Collaborative planning – A neoliberal strategy? A study of the Atlanta BeltLine

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A B S T R A C T

Collaborative/communicative planning theorists have engaged Habermas's idea of communicative rationality to offer a framework for a more democratic decision-making process. However, critics of communicative rationality and its underlying assumptions raise fundamental questions about the very possibility of an actually existing collaborative planning process. While collaborative planning theory provides a worthwhile ideal, the assumptions of bracketing status difference, identifying common good and building consensus, problematize its application in real life. In fact, collaborative planning principles provide a means for the market-driven local state and planning agencies to reinforce present neoliberal hegemony. While such processes may result in community empowerment and greater democracy under certain conditions, market-led planning projects are more likely to co-opt the high democratic principles of collaborative/communicative planning theory and nurture a post-political condition. This paper elaborates these points by examining the planning process of the Atlanta BeltLine as an instance of neoliberal governance. Using qualitative research methods this paper analyzes the BeltLine's community engagement effort to democratize the planning process in the Historic Fourth Ward neighborhood in Atlanta. It argues that BeltLine-like market-led planning efforts tactfully take advantage of the problematic principles of collaborative planning theory to create an ostensibly democratic decision-making process that in reality reinforces the neoliberal hegemony instead of challenging it.

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Introduction

This paper engages with one of U.S.'s largest redevelopment projects underway, the Atlanta BeltLine (BeltLine 1) to discuss the implications of the collaborative planning discourse for community engagement/empowerment within such large-scale redevelopment projects under the neoliberal political-economy. It highlights how the present paradigm of collaborative/communicative planning[1] can be mobilized by neoliberal state agencies to maintain existing power relations, protect market-centric state agenda, annul possibilities of counter-hegemonic developments and therefore consolidate the current post-political condition of neoliberal governance (Swyngedouw, 2010, 2011). More specifically, the

paper examines how the principles of communicative rationality on which collaborative planning theory (henceforth CPT) rests, such as assigning political equality to multiple participants, identifying common good, and reaching jointly beneficial agreements/consensus often remain implicit (and sometimes explicit) within present planning efforts. These principles provide market-driven state and planning agencies a strong means for reinforcing hegemonic power relations, avoiding what is "properly political" (Swyngedouw, 2009:605), while creating an illusion of greater democracy.[2]

Urban geographers have extensively discussed the complex nature and democratic potential of contemporary planning/policy-making efforts that increasingly rest on the ethos of public–private partnerships (Elwood, 2004), citizen participation (Ghose, 2005) and governance (Martin, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2005). This literature has examined the outcomes of neoliberal institutional re-arrangements that emphasize the collaboration of multiple public and private stakeholders in local planning. The strengths and weaknesses of such collaborative governance/planning projects, especially in

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[1] In this paper the term collaborative planning theory (CPT) collectively represents the theorizations of collaborative planning (Healey, 1997), communicative planning (Forester, 1998) and planning through consensus-building (Innes, 1996), which are all attempts to incorporate, although in different ways, Habermas's idea of communicative rationality in planning philosophy.

[2] Despite multiple and contradictory interpretations, democracy here, is understood in terms of ensuring citizens' ability "to choose among many real and viable options" (Purcell, 2008:27). This, after all, is the basic premise on which all versions of democracy rests.

terms of their ability to create equal and empowering decision-making forums in the backdrop of a market-led political-economy, have been discussed at length (Elwood, 2002; Ghose, 2005; Martin, 2004; McCann, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2005). However, few geographers have dealt explicitly with the Habermasian CPT that lies behind the practice of collaborative governance.[3] Habermasian CPT conceives of collaborative efforts not simply as multiple stakeholder-involved participatory processes but as specific attempts of deliberative decision-making through communicative rationality (Healey, 1992; Innes, 1995; Innes & Booher, 2000). Geographers have begun to examine the implications of such theoretical underpinnings of collaborative practices for neoliberal hegemony and democracy (Huxley, 2000; Purcell, 2009; Ramsey, 2008).

Scholars generally agree that processes of neoliberalization undermine democracy because the primary neoliberal agenda is to increase the control of capital over all spheres of material life (Harvey, 2005). This translates into the reduction in the power of the common people within political decision-making processes (Purcell, 2008). However, Purcell (2008) also highlights that democracy is a highly contested concept with multiple and contradictory interpretations. Not all forms of democracy are oppositional to the principles of neoliberalism. Liberal interpretation of democracy, for instance, is quite compatible with the free-market credo of neoliberal capitalism as it rests on principles of protecting individual and market freedom from state tyranny (de Tocqueville, 2004), and on allowing individual interests to be freely expressed primarily through the electoral process. In contrast, deliberative interpretation of democracy (Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 2000) is more critical of the free-market ethos. It questions the efficiency of the electoral process as the primary political space and demands greater possibilities for the people to shape their material life. However, despite being relatively more progressive, Purcell (2009) argues that Habermas-inspired deliberative democratic understanding and associated CPT is not only incapable of resisting neoliberal hegemony, but can potentially help reinforce it.

Using BeltLine as an empirical case, this paper intends to examine the ways in which collaborative planning paradigm may become a useful pawn in the hands of neoliberal state agencies. The paper concludes that by virtue of the problematic assumptions of communicative rationality, collaborative planning paradigm can be easily co-opted by market-driven state and planning agencies to protect their own interests and to foreclose possible interruptions of the naturalized order of domination (Dikeç, 2005). This helps to further consolidate the current post-political and post-democratic condition of the neoliberal political-economic hegemony.

