence every major policy area that cities currently face and will face in the future. Sweeping land use policy ranging from widespread zoning reform to an overhaul of development procedures are needed to tackle urban, social, political, and environmental crises. However, if land use processes are to be successful towards building healthier, happier, more equitable communities, they must include the public in the decision-making process. Typical engagement processes, such as the dreaded public meeting, fail our cities again and again with no shortage of skeptics. This does not mean we can turn a blind eye toward the importance of shared civic power. We need to boldly rethink civic engagement for a new future of land use, and it is time for German and American cities to lead the way.

In our travels across cities in the United States and Germany, land use was a critical challenge facing elected officials, local bureaucrats, community organizers, and advocates as they grappled with how to best shape their cities. Whether the supply of affordable land was lacking, as in Austin and Berlin, or showing early signs of unaffordability, as in Chicago and Leipzig, land use policy was at the front of political debate.

They pointed to lengthy engagement processes that overly complicate planning decisions while crippling cities from swift and bold action. Typical community engagement allowed those with the most anger and loudest voice to dominate the conversation. These observations have been supported by research showing that white, older, more conservative residents are overrepresented in the typical engagement process.

And yet, no topic area is more in need of meaningful civic engagement than land use policy. At their core, land use decisions divide a city's most valuable resource, its land, and affect every aspect of how we experience the built environment. The history of urban renewal in the 20th century sets a dangerous precedent for what happens when planning does not include community voices. Leaving the public out of planning will only further the divide between community members and government, weakening our democratic culture and leading to out-of-touch, harmful policy decisions. Furthermore, we are facing an unprecedented political moment of public apathy and distrust in government. There is an opportunity for cities to more authentically engage residents, build civic power, and encourage dialogue across differences on a local and international scale.



Cities have always been places of experimentation and innovation. Now is the time for cities to continue this tradition and boldly rethink land use engagement. From our travels and discussions, we have come to propose three strategies cities can implement to introduce new methods for engagement, build opportunities for international dialogue, and increase transparency and accountability in the process. These include:

- 1) Use civic lotteries to form 'Pop Parliaments' to vote on land use decisions
 - 2) Encourage civic engagement across international borders with a focus on land use
 - 3) Implement evaluative frameworks and time limits on land use decisions.
- With these ideas, we hope to bridge the gap between efficient and effective policy-making and more equitable and impactful civic engagement for the challenges cities face today and the ones they will face tomorrow.

Solution 1

Introduce new participatory mechanisms and structures

Land use decisions present a perfect opportunity for a new form of civic engagement to grant meaningful decision-making power to residents on zoning reform and development decisions while shifting the typical public discourse outside of a NIMBY framework.

An exciting engagement model we saw in our travels was the citizen assembly. The typical citizen assembly structure includes residents who volunteer or are nominated to advise on given issues related to a city. Examples abound, such as the city of Berlin, which recently installed a Climate Assembly where 100 Berliners regularly discuss climate action and develop recommendations for the Senate and the House of Representatives. In Austin, citizens can volunteer for an advisory council that works with city officials for redistricting.

While these examples offer a formalized role for citizens to participate in the decision-making process, there is room for innovation within such a typical structure. Like other community engagement methods, voluntary assemblies can limit participation to those with the time, resources, and prior knowledge. Furthermore, who can participate is often limited by restrictions of citizenship and property ownership. How can new models be inclusive to more people, including renters and immigrants, who have just as much a right to help shape their built environment? Typical citizen assemblies also limit the role of participants to one-off advisory positions rather than fully enabled decision-makers. Inspired by our travels and debate, we see an opportunity for a new kind of citizen assembly that can more meaningfully empower a broader range of residents.



We propose a new form of citizen assembly model, a 'Pop Parliament'. The Pop Parliament will give participants real decision-making power over land use decisions and will broadly represent local residents through a randomized selection.

While each city would tailor the Pop Parliament model to best meet their context and needs, we suggest general guidelines, including a randomized selection, collaboration with city officials, and voting power on land use decisions. The Pop Parliament could share one vote equal to that of a city councilor or zoning board commission when voting on a development approval, land use reform, or zoning code revision. Selection would be through a 'Civic Lottery', which would work like jury duty, a formalized process for residents to participate in the judicial process. We would propose participants be paid for their time with the ability to opt out and a reasonable time commitment. Participants could serve on the Pop Parliament as long as the decision was being decided to ensure appropriate turnover as well as offering an engagement opportunity more substantial than the typical one-off event. Participants would be broadly eligible based on residency in a city, such as having a valid postal address or library card.

While typical engagement efforts for land use decisions are dominated by those with the most resources, a randomized selection process can ensure to invite residents who would not otherwise participate and level the discussion ground while leading to bolder policy outcomes and broader public support. Randomized selection can also help foster a culture of participation within cities, where anyone is suddenly seen as a potential decision-maker over how a city is built. In order for assemblies to be successful, cities would need to build the capacity of citizens to participate. Cities could strengthen their partnerships with school systems to build planning education into the curriculum similar to how schools are supposed to prepare students to be able to vote and be active participants in democracy. Understanding how the built environment is organized is an important lesson for informed residents to help shape their cities.

