

# **“Learning by doing: delineating the changing roles of the new urban professional”**

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## **1. Contemporary planning: a changing field of contradictions**

Participatory approaches to planning have been growing in importance in research, practice and policy-making over the last decades, arguing for citizen-involvement in planning (Albrechts, 2008, 2002; Van Herzele, 2004). Radical or insurgent (Friedman 1987, Sandercock 1999), communicative (Innes 1995) and collaborative (Healey 1997) approaches have had a growing influence on planning discourse (Albrechts 2004; Healey, 1997, 2007). Several authors have however expressed fundamental critiques on communicative planning approaches (Bengs 2005; Gunder 2010; Hillier 2003). Despite its emancipatory ambitions, collaborative planning often results in a type of ‘inclusion’ that legitimizes pro-development interests and depoliticizes conflict (Gunder 2010), hence acting as a mechanism facilitating the neoliberal market logic (Bengs 2005, Purcell 2009).

More recently, the idea of civic self-organization has however been gaining momentum within urban development, embodying a shared responsibility for the spatial environment between government and civic communities (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). In response to the fact that public government often fails to deal with the increasing amount of self-organizational initiatives, spatial planners should turn to an ‘outside-in’ perspective, consciously positioning themselves as actors in the middle of self-organization processes as a new form of ‘embedded spatial planning’ (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011:100). An outside-in perspective thus perceives self-organization as a way out of the dilemma of wanting to involve citizens from the outset, while government initiated participatory trajectories fail to fundamentally do so. This can be framed within the broader context of fundamentally changing relationships between state and civil society, where a ‘destatisation’ is taking place, transferring former state domains (such as health, education, socio-economic well-being) to the individual citizen or civil society organizations (Jessop 2002) and new arrangements take place in institutional voids (Hajer 2003). Local governments are increasingly promoting active citizenship, or a more direct involvement of citizens in urban governance (Kearns 1992). While institutional forms that rely on the greater involvement of individuals or actors from the civil society have the potential to generate socially innovative practices in urban governance (Moulaert et al, 2005), Swyngedouw (2005) argues that ‘governance-beyond-the state’ is fundamentally Janus-faced: on the one hand these practices have an empowering potential, on the other hand they are positioned within a neo-liberal order where democratic characteristics of the political sphere is eroded by the imposition of market forces.

While the potential of self-organizing initiatives by an increasingly stronger civil society create a potential for spatial planners, at the same time a growing body of literature has emphasized the uneasy position planners are being ‘pushed’ into within the contemporary neoliberal urban development logic (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Olesen, 2013; Purcell, 2009; Tasan-Kok and Baeten, 2011). Within a context where urban space is increasingly mobilized as an arena for market-oriented growth (Sager 2011, p. 149), the focus of spatial planning has shifted to a project-oriented, flexible and short-term planning in order to deal with property-led urban development (Albrechts 2004). The project-oriented mode of planning is often criticized as supporting an entrepreneurial urban governance, where urban projects are used as a vehicle for urban growth and interurban competition (Swyngedouw et al. 2002; Harvey 1989). Planners are as a consequence often pushed into the role of facilitators or enablers (Haughton et al 2013, 221) hence becoming ‘agents’ (Taşan-Kok, 2011, p. 2) or important players in the project of neoliberalism (Olesen, 2013). This leads, by its turn, to contradictions between ‘the principles and practices of planning for urban development’ (Taşan-Kok, 2011, p. 2). The spatial planner is torn in different directions by a confusing and inconsistent professional role: pushed out of ‘planner’s paradise’ (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994) into the project of neoliberalism (Olesen, 2013).