This is not to deny that collaborative planning theorists have developed their ideas to foster more democratic decision-making processes in the wake of technocratic, expert-driven and elitist planning interventions of the past (Innes & Booher, 2000). However, as the BeltLine study will show, market-led planning authorities can easily misuse collaborative planning's problematic ideals to promise citizen empowerment on the surface, while limiting citizens' power to disturb existing hegemonic power relations in reality. Before elaborating further the paper will briefly discuss the research methods used in this work.

Research methods

This paper uses a case study strategy (Yin, 1994). Atlanta BeltLine is chosen as an appropriate case for three reasons. First,

it represents a large-scale public–private partnership-based planning effort. Second, it is evidently an entrepreneurial state-driven project that takes great pride in its success to inspire $1 billion in private redevelopment (to be elaborated later). Finally, it vehemently emphasizes its democratic process as an efficient vehicle for all Atlantans' involvement in future city-building. Thus the BeltLine provides a relevant case through which the theoretical concern regarding the implications of collaborative planning ideals within market-driven planning processes can be explored empirically. This paper strongly contextualizes the empirical results within theory enabling analytic generalization (Yin, 1994). Lessons learnt from this study can be extended to support theory and provide a stronger analytical framework to better understand other contemporary planning processes situated within a predominantly neoliberal policy context.

The empirical data is drawn from archival material and interview transcripts. Firstly, planning documents and Steering Committee meeting minutes prepared by the Atlanta BeltLine authority have provided important information regarding the way BeltLine planning has discursively been framed as a democratic process. Secondly, twenty-three in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with five BeltLine planners, eleven Steering Committee members, six Study Group members and two local politicians to analyze the nature of the BeltLine's community engagement process. The data collection, which was done during 2010, primarily focused on the Historic Fourth Ward Park/Area Master Plan development in one of Atlanta's majority black, recently gentrifying, inner-city neighborhoods. This is primarily because this neighborhood was one of the first to go through development under the BeltLine project. The next section discusses the implications of the neoliberal context for contemporary planning processes and then the implications of CPT for neoliberal hegemony.

Theoretical background

Neoliberalism and collaborative governance/planning

The right turn to neoliberalism[4] has immensely reshaped planning since 1970s (Taylor, 1998). Ideologically, the purpose of planning has undergone a dramatic shift with the rise of neoliberal political-economic hegemony from extending welfare to enhancing competitiveness (Taylor, 1998). Planners have been urged by state authorities to take a more "positive" view of market-led development and make planning more "efficient" such that it helps in "aiding the market" (Thornley, 1991:143). Driven by increased inter-urban competition and urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Hubbard & Hall, 1998; Lietner, 1990) most local state and planning authorities (whether by choice or otherwise) have become henchmen of the neoliberal growth agenda. Thus neoliberalism "can be viewed as a restructuring of the [power] relationship between private capital owners and the state" that "rationalizes and promotes a growth–first approach to urban development" (Sager, 2012:130). By extension, neoliberalization of planning signifies a partial retreat of planning that does not represent loss of power but a more proactive use of power by the state to insert market principles in planning (Tasan-Kok & Baeten, 2012).

Furthermore, the rise of neoliberalism has also brought about a major shift in the practice of planning. Today, planning increasingly involves a variety of public and private institutions to work

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[3] In the planning literature however, Habarmasian CPT has been extensively engaged with both by proponents and critics (see Forester, 1998; Healey, 1997, 2003; Innes, 1996, 2004; Phelps & Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). Yet, few planners have explicitly drawn connection between neoliberalism and CPT. In this respect Sager's work (2012) is an exceptional contribution.

[4] Neoliberalism here is not understood as an end-state ideology. Rather it stands for a historically and geographically specific, ongoing, and internally contradictory process of neoliberalization that is fundamentally committed to the extension of markets and logics of competitiveness in all spheres of life (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

in collaboration. Substantial work has focused on debating whether and to what extent these collaborative processes democratize society and empower the marginalized. On the one hand, it is argued that public–private partnerships may provide an opportunity for local communities to defend their own interests and engage in contestations (Elwood, 2002; Roy, 2011; Taylor, 2000). On the other hand, collaborative processes have been interpreted as dumping of state responsibility onto the citizens and community groups (Peck & Tickell, 2001; Perkins, 2009) and disciplining citizens in order to keep the existing power relations unchallenged (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; McCann, 2001; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Taylor, 1999). Thus scholars have highlighted the "janus-face" (Swyngedouw, 2005) of collaborative governance by pointing out its many limitations or rather manipulations.

Inspired by political philosophers like Žižek (1999) and Rancière (2001), Swyngedouw (2010:2) points out that contrary to popular understanding that collaborative forms of governance "deepen 'democracy'", they nurture a post-political condition: a condition that "annuls democracy, evacuates the political-proper" defined as "the nurturing of disagreement through properly constructed material and symbolic spaces for dissensual public encounter and exchange." Such a post-political condition is consolidated by the parallel rise of post-democratic institutional configurations (Crouch, 2004). While properly egalitarian democracy is meant to give power to those who are not entitled to exercise power, and to enable them to interrupt existing order of domination, post-democracy avoids adversarial politics by strictly defining what is appropriate within the given forms of the state and social relations (Mouffe, 2005). Thus while debate and disagreement is possible within these post-political/post-democratic governance arrangements, they operate (without questioning) within the given hegemonic socio-political and economic context.[5]

Strengthening these criticisms, more recently, urban geographers have started to question the very foundation of collaborative planning practices, i.e. the Habermas-inspired CPT. This work engages with earlier critiques of Habermasian-CPT to highlight their potential for strengthening current neoliberal hegemony (Huxley, 2000; Purcell, 2009). Inspired by these critical discussion, this paper suggests that neoliberal state and planning agency-led collaborative processes resting on Habermasian-CPT are more likely to nurture a post-political condition of decision-making arrangement that consensually shapes the city according to the needs and preferences of the economic, political and cultural elites. As such they not only fail to secure empowerment for the marginalized, but may instead facilitate their disempowerment in order to maintain the present political-economic *status quo*. Before elaborating further, let us consider the main propositions of Habermas's notion of communicative rationality that inspires CPT.

