Social and Spatial Justice: Grassroots Community Action

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Abstract
This paper draws parallels between social and spatial justice and considers designing for spatial justice in a town planning context. Social and spatial injustices are present in the current participation methods in town planning. To overcome these, technology can support grassroots community action and the HCI field offers opportunities to do so.

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Social justice; spatial justice; town planning; community action

Introduction
Social justice focuses on the need for all people within a society to have fair and equal rights to human rights, opportunities and a fair allocation of resources [12]. This not only means that these opportunities and rights should be available but they should also be attainable by all [11].

Spatial justice is quite a recent term and focuses on the spatiality of justice. The concept mainly stems from Lefebvre’s [9] idea that individuals’ needs in urban areas have been prioritised over society’s needs and that the consequences of space and geography mean that communities are negatively affected [14]. The only way to overcome such struggles is for those affected to rise up and fight against the current reality. In contrast, Harvey [6] thought that spaces in cities had only been
considered through the lens of efficiency but had not considered the impact this could have on the social aspects of society.

Later theorists, such as Soja [13], have built on both aspects of spatial justice theory arguing that all social justice has a spatial element regardless of scale [7, 13]. When considering social action, the physical environment is often seen as a fixed background and not as an important factor in shaping society. Times of civic unrest are often the result of injustices that have been hidden for too long, such as poverty and unemployment [13].

Marcuse has further developed the idea of spatial justice arguing that spatial justice is a derivative of, and a cause of, social justice which would have broader social justice issues [7]. At a local level, Marcuse would state that all social justice has a spatial element but that broader societal, political and economic issues are always at play which are ultimately not spatial.

I would argue that all social justice issues have a spatial element. The social justice issues in our society are shaped by our spaces and, equally, our spaces are shaped by our society. In addition, where injustice is an outcome of a process, the process itself is also unjust [13]. Social and spatial justice are so intrinsically linked that to separate them could lead to missed opportunities to understanding the workings of justice in our society and to address injustices.

**Town Planning Context**

Town planning decides on the future of towns and cities. It is a political process requiring technical expertise and includes social, environmental and economic factors. It has the power to create social and spatial injustices if it is not done well which is clearly evident through isolated, deprived or degenerated neighbourhoods [2]. The decisions made in town planning departments can affect the outcomes by the allocation of resources, the direction of infrastructure and the gaining of political support. It is not usually an intentional decision to starve an area of resources, but a result of putting resources elsewhere which impacts on a place [2].

My main interest is focused on how people can participate in planning to shape their own neighbourhoods, taking control of their own future. In town planning in the UK there is generally a standard way for people to participate in planning through a predetermined process set out by national and local governments. The participation takes place within a traditional representative democracy, using traditional engagement methods and is a process which attracts interest from a more affluent, ex-professional section of the population, generally living in the resource-rich areas [14]. The use of ICT systems in this arena is usually minimal with planning departments favouring public meetings and forums as a means of participation. This type of process results in and creates social and spatial injustice in our communities.

More recently, neighbourhood planning was introduced through the Localism Act 2011 as a way to provide communities with the power to decide their own future [15]. It is a grassroots process with the community coming together to decide to act in their neighbourhood. Although neighbourhood planning is still a predetermined process in the representative democracy, the guidelines of how to carry out a neighbourhood plan are vague and open to flexibility and interpretation. Despite the addition of this process
to the town planning sector, the possibility of carrying out a neighbourhood plan has mainly attracted interest from the already engaged – communities in resource-rich areas.

As a researcher, how do I begin to design technology to better support the resource-deprived areas to get involved in neighbourhood planning? Or, how do I design to support alternatives to the opportunities provided through the representative democracy? In addition how do I support activism, social movements and grassroots community action in the town planning field to counter spatial injustice?

**Planning for Spatial Justice**

As previously mentioned, technology is under-utilised in town planning to support participation. In my previous research, I spoke to planning officers in the North East of England and they revealed they are sceptical and scared of the possibilities afforded by technology. They did, however, recognise the need to bring planning into the 21st century and embrace the digital era. Although interesting, considering designing technology for the use of local governments in planning processes is not my main interest. Designing for grassroots community action in town planning is where my main research concern lies.

Neighbourhood planning, although a predetermined process open to communities, still has great potential. There are many more citizens and communities who benefit greatly from the process and outcome of producing a neighbourhood plan which in itself would begin to address social and spatial injustices of skills and capacity amongst communities. During an interview with the local authority planner from the North East, he stated “you’ve got deprived areas where it’s lack of development as the problem...those groups, they’ve not been forgotten about by the council but how do you start bringing [neighbourhood planning] groups forward in the more deprived areas”. We need to design technology to support those groups at risk of being left behind because without this, the social inequalities gap will continue to widen [8].

Designing technologies to support grassroots action, whether through neighbourhood planning or other means, is an important task but not without challenges. HCI researchers must not rush into designing technologies under the impression that a ‘one size fits all’ solution will be successful in supporting community action. Even when considering more traditional forms of offline participation, it is widely recognised that multiple methods should be used to engage communities [11] and technology should be viewed in the same means.

This is not to say there is no value in coming together to find commonalities as this will help the research community move forward in promoting technologies for community action to work towards social and spatial justice. Alongside this it is essential to consider that any new technology may only result in serving the already resource-rich sections of society that are already engaged in town planning decision-making. Designing technology to solely support such communities would only exacerbate existing injustices.

In addition, working to support community action can often result in the researcher finding themselves in a difficult situation deciding how involved is too involved in supporting activist-type activities. To be able to achieve those things set out above, I believe it is important to consider the changing role of researchers.
to facilitators, mediators and advisors, providing reflexivity becomes a core practice. Providing under-resourced communities with technology to support their fight against injustices is not enough in itself, the process would still require planning knowledge and much more. Using participatory methods in research to support the community could be a valid approach, for example, the use of storytelling and narratives to spark discussion amongst community members [3].

**Looking to the Future**

I would argue that technology can be used to support areas who would benefit most from community action in town planning to reduce spatial and social injustice and this could be achieved on multiple levels. By taking control of their neighbourhood and making decisions about their future, communities can reduce the spatial injustice of resource allocations and regeneration. Additionally, the process to achieve this would also work to reduce social and spatial injustice by upskilling communities and building capacity for the future. HCI researchers have had some successful achievements in supporting grassroots community action to date [1, 4, 6] but there is more work to be done to consider the lessons learned from previous research and to continue to design technology for such communities.

**References**