This ‘crisis’ in contemporary planning theory and practice however coincides with a proliferation of bottom-up, self-organized initiatives in urban areas, initiated by an increasingly more vocal and empowered civil society, where vital socially innovative development dynamics reside (Swyngedouw and Moulaert, 2010). Arguably, this can be interpreted as a counter-movement: a growing mobilization against the neoliberalization of urban governance and corporate urban development, embodying a renewed convergence under the Right to the City banner, as a unifying concept, with an emphasis on its spatial dimensions (Harvey 2012; Mayer 2009). Mayer (2009) therefore argues that it is exactly the increasingly more “hostile” urban environment (entrepreneurialism, corporate urban development, etc.), which has triggered a loud call to (co)create the urban environment and local struggles over the Right to the City to become more pronounced. The growing plurality of self-organized practices that has been developing itself, as alternative models of spatial production, can therefore be seen as a “a social movement in its own right” (Stickells 2011). Diverse labels have been proposed for these diverse alternative practices of ‘DIY Urbanism’, such as tactical urbanism, guerilla urbanism, temporary urbanism, etc. (Finn 2014).

## **2. Spatial professionals as ‘organic intellectuals’**

The emergence of alternative practices of area development emerging alongside growth-dependent planning (Rydin 2013), initiated by often non-traditional or civic actors, arguably can be read as attempts to fill in the deadlock of urban planning. These practices are often driven by personal involvement, shared feelings of responsibility and informal ownership, characterized by a blurring of responsibilities and professional boundaries between all actors. While there is an increasing interest in the proliferation of self-organized (civic) initiatives, we see the development of professional urban planning, artistic and architectural practices which in a variety of ways respond to or pick up elements from his transforming landscape, by taking up alternative roles within the field of spatial developments on very local scales. They seek interactions with civil society, cooperate with or initiate self-organized initiatives, work in the margins of temporary space, etc. These professionals claim a different (often independent) position, which however requires a range of different skills, attitudes and roles, which remain unexplored.

Based on the concept of the organic intellectual as described by Gramsci (1971), we argue that the types of practices which will be analyzed in this article are playing a role as ‘organic intellectuals’ through material practice and socio-spatial knowledge and skills. Gramsci argues that the image of the ‘traditional’ intellectual, as a class apart, in an autonomous position, separated from society itself, is to be considered as a myth which has been gradually created. This ‘social utopia’ therefore conceals the historical continuity that the positioning of intellectuals has always been, in one way or another, connected to ‘class struggle’. As a consequence cultivating the illusion of an independent position (of the planner), actually sustains certain hegemonies. In contrast, organic intellectuals are consciously ‘developed’ in response to certain societal changes and developments, carrying an explicit social function. Successful (counter-) movements consciously yield organic intellectuals that play a directive role, based on their specialized knowledge. Organic intellectuals, according to Gramsci, thus challenge traditional practices and contribute to social movements, or more broadly framed fundamental societal changes. Within this study urban professionals or practices which develop alternative models of spatial production, assume a different position within the shifting relationship between government, governance and civil society, and respond to the deadlocks in contemporary planning theory and practice, can therefore be considered as organic intellectuals. Through developing new skills, tools and forms of ‘organic intelligence’, they are contributing to a changing field of planning and urban development, driven by conscious socio-spatial missions and ambitions. In this article we want to develop a first understanding of the diverse

ways in which ‘spatial organic intellectuals’ are searching for a new approach and more importantly are developing alternative roles within the arena of urban development and spatial changes.

We argue that these changing roles, related to the –fast- changing set of conditions, is best studied in practice – as they are often formed and adjusted within specific process and cases of urban transformation. In the subsequent part we introduce the ‘Stadsklas’ (freely translated as ‘Urban Classroom’) as a collective learning process or ‘a learning by doing’ research model. This is followed by a description of the first findings of the Stadsklas; introducing different role categories as illustrations of new urban practices. In the final part we reflect on the new role of the urban professional within present-day contemporary urban developments. We conclude with a reflection on the Stadsklas as a research model and an alternative educational project.