Habermas's theory of communicative rationality and action (1984, 1987, 1990) suggests that the essence of democracy is in the communication and argumentation amongst democratic citizens. This understanding forms the basis for CPT (Forester, 1998; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1996) and deliberative democratic thought (Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 1990). Habermas supported communicative action over strategic action, so that "participants work towards the ideal of deliberating toward an intersubjective understanding of the common good for all" (Purcell, 2009:149). Habermas (1990:23, 2005:384) believed that through rational argumentation

it is possible to create a politics that is guided by the "forceless force of the better argument" and not by socio-political power relations. He assumed that it is possible and desirable that multiple participants are assigned political equality in a democracy while bracketing out socio-economic inequalities.

Although CPT is not a "tight discipline" (Innes, 2004:6) and embodies internal variations, we could reasonably suggest that it is based on these above-mentioned basic premises. Thus, collaborative planners suggest that state and non-state actors involved in democratic planning processes, should deliberate and communicate to reach a consensus that defines the common good rather than individual interests (Healey, 1997). In such a process, the state, and by extension, the planners should play a role that facilitates rational deliberation among different interest groups (Innes, 1995). These groups interact as political equals in order to design solutions that address the needs of all or most of the groups.

Undoubtedly, Habermas and his followers in planning theory, intended to alter existing power relations through their formulations (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998) and undoubtedly Habermas-inspired deliberative democratic thought and CPT presents a more inclusive alternative to liberal democracy and the expert-driven interventionist planning model (Purcell, 2009). Yet, substantial critique has been directed towards communicative rationality and collaborative planning's utopian and apolitical treatment of society and planning to which the paper turns to next. It is worth mentioning here that although these critiques are not new, this paper revisits these critiques with the aim of unraveling the ways in which Habermasian CPT can be co-opted by entrepreneurial state and planning agencies in order to reproduce the neoliberal hegemony and its post-political condition.

Excavating the underlying principles of CPT

Many scholars have pointed out the problems that lie in the assumptions of Habermas's propositions (Flyvbjerg, 1998a, 1998b; Fraser, 1990; Huxley, 2000; Mansbridge, 1992; Purcell 2009; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). One of the most significant critiques is directed to Habermas's notion of a polity guided by the "forceless force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1990:23, 2005:384) that is believed to remain immune to socio-economic power/status disparities. Fraser (1990) points out that it is never ever possible to "bracket" differences in status or power within a democracy. In fact, suggesting that it is possible to ensure inclusion and participatory parity for all, ignores the political nature of our society (Pattison, 2001).

In response to this critique Innes (2004:12) suggests that we must distinguish between "power around the table" and "power outside the dialogue" and that while the latter cannot be readily changed, the former can be "equalized with skillful management of dialogue, shared information, and education of the stakeholders." It is exactly this distinction of power inside and outside of the planning process that critics find problematic because it ignores the fact that political equality is impossible to achieve without achieving socio-economic equality (Ellison & Ellison, 2006; Fraser, 1990). In essence, this allows deliberative democracy and collaborative planning processes to eliminate and/or neutralize power relations. It allows collaborative arrangements to claim equality simply by bringing competing interests at the table while ignoring the likely domination by economic, political and cultural elites and hence avoiding truly political negotiations.

According to Dikeç (2005:172), "[S]pace becomes political" through "the interruption of the 'natural' (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order. The political, in this account, is signaled by this encounter as a moment of interruption..." However, by making power inequalities invisible,

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[5] The notion of post-political and post-democratic city is also highly contested (MacLeod, 2011). First there is the question of whether cities have ever been properly political. Secondly, the post-political perspective tends to underestimate the capacity of social resistance/agency. Yet, as MacLeod (2011: 2652) emphasizes, post-political (rephrased more appropriately as 'depoliticization') lens provides an effective means to "raise awareness of the ways in which the strategic selectivities of urban government are being redrafted and in directing us to how and why significant institutional struggles are being foreclosed."

collaborative planning principles disable the very possibility of challenging/interrupting existing power relations/order of domination. In other words, by imposing/maintaining a particular (likely to be hegemonic) state of power relations (Hillier, 2003; Huxley, 2002) Habermasian-CPT becomes a useful tool in the toolkit of neoliberal agencies (Purcell, 2009).

CPT further assumes the neutrality of the planners who are expected to "act democratically, or at least be supportive of increasing progressive democratic pluralism" (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998:1984). As such, planners are expected to play the role of "a critical friend" (Forester, 1996) so as to take away the "power and political trappings of the administrative elite" (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998:1984). However, in reality most state agencies are guided by specific priorities and planning still remains a largely state-driven process. In fact, under the pressure of a globalized economy, an agenda of economic growth above all other socio-cultural and environmental needs of the society seem to motivate most entrepreneurial cities (Harvey, 1989). Thus, far from playing a neutral role, state agencies and by extension public planners are likely to act strategically in order to foster policies/projects that support this overall agenda. Fainstein (2000: 456) explains that it hardly makes sense to believe that planners would have a "special claim on disinterested morality." Sager (2009) also discusses the dilemma that even the most progressive planners face when collaborative ideals of open dialogue and democracy, and the neoliberal reality of efficiency and growth, pull them in two different directions. Therefore, it seems rather naïve to assume or expect that planners will have the willingness or the power to position themselves outside of the political-economic hegemony.