The OECD recently released a report on citizen assembly models in practice around the world detailing best practices and outcomes. The report looked at examples where decision-making processes were formalized, consisting of randomly selected participants and involving meaningful interaction and decision-making.



The report revealed that deliberative representative democracy models led to more innovative and effective policy outcomes because discussions drew on the collective knowledge and diversity of experiences of a citizen body. They also found that these policies had greater public support and legitimacy, because they came from fellow citizens rather than disconnected politicians. We see the model as a way to break through the gridlock that often faces land use decisions, desperately in need of bold and effective ideas.

Most of the models reviewed were temporary projects with the only ongoing citizen assemblies operating in Belgium and Spain as of 2019 and Toronto and Oregon as of 2020, none of which were explicitly focused on land use decisions. We believe that there is an opportunity for more cities in the United States and Germany, such as Austin and Leipzig, who are leaders in the direct democracy field, to build upon the citizen assembly towards addressing land use through the Pop Parliament model.

Solution 2

Build up opportunities for international dialogue and deliberative processes

As we saw in cities across the United States and Germany, urban issues are increasingly becoming global issues and cities are taking on important leadership roles on the world stage,

a process that is equally important for civic engagement and public participation. Without building public knowledge, support, and dialogue around international policies, we will continue to see the spread of misinformation, disconnection, and nationalism that has dominated public debate.

Furthermore, land use reform is a common issue that all cities are facing. Whether dealing with exorbitant land prices and housing pressure or vacancies and population decline, cities would benefit from cross-border exchange of ideas to address these complex problems.

There are new models of direct democracy that cities can adopt to support international dialogue between residents. We heard about Sister City Initiatives in Leipzig and Chicago as well as informal international exchanges particularly around climate change, such as with the international First Fridays movement. The UN has also implemented a World Wide Views program, where randomly selected citizens from different countries are brought together to share views on climate and energy policies. Again, we believe these models can be applied to land use topics and developed further to galvanize cross-border dialogue and bring international diplomacy to the people.



German and US sister cities could bring together residents from each country to exchange ideas around land use, an International Pop Parliament. As with the local model, participants could be randomly selected from each country to provide on the ground perspectives on the challenges their cities are facing and learn from each other about best practices. The International Pop Parliament could invite politicians from all levels of government to collaborate and better connect with residents. We see a role for German and American think-tanks such as the Progressive Policy Institute, Das Progressive Zentrum, and the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, to facilitate this experiment in international exchange, civic engagement, and innovative policy making.

To bring even more people into the international conversation, we also propose an International Democracy Festival between Germany and the United States. Too often foreign policy matters and international debate feel overly complicated and disconnected from people's everyday lives. We need to bring vitality and excitement into democracy and decision making. We need to reach people that governments continuously fail to engage especially on foreign policy, such as young people. Democracy festivals are celebratory events where everyone is invited including politicians, universities, community groups, business leaders, etc. for a day of dialogue and celebration.

Celebratory events can instill a sense of belonging, community, and a feeling of being on the same team. The only day Americans come together right now is for the Superbowl; Germans for the World Cup.

It may sound hokey, but democracy festivals are annually held in eight countries in Northern Europe with over 600,000 participants every year. Brussels has organized a European democracy festival. Participants say the secret to the festival's success is that the celebratory format breaks down barriers between civil society and politicians. They offer an opportunity for people to get to know each other outside of city hall or on online message boards. We believe this could be a unique model applied to international dialogue and cross-border exchange building upon the legacy of German and American diplomacy. An International Democracy Festival could bring German and Americans together in different sister cities on an annual basis for a day of conversations, talks, workshops, tours, performances, and revelry.

Opportunities and spaces to exchange best practices internationally do not just happen on their own - they need to be designed and created. The benefits of exchanging best practices on land use in urban areas and international democracy festivals are clear. We suggest that cities actively work on building these opportunities for transatlantic dialogue on issues that matter to us all and will enrich our urban lives.



Solution 3

Layer in evaluative benchmarks to increase transparency and accountability

New forms of civic engagement will always come with criticisms. The common concerns are that they breed distrust because expectations are not clear and that they drag out decision-making processes, leading to stalled governments. While cities experiment with new models of civic engagement and democracy, they need to implement systems and structures to address these concerns and measure their effectiveness.

Public participation processes first and foremost require transparency and clarity. This provides the necessary foundation for trust to be established between the stakeholders involved, and ultimately the basis on which a culture of participation can grow. A guiding framework can hold participants accountable to common values and ensure expectations for participation are clear. Ongoing research and evaluation can demonstrate the impact of new models, leading to improvements and political support.

A great example of a participation framework arose in Berlin with the redevelopment of Tempelhof Airport. The so-called THF-Kompass — has been created and published online, to navigate future participation projects.