### **3. The Stadsklas as a research model:**

*“Learning by doing” suggest that we not only can think about doing but that we can think about doing something while doing it.’ (Schön, 1983).*

Through the medium of the ‘Stadklas’ we aim to explore the broad field of innovative practices in the Netherlands and Flanders, which in multiple ways respond to changing planning conditions. In this way we try to investigate the contemporary field of the urban professional which seeks to step outside of the classically delineated roles of the urban planner, urban designer or architect and get a profounder grasp of the types of practices which are consciously developing in response to the increasing importance of self-organization, and bottom-up involvement in spatial planning. The Stadsklas is on the one hand a course in innovative urban planning, while at the same time being an action research model, which focuses on collective learning to delineate the new roles we see emerging within the changing field of urban planning. It was developed in two phases:

1. A desk-research identifying and analysing a diversity of practices which actively and reflexively search for a new role within a changing field, including studies of current literature, the analysis of documents and websites, interviews and observations.

2. Based on the findings of this desk-research, ‘a learning by doing’ action research program, called the Stadsklas, was developed in cooperation with Stroom<sup>1</sup>. Nine cases –from the previous executed desk-research- were selected in the Netherlands and Flanders and were visited during the five Stadsklas fieldtrips in 2014<sup>2</sup>. The Stadsklas is conceived a collective learning research model in which urban professionals, - students and educational institutes were actively involved.

The Stadsklas is a research model; in which together with a diverse group of professionals and students from architectural/planning-related disciplines, different cases<sup>3</sup> of urban developments and practices are studied. This is done based on a collective learning process (Scharmer 2009) in which information is actively exchanged between all participants involved and participants are seen as experts. Learning happens through active involvement and a process of sensing [*as (deep) listening, observation*] and is un-judgemental (ibid.). Through the format of the Stadsklas the participants<sup>4</sup> are thus involved as co-researchers in exploring the practices and contexts from different perspectives. Their role in the Stadsklas was to act and interact from their own expertise and professional background. Of the participants thirteen were involved in urban planning, fourteen in (landscape) architecture, nine in spatial design, five in urban and social geography, six in art-history, and fourteen participants were dealing with communication of some sorts. Of this peer group seven percent were students, and thirteen percent was working for a municipality. The activities and program of the excursion itself were shaped by the invited practice (professionals), guiding the group of peers through their urban practices, their everyday working environment, explaining their working methods and the tools and skills they employ. Their professional background differentiated: four urban planners, three architects, four graphic designers, two community developers, three artists and one an art-historian. The organizers<sup>5</sup> of the Stadsklas joined each field trip as part of their research. Their role was to act (and interact) with the group, structure the discussion(s), and write the reports on each fieldtrip<sup>6</sup>. The physical conditions which were dealt with are urban neighborhoods awaiting regeneration (Amsterdam, Antwerp) or deprived areas such as a former military basis near the city of Arnhem, the

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<sup>1</sup> STROOM is an independent art and architecture foundation in The Hague, the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Cases were visited in Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Arnhem in the Netherlands, Antwerp in Flanders.

<sup>3</sup> Nine different cases were visited during five field trips in 2014: Amsterdam Noord and West, the Binckhorst in the Hague, Vliegved Deelen Arnhem, Testsite, Schieblock and Zoho In Rotterdam, Wijkdam and Park Groot Schijn in Antwerp.

<sup>4</sup> In 2014 a total of 50 paying participants joined the program. The group sizes differentiate between 13 and 21 peers. In total 88 people joined the Stadsklas.

<sup>5</sup> Willemijn Lofvers (author), Tim Devos (author), Hans Venhuizen and Francien van Westrenen (Stroom)

<sup>6</sup> Involved journalists and some of participants blogged about their findings on various media (Stroom 2014).

slaughterhouse terrain in Antwerp, post-war business-areas near inner city-centers such as Zomerhofkwartier and Testsite in Rotterdam and the Binckhorst in The Hague.