Habermas's theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy inspired by it, also suggests that the main goal of a truly democratic process is to identify the common good (Dryzek, 2000). Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998:1978) explain that "[C]ommunicative rationality rejects the individual basis of society and plumps instead for an approach which is either community based or consensus based." However, critics argue that the very expectation that everyone should keep aside their private interests and think about the greater good is not only impractical but is also undesirable (Fraser, 1990). It is not hard to imagine the implications of asking lower-income residents of a neighborhood to forget their fear of displacement triggered by a new development and associated increase in property values and think about the greater economic benefits for the area/city as a whole. As such, Purcell (2009) comments that the commitment to "the politics of common good over and above a politics of self-interest" (152)…"denies disempowered groups their most promising political tool" (153; also see Abram, 2000). It silences their interests while enabling hegemonic understanding of what is best for all to take over.[6] Thus, such an emphasis on identifying the common good automatically adds to the list of techniques used by agents of neoliberalization to uphold market-driven views/possibilities and stifle alternative/contesting ones. By extension it could be argued that such politics of common good is an effective means for creating and maintaining a post-political condition where possibility of conceiving, let alone creating, a fundamentally different alternative urban future is eliminated.

Like Habermas, deliberative democrats in general and collaborative planners in particular have immense faith on building consensus. Consensus building assumes that through rational communication it is possible for different groups to reach an agreement on what is best for everyone and develop "jointly beneficial solutions" (Forester, 1998: 220). Critics point out such consensus-building allows stronger and hegemonic groups to use the process for furthering their own interests. Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998:1979) thus state that "[T]here is a danger (if not inevitability) that seeking consensus will silence rather than give voice" as "[R]eaching agreement through open discourse is…dependent upon a threat of imposition." In practice consensus-building can be misused as a framework for fostering community buy-in of projects and policies, and for educating the public to engineer citizens' support (Arnstein, 1969).

In a counter argument Innes (2004) suggests that often perceptions of group interest and collective good changes through open dialogue and lead to the incorporation of the interests of the weaker groups. As such there is no reason to believe that consensus-building always leads to "lowest common denominator solutions […] through peer pressure" (Innes, 2004:13). But Innes (2004:13) also points out, this does not mean that stronger stakeholders "will do something fundamentally against their interests." This reinforces the critique that while some reasonable compromises could be achieved, basic power relations remain intact. Fundamental assumptions, for instance, that of the inevitability and efficiency of neoliberal capitalism, also remain intact. As such, participatory processes may in the name of building community agreement and/or consensus continue to reinforce existing neoliberal power geometries (Purcell, 2009) and foreclose the possibility of developing alternative trajectories of future urban development. Politics in the present neoliberal era is thus said to have been reduced to a process of "governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures" (Swyngedouw, 2009:609) that involves "consensual policy-making within a singular distribution of the givens" (Swyngedouw, 2010:9; also see Swyngedouw, 2011). Accordingly, Mouffe (2000) contends, that consensus endangers the truly political potential of a healthy democracy.

Furthermore, these ideals of identifying the common good and building consensus automatically foster a comprehensive public sphere. While Habermas believed that democracy is about building a comprehensive public sphere, critics disagree. They point out that a democracy with a comprehensive public sphere is no democracy at all because it masks hegemonic power relations by "absorbing the less powerful into a false 'we' that reflects the more powerful" (Fraser, 1990: 67; also see Mansbridge, 1992). Evidently then building comprehensive public sphere is also likely to reinforce the present post-political condition by hindering "the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future (urban) environmental possibilities and assemblages" (Swyngedouw, 2009:610). Collectively, these problematic principles reflect CPT's inherent potential to reinforce rather than counter neoliberal hegemonic power relations and discourse. In the next section the paper explores the implications of collaborative planning paradigm within the context of the BeltLine.

Results and discussion

Public planning has always been about power. Until the 1970s, planning was primarily a state tool for correcting and avoiding market failure. However, with the neoliberal turn, "a significant weakening of planning powers and a corresponding increase in the power and assertiveness of development interests" (Griffiths, 1986:3) has occurred. As such, the power geometries within planning processes have been reshaped. The state and the market are now placed squarely within the same side as opposed to the civil society, specifically, those members of the civil society who are

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[6] Innes' (2004) consensus-building is different in this respect as it suggests that multiple stakeholders should work together to design solutions that benefit each group's self-interest. However, such "not-quite-Habermasian consensus-building has far stronger tendency to support neoliberalization" as it guarantees that preexisting power relation remain unchallenged (Purcell, 2009:156).

unable or unwilling to contribute to the economic growth agenda. Furthermore, neoliberal mechanisms of controlling/disciplining individual conduct "accentuate individuals' responsibility for their own living conditions and de-emphasize individuals' responsibility for others" (Sager, 2012: xxvii). This aggravates existing social inequalities/injustices. Neoliberal power dimensions therefore present a more complex and unequal state-market-civil society relationship.

This necessitates that we understand contemporary public–private partnership-based planning and the implications of CPT for such planning in the context of the neoliberal restructuring of power relations. While a power perspective can help us partly understand the implications of CPT's problematic principles, without engaging with the framework of neoliberalism it would be difficult to comprehend the degree of risk that CPT values run of being co-opted within the present market-led planning context. While the 2008 financial crisis has opened up debates around the possibility of a postneoliberal era, most scholars remain skeptical about the imminent disintegration of the hegemonic reach of neoliberalism as a form of social, political and economic regulation (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). Rather, Hall, Massey, and Rustin (2013) suggest that the crisis has been used by many Western states, including the U.S. as a reason for further entrenching processes of neoliberalization, not the least by embarking on major public–private partnership-based infrastructure projects like the BeltLine. This indicates the continued analytical significance of the concept of neoliberalism in evaluating present planning processes.