The tool aims to communicate the broad parameters of participation at Tempelhof to the general public and hold the development corporation and political actors accountable. The Kompass comprises of 3 building blocks: A) the 3 so-called “fields” where participation will take place, B) the wider strategic network in which the participation is embedded (a visualization which shows the relationship between participation and the building renovation along a 30 year horizon), and C) an action plan (a project management tool that guides those working on participation to consider goal and context, spaces of participation, the stakeholders and target groups, formats and process and lastly, results and evaluation.

Civic engagement models also need to address the tension between democracy and efficiency. A meaningful but inefficient process will not stand the test of time given the speed at which governments must act and the increasing intensity of land use crises. How can cities ensure that increasing participation will not lead to never ending public debate? Land use is a particular policy area where swift action is demanded. Too often anti-housing advocates stall public processes to block much needed housing from being built. With the increasing threats of climate change, housing prices, and inequality, governments must act quickly to deliver solutions, not be captive to political gridlock.



Cities should implement time limits on land use review processes, particularly for affordable and multifamily housing and zoning reform, to guard against total inaction. This could be based on the model of environmental reviews, which have time limits in both the United States and Germany.

The messy realities of collaboration mean that frustration and antagonism will always be part of the participatory process. However, implementing clear and efficient structures — ones that crucially can withstand changes in the political landscape — can help foster a culture where diverging ideas, needs and interests can be negotiated fairly.

Conclusion

Cities need radically different processes than the ones being used as they grapple with ever immediate land use crises. While typical community engagement methods struggle to enact meaningful change, there is a way we can rethink participatory governance structures to formalize civic power and expand engagement to a global scale. We think this is the best solution for rescuing the fate of community engagement in cities as more than lip service towards an effective form of urban democracy and an improvement to the built environment.

Luckily, cities have the tools they need for better civic engagement - local politics are already closer to people's everyday lives than state or federal politics. Also, cities have the financial and political latitude to deliver on innovative solutions in a way that less urbanized areas cannot. In this paper, we have outlined three strategies cities can use for more productive collaboration and engagement. From granting voting power on land use decisions with a new form of the citizen assembly to models for international dialogue to evaluative frameworks and time limits, we hope these ideas will inspire civic leaders in Germany and the U.S.

For this paper, we focused on land use decisions, but this could easily extend to other impactful urban policy areas like sustainability, emergency management and economic development. Regardless, in allowing everyday people to sync with government actors on issues of the greatest public consumption, we can share in a city's successes and failures, we can be accountable to one another, build a culture of participation, and, most importantly, if we add transparent and efficient structures to the process, we can regularly measure exactly how to improve ourselves. Our travels across Germany and the US have shown us how cities can quickly become the most fertile ground for innovative policy ideas and community building.



Bold policy is needed more than ever as the problems in cities grow in complexity and importance. Working together with communities on a local and global scale, we have hope that cities will continue their track record for the type of adaptability, audacity, and experimentation that's required to meet the challenges ahead.

Glossary of Key Terms

LAND USE

Land use refers to the human use of land. Land use is the central topic of our paper largely because land is a finite natural resource and thus land use is extremely political; the way in which urban space (land) is managed, reveals *for whom* cities are being built and developed. Land use policies directly impact every aspect of urban life, such as housing, health, transportation, climate. Local land use decisions therefore shape inclusion/exclusion in communities and play a decisive role in defining the character of neighborhoods.

CITIZEN ASSEMBLY

A citizen assembly is a body of people who are tasked with deliberating a given issue — often highly divisive issues such as climate change. Assemblies work in the tradition of deliberative democracy, making information a crucial part of the process, central to the decision making. Typically, the assembly is a state initiative with the aim of increasing trust, and is composed of randomly selected citizens, in order to have a representative cross-section of the general public, e.g. in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and education. Citizen assemblies typically produce a political recommendation.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Direct democracy refers to a form of democracy where laws and policies are voted on directly by citizens (for example in a referendum), rather than by elected representatives (representative democracy). The idea goes back to ancient Greece and most prominent in modern society Switzerland has incorporated direct democracy within its constitution. Direct democratic formats are valuable when thinking about democratic innovation, largely due to their level of citizen participation, the degree of transparency between government and people it affords, and the accountability it demands of governments.

NIMBYism

NIMBY is an acronym for 'Not In My Back Yard'. It refers to residents opposing a development in their area, but which they would otherwise support. NIMBYism therefore describes a community acting in their own interests, rather than the needs of the wider community or neighbourhood. The term is often used in connection with debates on land use — and in this context is relevant to this papers' focus on unequal power dynamics in city development.

About the Project

New Urban Progress (NUP) is a transatlantic dialogue on how urban areas can be more innovative, democratic, and sustainable. By exchanging best practices and collaborating on bold solutions, young urban leaders from Germany and the United States worked on how to deliver social and economic progress while renewing the transatlantic partnership at the city level. The project covered three years (2019-2022), including two delegation trips, and 20 transatlantic fellows.

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