Furthermore, the Stadsklas itself mirrors the practices it studies; as an ongoing process, studying in a relational approach and through a direct dialogue, urban localities in transformation by submerging in the expertise of involved actors. This is done based on the format of a one-day fieldtrip in which two guides introduce their practice and approach, while focusing on collective reflection on their role and position, the applied methods, skills and tools. In the Stadsklas we thus shift the focus from the object of change (the city, the specified area, the project) to the process of how this space is conceived, produced. Since the studied projects, or rather processes are still ongoing, we focus on the present situation rather than a future end-state. Participants are introduced to the spaces in transition of which the examples derive in order to develop a participatory, open learning process to develop a reflexive understanding of these processes.

#### **4. Lessons learned: delineating 5 roles**

Based on the material derived from the five fieldtrips, consisting of field notes, transcriptions of the (final) discussions, and written documents we describe our first findings on the different roles for the urban professional involved in new urbanisms. While these roles require further refinement, they are to be seen as a first step in delineating the different roles of the involved urban professional as ‘organic intellectuals’ in the process of self-organization. These roles will be tested and further explored in the second edition of the Stadsklas (2015). To understand practices which develop in response to the context of fundamentally changing relationships between government, civil society and market - the focus is on the role the urban professional performs to execute his (self-defined) tasks. To be able to address this role we have studied the tasks they execute, the skills this requires, the attitude and mentality towards the specific context, and the knowledge required within these new situations. We will describe four identified role-categories, which emerged in the Stadsklas of 2014: the Scout, the Mediator, the Propagandist and the Instigator.

##### **4.1. The Scout**

The first type of practice we identified through the ‘Stadsklas’ focuses predominantly on exploring or ‘scouting’ the potential of often ‘forgotten’ or undervalued sites and areas. This is predominantly based on a self-initiated, pro-active investigation, aiming to identify potentials in

the observed conditions, which can be translated into possible strategies for alternative area development or planning. Furthermore these practices are typified by a cultural approach, emphasizing local findings from an artistic or research-oriented perspective hence aiming to uncover the specific identity of the locality, its underlying potential and putting it on the agenda based on (often artistic) interventions. The scout however mostly develops some sort of personal connection to the situation at stake, often described as a 'pioneer'.

The scout, as a central figure or 'local host' or even 'curator', works independently to connect different local and supra-local partners, brings together interests, stimulates coalitions and even actively searches for investments. Seeking cooperation with developers and investors as well as municipalities. Through the introduction of 'pioneer' projects, different potential development strategies are explored, in an organic development process. While these practices are often typified as temporary appropriations, they have professionalized an approach to identify opportunities and preconditions for future development, based on elaborate local research, aiming to trigger an organic and locally embedded development process.

#### ***Case example: Koningsweg Noord Arnhem (guide: Hans Jungerius)***

Hans Jungerius is working on a gradual redevelopment of the former military complex Kamp Koningsweg Noord adjacent to former airport Deelen north of Arnhem. He runs cultural project-office G.A.N.G., specializing in setting-up projects for 'localities which can't be typified unambiguously and focusing on overlooked issues'. From the perspective of visual arts GANG aims to 'see opportunities which are often overlooked in conventional planning visions'. He lives and works as an artist in one of the buildings in the complex. Jungerius has started 'foundation hidden landscape', facilitating 'artist in residences', and attracting entrepreneurs to develop Koningsweg as a connecting hub between the city and the disconnected landscape of the Veluwe. Through organizing activities such as opening the site to the public, exhibiting his local discoveries and hosting workshops he unlocks knowledge about this former military complex. At the same time he searches for actors to be actively and reflectively involved in the process of redevelopment of the area. They are seen as necessary allies in the regeneration process.

#### **4.2. The Mediator**



These practices develop an intermediate role between local stakeholders, social networks, and local dynamics and spatial planners or municipalities, within, often project-driven, urban redevelopment projects. By professionalizing this in-between role they strive for a more participatory involvement in formalized planning processes. On the one hand based on a research-oriented approach: searching to translate local preconditions to spatial terms to feed design processes and as a means to activate local networks. On the other hand by developing approaches and methods to stimulate participatory debate, a platform for community input. This type of practice often originates in professionalized citizen initiatives or organizations, or is the result of the emergence of a professionalized ‘participation-niche’.