In the following discussion the paper describes what is 'neoliberal' about the BeltLine planning process and what role collaborative planning principles play in further strengthening this 'neoliberal' nature/tendency of the project.

Atlanta BeltLine: a neoliberal planning process

The 1970s turn to neoliberal ideals by now has become the common sense policy prescription for almost all U.S. cities, although to different degrees and with varied implications (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Hackworth, 2007). Atlanta, is no exception. As such, Rutheiser in his (1996:3) book *Imagineering Atlanta* discusses the city's official entrepreneurial discourse and talks about its "ability to reconfigure itself in response to the demands of capital." Situated within this predominantly market-driven political-economic backdrop, the BeltLine is a $2.8 billion dollar urban regeneration project. It plans on building a network of parks, multi-use trails and a new transit system along a 22 mile loop of mostly abandoned railway corridor encircling the city's core.

From the very beginning, BeltLine project clearly emphasized its goal and expectation to generate $20 billion of new economic development, 30,000 new jobs, and over 5000 new units of affordable housing spanning over a period of 25 years (BeltLine 2). In the recently adopted Long Range Strategic Implementation Plan, the Beltline authorities take pride in the success of the projects initial phase which has "generated a roughly 3:1 return on investment, with more than $1 billion in private redevelopment spurred by roughly $350 million of investment" (BeltLine 3). Despite occasional mention of public health and quality of life issues, it is evident from the Beltline's website, that it remains primarily driven by economic priorities of encouraging private real estate development, improving tax-base, and creating more jobs. As such, it could be reasonably argued that Atlanta BeltLine is an example of neoliberal planning that rests on a growth-first approach to urban development.

While there might be various different ways of understanding neoliberal planning, expanding the use of private solutions to urban problems, fostering more competition and freer use of private property and serving developers and their favored customers are some of the most common ways that neoliberalization manifests itself in urban development/planning (see Sager, 2012:131). BeltLine fits with several of the aspects of neoliberal urban development Sager (2012) highlights. However, in this paper it is described as a neoliberal planning project mainly by virtue of its growth-first approach to planning that has led it to primarily serve the interests of the developers and their favored customers through its ostensibly inclusive planning process: a process that denies their "right to equality" (Swyngedouw, 2009: 606) from "those who are not-All" (Swyngedouw, 2010:11). This neoliberal tendency will be evident throughout the following discussion.

The BeltLine's Community Engagement Framework (CEF)

Originally based on the vision of a Georgia Institute of Technology Master student (Gravel, 1999), the BeltLine is one of the nation's biggest public–private partnership-based urban regeneration projects underway. While financially and administratively, the local state agencies remain at the core, there are several non-government and private organizations and individuals working collectively to make BeltLine a reality. The BeltLine, therefore boasts of a highly democratic planning process that involves a wide range of groups and interests and resonates well with the basic criteria of collaborative planning. According to Atlanta BeltLine Inc. (or ABI which is an affiliate of the Atlanta Development Authority and is responsible for planning and implementation of the BeltLine), it has a structured Community Engagement Framework (CEF). This framework is "an initiative to increase public awareness and public input related to the BeltLine" (BeltLine 4). ABI describes the CEF as a means "to keep Atlanta residents informed and actively engaged in the BeltLine's creation so that the BeltLine reflects the aspirations of its many neighborhoods and communities" (BeltLine 2).

BeltLine's CEF has several parts. First of all, ABI convenes quarterly briefings four times a year and invites the general public to learn about recent BeltLine developments and responds to citizens' inquiries. Five Study Groups have been designed specifically to provide an opportunity to bring community residents of specific geographic areas within the BeltLine region to the table to voice their needs and concerns. For the master planning process these Study Group areas have been further subdivided into ten sub-areas each with a Master Planning Steering Committee formed of area representatives (see Fig. 1). In addition there is a formal position for a community representative chosen by the Atlanta City Council on the ABI Board and a Community Engagement Advocate Office that works primarily to inform and engage the community in BeltLine related matters (BeltLine 2). Also, a BeltLine Affordable Housing Advisory Board (BAHAB) and Tax Allocation District Advisory Committee (TADAC) have been created to provide advice on important issues like ensuring availability of affordable housing and allocating TAD-related resources equitably and efficiently around the BeltLine (Publication 1 and Publication 2).