The studied practices aim to break open formalized participation trajectories, tying together formal networks and increasingly professionalizing local neighbourhood organizations. In doing so they mediate between (often) parallel trajectories of instrumentalized participation and actual decision making processes. In this way they tie connections between bottom-up and top-down development processes and facilitate ways for increasingly stronger local actors to reclaim an active role in the planning process and stimulate co-ownership of the trajectory.

***Case example: Dam neighbourhood Antwerp (guide: ndvr)***

Ndvr works as a third party between the City and the local neighbourhood committee within the context of the redevelopment of a former slaughterhouse site. Following a direct request from the local neighbourhood committee to assist them, Ndvr has set up an intensive participatory research trajectory to feed the project definition and masterplanning competition, by thoroughly mapping daily realities and the use of space. In doing so they aimed to translate local knowledge to concrete spatial preconditions through canalizing the local involvement by stimulating a productive debate. In this way they aimed to have an impact in the early stage of a spatial transition process, developing instruments to unlock local knowledge, bridge social and spatial knowledge and involve local actors. In addition they are facilitating the dialogue between neighbourhood actors and the appointed masterplan designer.

**4.3 The Propagandist**

Communication has always been inextricably connected to urban development. However more recently, inhabitants and ‘spatial entrepreneurs’ are ever more tactically using the wide variety of available media to put certain concerns on the local planning agenda. This can be through online or offline campaigns, specialized blogs or publications or concrete interventions. In

doing so they pro-actively put issues on the agenda, which can focus on a certain locality (for example a neighbourhood blog) or act as a platform for bottom-up initiatives. Through media they create public support, involve civil society and exert influence. While urban developments get a temporary character, communication strengthens the momentum, generating a big (online) impact while the spatial intervention is small. This way of activist agenda-setting is all the more becoming part of the skillset of alternative spatial planning practice.

These types of practices often focus on image- and / or community-building of a neighbourhood or locality. In this way these platforms can grow to become an instrument for a certain kind of bottom-up, positive neighbourhood branding, increasing the visibility of local issues, especially in neighbourhoods in transition. While this often originates from an habitants personal connection to a neighbourhood, it becomes challenging when developed into a practice serving marketing goals and risks when to become the online face of a gentrification process.

#### ***Case example: IloveNoord Amsterdam (guide: Luc Harings)***

Born out of love for his neighbourhood, Luc Harings decided to share his knowledge about his experiences in the area on a blog: [ilovenoord.nl](http://ilovenoord.nl), addressing local issues. Over time the blog has developed a more activist approach – of which the overnight paint-job of the debarkation-area of the ferry is a result. As a response to daily chaos (and frustration) the northerners decided to mark these transfer-areas themselves in green and a red waiting area. The result is appreciated by the formal institutions (the borough and the public transport company) and applied to all disembarkation stations in Amsterdam.

#### **4.4 The Instigator**

The instigator triggers the redevelopment of an area, acting as a ‘public developer’. This often starts by linking or creating their own pro-active vision on a certain area in relation to concrete developments. The instigator aims to trigger alternative urban development through some form of personal involvement and based on local networks which they take part in or (co)construct and in which they take up a centralized position. They often tackle spatial issues such as vacancy (ex. empty office spaces in the case of Rotterdam) and deteriorating areas through designing alternative development models in the ‘meantime’, or in times of crisis. They mobilize different financial means through for example crowd-funding and –sourcing, and different forms of expertise through the development of organisational models. This process

often goes hand in hand with a type of programming combined with a networked infill: maker-industry, organizing events, activating the floor-areas as temporary public spaces. The locality is in a sense looked at as a test-site for alternative ways of urban development.

Personal presence and involvement are seen as crucial levers. Both Zus and Stipo play a key-role in the process of redevelopment which is approached as connecting networks through creating vital relationships between owners, stakeholders, users, and the physical conditions. They re-programme urban locations through active involvement of local embedded networks.

***Case example: Schieblock Rotterdam (guide: ZUS)***

The Schieblock has become a reference concerning alternative urban development. The squatted office block near the central train-station of Rotterdam has been redeveloped by ZUS, with the permission of the real-estate owner, as a creative hub. Kicking off with public facilities, followed by workspaces for creative entrepreneurs. After the completion of the Schieblock, they launched the Testsite with the Luchtsingel, connecting different vacant urban spots -divided by main infrastructures- with an air-bridge. The projects was financed through crowd-funding as a kick-start and later generously funded as a ‘burgerinitiatief’ by the municipality (2012).

***Case example: Zomerhofkwartier Rotterdam (guide: ZUS)***

Spatial consultancy firm Stipo plays a key role in the development process of the Zomerhofkwartier. The major local landlord, Housing Cooperation Havensteder, has given them a ten year ‘wild card’ to transform the deprived business quarter Zomerhofkwartier (ZoHo) at the edge of Rotterdam’s city centre, into a vibrant, innovative working area. Stipo approaches the vacancies of the office blocks (10.000 m<sup>2</sup>) as a thematic programmatic task to innovate and recreate new local and global networks through recruiting and selecting new entrepreneurs, based on the idea of connecting networks to co-operate in the production process. Next to their role as spatial planners, Stipo also performs the role of developer, broker, organizer and programmer. Their personal presence is seen as an essential investment in the process of change, which plays a key-role in creating local networks. New entrepreneurs are actively recruited and selected through *pitches* to make sure that the new actors are both commercially and personally willing to contribute to strengthen the area as a creative hub.

## **5. Some first concluding Thoughts**

This paper aimed to develop a first categorization of the different types of alternative practices which have been studied through the platform of the Stadsklas, by identifying, describing and delineating different roles. Throughout the different case studies, and consequently the identified roles, the process of self-organization, plays an increasingly important role. In response to either the impact of the financial crisis, limiting the amount of formally ‘planned projects’ and/or the increasing importance of participation and bottom-up involvement, the planning professionals we have engaged with are exploring new possibilities. They are actively looking for new and changing opportunities to put their skills to use, often exploring, manifesting or initiating new opportunities for organic spatial development (the instigator or the scout) or developing a practice mediating between top-down planned developments and bottom-up involvement (the mediator). The practices are thus pro-actively developing new ways of working in a learning by doing process, searching for multiple ways to deal with a multitude of actors, who share different forms of involvement and ownership of the situation at hand.

The identified roles require a ‘new’ or adapted set of skills, a strong connection to localized networks, a different positioning and coalitions with other stakeholders such as developers, civil society (individuals, entrepreneurs, organizations) city institutions and politics. Often these urban professionals’ way of working and the skills they apply tend to be more embedded in the situation at stake and in close collaboration with local actors as stakeholders, addressing local issues, dealing with actual situations (instead of projecting future perspectives). In general these approaches are thus heavily connected to the local, existing situations as a starting point: such as the physical condition of vacant buildings or derelict land, the presence of local business and networks of inhabitants and entrepreneurs. In addition they work on different aspects of spatial development, rather than on the classically delineated role and output of the spatial planner. Often this implies that the practices work within a different timeframe, setting incremental goals for the near future, working on short-term, sometimes temporary realizations and, or taking small incremental steps. On the other hand, these practices also aim to draw attention to or address certain issues, through a more pro-active way of working, and tactics derived from activist approaches (such as the scout or propagandist).

The Stadsklas as a research model, which arguably is in itself a self-organizing process, was used as a participative platform to study how alternative urban developments take shape in practice and to reflect upon the role of its main agents. Through a process of collective learning,

involving a variety of contributors, with different professional backgrounds, we aimed to develop a model to develop an understanding of the practices. The ownership of the Stadsklas is shared and participants play an active role within the research process, sharing knowledge and collectively debating the issues we observe. In doing so the Stadsklas aims to reflect on types of skills, which are not thought within traditional planning or architecture education, outside of a formal educational setting, but rather in the field.

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