Overall this seems to present a promising effort towards encouraging community engagement in BeltLine planning. However, advisory bodies like BAHAB and TADAC are formed of members appointed by established public and private authorities/groups like the President of the City Council, Mayor of Atlanta, Atlanta Pubic School, Fulton County Board of Commissioners, Atlanta Housing Association of Neighborhood-based Developers, etc. As such, these bodies are not as easily accessible to common citizens who are not part of these important organizations. At a local level, it is the quarterly briefings, Study Groups, and Steering Committees that hold the promise for Atlanta residents to become involved in BeltLine planning. The rest of the paper focuses on these community engagement processes to highlight the real
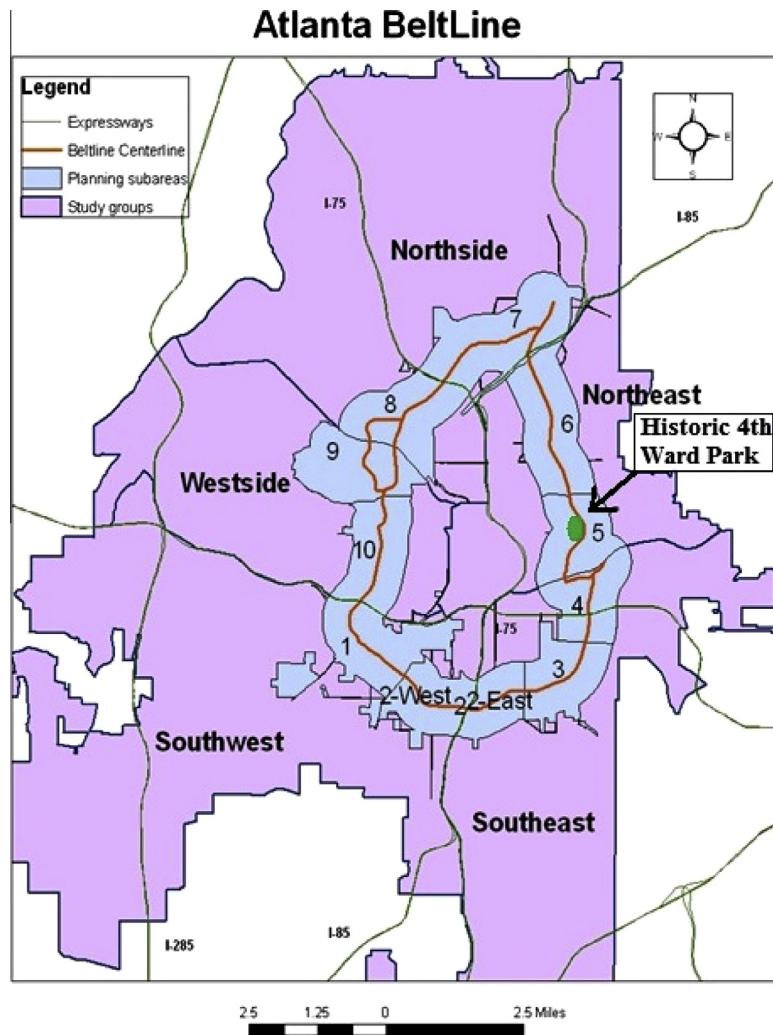
Fig. 1. Map showing all the 5 Study Group areas and 10 planning (Steering Committee) subareas with Historic Fourth Ward Park marked within Northeast Study Group area and planning subarea 5.

implications of the collaborative planning discourse in BeltLine planning. The following analysis highlights how collaborative planning ideals may be co-opted by neoliberal planning agencies and help reinforce the consensual post-political hegemony of the neoliberal regime.

The true nature of democracy in BeltLine planning

Fostering equality

Without explicitly identifying BeltLine as a collaborative planning process, BeltLine planners seem to engage in a discourse of equality, neighborhood good, and community support/agreement that resonates well with collaborative planning's underlying principles of bracketing participants' status differences, common good, and building consensus. As such, ABI promises that "[T]he CEF process will allow *all* city residents and interested groups to have an *equal* opportunity to participate and be engaged in how the Belt-Line takes shape" (BeltLine 4, emphasis added). The quarterly briefings and Study Group meetings are described by BeltLine planners as "open" forums where everyone is welcome (personal communication). However, participants of these events acknowledge the limitations of ABI's efforts to inform and engage the community in the Historic Fourth Ward (henceforth, H4W) area planning process. One Study Group participant explained that, "the preferred method of communication was through established

pipelines of the Neighborhood Planning Units[7] and community associations. But those don't reach out to everybody by any means, or e-mails, there are a lot of folks in those neighborhoods who don't have internet access". This imposes restrictions on who really has the opportunity of getting involved in a mixed-income and mixed-race neighborhood.

The inclusiveness of the Steering Committee also remains problematic. One ABI official described, the Steering Committee as "a group of knowledgeable neighborhood residents and property owners" who are "selected" and often "interviewed" by the city or ABI staff members. He explained, "[To] be honest there are people just through having done work in Atlanta that we avoid [laughs] having on the planning committee. So ultimately it's the planning department that makes that decision". Thus the Steering Committee members are recruited by the ABI itself. This clearly indicates that ABI remains in control of the planning process by controlling the selection process. Furthermore, the BeltLine through its promise to offer equal opportunity for participation to all, draws our attention away from the inherent inequalities that

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[7] The City of Atlanta is divided into twenty-five Neighborhood Planning Units or NPUs, which are citizen advisory councils that make recommendations to the Mayor and City Council on zoning, land use, and other planning issues (http://www.atlant-aga.gov/index.aspx?page=739).

it reinforces (in order to safeguard its own interests) through problematic selection procedures.

Based on recent changes in median household income, educational levels and racial/ethnic composition, Combs (2010) has indicated that the H4W area is likely undergoing a trend of gentrification. In this context of a transitioning neighborhood the question of representing it and its needs becomes even more critical. The Steering Committee member list for the H4W park/area planning reveal that several of the recruited individuals are middle/higher-middle income people who have only recently (within the past 2–8 years) moved into the neighborhood, are active in local civic associations, and/or are property owners or business owners who do not live in the area. This raises obvious questions regarding the openness and all-inclusive nature of BeltLine's CEF.

BeltLine planning process thus not only attempts at bracketing status differentials within the decision-making process, rather it ensures that the participant pool is as homogeneous as possible such that the issue of status difference becomes largely irrelevant. By ensuring homogeneity of the participants, the planning process automatically succeeds in creating a comprehensive public sphere. Like the collaborative planning paradigm it discursively reinforces the idea that equality is possible to achieve within the planning process without achieving broader socio-economic equality. In practice it takes advantage of the power inequalities outside of the planning process by consciously mobilizing particular methods of selecting participants that result in the exclusion of the less resourceful. By doing so the BeltLine authority protects the interests of profit-driven private developers and their preferred customers of middle and higher income background. This could be described as a moment when CPT's well-intentioned (yet problematic) principle of equality is co-opted by neoliberal planning agencies to create an illusion of inclusion while reifying existing unequal power relations.

The BeltLine planning process thus neatly avoids creating a truly political space for contestation, in the name of equality for those who are not-All (Swyngedouw, 2010:11) or "those who are not equally included in the existing social-political order" (Swyngedouw, 2009:606). By ensuring the exclusion of the disadvantaged groups, who might raise fundamental questions regarding or render visible the "wrongs" (Swyngedouw, 2009:606) of the current socio-political order, the BeltLine process seems to stall any possibility of truly political engagement or contestation. Also by deliberately selecting some while avoiding other participants, BeltLine planners hardly seem to play a neutral role in the process. In fact, as will be clear in the following discussion, BeltLine planners as representatives of the local state, act strategically to empower those whose interests remain compatible with the entrepreneurial city's needs.

Identifying the neighborhood good

The main piece of the H4W master plan is a 35 acre park. While the local district councilman, Quanza Hall, commented that "[T]he neighborhood as a whole is very excited" about the park, developing the park was mostly the wish of the relatively new, middle/higher-middle income, white residents. It was not the general public opinion as the above comment implies. As a community resident and Study Group member explained, much before BeltLine initiation, "…as groups of middle class young residents with children moved into the neighborhood, there was recognition for the need for park space in this area". Another resident/Steering Committee member explained how the original idea/need for the park space evolved among certain members of the community saying,

"the typical person I am talking about is somebody who is fairly young, in their 30s, young families, usually someone who has served in some sort of leadership capacity, either as a neighborhood association leader or as NPU leader. These people really have no […] [pause], their only objective really is, well aside from potential property value increases, is the transformation of the neighborhood for something that would be safe and enjoyable for their kids. They just care about the neighborhood. These guys have absolutely no ulterior motives. Everybody is going to benefit if this park can increase property values […] [pause], well not everybody."

This statement reflects the obvious tension in a gentrifying neighborhood where the needs of the incoming young white middle-class residents hardly match with the needs and concerns of the long-term relatively lower-income and mostly racial minority residents. Also it makes it evident how the discourse of the whole neighborhood's common wish allows the need of a selective few to represent the so-called common good.

More interestingly this so-called community-defined need was not readily accepted by the city officials. There were earlier attempts to get the city's support to develop a park in the neighborhood without success. Perhaps this was because at that time the city did not see immediate development potential in the area which had only begun to change. Later, while dealing with an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandate regarding the (old) City Hall flooding issue the city gave into the idea of developing a park in the neighborhood. Local park proponents were able to convince the politicians that the City Hall flooding could be addressed by developing a low-cost above ground pond landscaped to become a neighborhood park in the H4W. So, in this case residents' demand for a park space and city's need to deal with the EPA mandate while simultaneously attracting private developers and increasing tax-base coincided and lead to an empowering experience for the community. It must be noted that the middle class residents had to use a language of economic efficiency to get their demands met. The city planners proudly attributed such citizen empowerment to their successful community engagement effort.

One community activist/Steering Committee member explained that communities are more likely to be empowered/heard when "neighborhood goals are consistent with municipal needs." Another Study Group member went as far as to claim that the motivation of the park was not at all based on community need. He explained, "I don't think that they (city planners) took into account the residents (their need). I think the park was built to spur future development. They are developing the park where there is basically five developers lined-up to build apartments." Thus, it is evident that the middle class residents' wish became defined as the neighborhood's wish primarily because it was in sync with the local state's entrepreneurial agenda of attracting private developers and resourceful gentrifiers capable of increasing the city's tax-base. This could be described as another moment when the principle of common good provided an easy means for the BeltLine process to co-opt the original democratic aim of CPT.

Building community agreement

In an attempt to explain the purpose of implementing the CEF, a BeltLine planner stated, "[Y]es Atlanta BeltLine with its partners make the final decision, but we want community buy in, we want community agreement so that they will own it, they will support it and they will fight for it." This aim of reaching some kind of a community agreement resonates well with CPT principle of building consensus. However, as critics have pointed out, if not implemented in its ideal or near ideal form, consensus building can lead to a coercive process wherein the weaker groups' interests can be easily manipulated and suppressed. Such processes can thus take the form of public appeasement (McCann, 2001) and manipulation

Table 1
Schedule of H4W Park and Area Master Plan meetings (the information, although incomplete as signified by the interrogation sign (?), was shared by ABI with the author) The final plan was adopted in March 2009.

Meeting dates	Topic	Present	No. of participants
July 18, 2007	Sub-area 5 master plan Steering Committee kick-off	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members	?
Aug 22, 2007	Study Group meeting	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members, **Study Group members**	53
Sept 10, 2007	Sub-area 5 Steering Committee meeting	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members	12
Sept 26, 2007	Goals and objectives determined	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members, **Study Group members**	19
Oct 23, 2007	Review three Master Plan concepts for H4W park	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members	14
Oct 29, 2007	Review Master Plan concept for the whole study area	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members	?
Dec 20, 2007	Presentation of H4W Park Master Plan	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members, **Study Group members**	32
April 21, 2008	Presentation of the draft of the Sub-area 5 Master Plan	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members	9
May 8, 2008	Presentation of the final Sub-area 5 Master Plan	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members, **Study Group members**	26
Nov ? 2008	Discussion on Final Master Plan	ABI representatives, Steering Committee members	11

or "distortion of public participation into a public relations vehicle by powerholders" (Arnstein, 1969:218).

Furthermore, avoiding conflicts by building consensus in this way also protects the *status quo* "since the ability to change positions requires some difference of interests rather than an illusion of common ground" (Agger & Larsen, 2009: 1089; also see Mouffe, 2000). This is especially true when the planning projects are contextualized within a neoliberal political-economic regime. A closer look at the BeltLine participation process helps understand how consensus intentionally misinterpreted by ABI as community agreement or buy-in is built by limiting community engagement merely to inform and educate the public while keeping the overall BeltLine plans/ideas unchallenged.

ABI conceives of the quarterly briefings as a forum where citizens may "learn about" the BeltLine and have their "inquiries" responded to (BeltLine 1). It thus remains merely a platform for exchange of information. While Study Groups are meant to gather "public input" and encourage "engagement" in shaping the BeltLine, whether such input really shapes decision-making is highly questionable (BeltLine 1). A closer reading of the H4W park and area planning meeting information reveal that not only the Study Group meetings were limited in number, they were also scheduled when the draft of the plans were already prepared by public planners and their private consultants, leaving little scope for major changes based on community input (see Table 1).

Unlike other participants, the Steering Committee members enjoyed closer and longer involvement in the actual planning process. Yet, the interviewed Steering Committee members felt they were playing an insignificant role in the planning of the BeltLine. One participant explained that "[T]hey (the planners) presented us with various options [...] they had four different boards with different layouts for the park. We all got to vote on which ones we want or like best." Expressing strong feelings against the sort of engagement sought by ABI, another Steering Committee member commented, "I thought it was kind a silly, to be honest. I thought it was a little of the crumbs. It was like you guys can pick where we put the trees" or "well what if we do the tennis court here or a dog park here? What do you guys think?" These seem like half-hearted attempts at keeping the public happy by allowing them to speak up on relatively trivial matters. Furthermore, this signifies a third moment of co-optation, as the notion of community agreement that falls in line with CPT principle of consensus is implemented by the ABI officials merely as a means of winning political legitimacy, while the original project-goals of the neoliberal state/planning agency remain unharmed. This sort of consensus building therefore limits truly political negotiations to well-disciplined compromises.

Conclusion

Maintaining the post-political condition of neoliberal hegemony through collaborative planning

The BeltLine story fits well with scholars' articulation of contemporary consensual practices as post-political whereby participation is carefully choreographed in order to avoid disagreement that threatens the existing order of things (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2010, 2011). As Mouffe (1993:6) explains "a healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions" (also see Flyvbjerg, 1998b; Lefebvre, 2003). Therefore "[I]nstead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion" Mouffe (2000:33–34) suggests, that "democratic politics requires that we bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation." This is what signifies the properly political. However, from the above discussion it is evident how BeltLine-like planning processes steer away from such political negotiations/contestations. Taking advantage of the problematic principles of CPT the BeltLine planning process creates a particular kind of democracy that is ultimately compatible with and fails to threaten the neoliberal order of existing power relations. As an example of innumerable partnership-based planning efforts initiated by market-driven state/planning agencies, the BeltLine story offers a lesson regarding the way Habermasian-CPT can help entrepreneurial state agencies to design post-political participatory processes. It reveals how state/planning agencies, as agents of neoliberalization, within and beyond the U.S. are likely to influence so-called collaborative planning processes in their effort to safeguard neoliberal hegemony.[8]

Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones (2000) insist that within collaborative processes, agents of governance with hegemonic power, are often guided by highly strategic behavior rather than by communicative rationality/action as is idealized by collaborative planning model. Thus, not only is collaborative planning a difficult model to achieve in the real world, rather, it can also be argued that there are no actually existing collaborative planning processes (Huxley, 2000). There is only a collaborative planning ideal that rests on a number of somewhat utopian assumptions (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998) making it an easy target for neoliberal state and planning agencies to co-opt and use to serve their market-driven interests.

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[8] However, since neoliberalization is a historically and geographically contingent process, it needs to be acknowledged that any policy lesson and/or theoretical understanding derived from this case study cannot be transferred anywhere or everywhere without some limitations.

Of course, CPT may yield good results especially when implemented with genuine interest in open dialogue (Barnes, Knops, Newman, & Sullivan, 2004; Margerum, 2002). However, in a predominantly neoliberal state context it is likely to be used by market-led agencies to protect the interests of those stakeholders, developers, and middle/upper income residents/visitors who can contribute towards the economic growth of the city. This silences the voices of the marginalized groups within so-called democratic collaborative processes. As seen in the case of the H4W neighborhood, the BeltLine process created a comprehensive and a compliant public sphere within which neighborhood residents, especially the less resourceful ones, were either fully excluded, or educated, disciplined, and managed, rather than empowered. Furthermore, the principles of CPT helped in justifying this ostensibly democratic process in the name of equality, common good and consensus. These ideals thus provide an effective veil to hide the true nature of the post-political space of citizen engagement fostered through present governance arrangements within the predominantly market-driven political-economic regime.

It is imperative to re-center the political into such post-political planning arrangements if counter hegemonic, alternative, more just and egalitarian urban transformation is to be achieved. But how? One thing seems clear from the H4W case. Despite the clear process of market-centric steering of the BeltLine process there were no significant protest from the marginalized members of the neighborhood. This lack of organized response is possibly the main reason why at the neighborhood level decision-making remained one-sided. Contrarily more debates about the BeltLine as a 'gentrification project' and 'an attack on Black Atlanta' (AIMC, 2011; Immergluck, 2009) at the city scale made it necessary for the city and the BeltLine to accommodate provisions for protecting the interests of the marginalized groups, for instance, through the creation of a community land trust or CLT. This CLT would decommodify land and maintain affordability of housing permanently in specific neighborhoods around the BeltLine (ALTC, 2013). This undoubtedly signifies a specific instance of an alternative development that stands counter to the predominantly profit-driven policy focus.

This entails that in order to ensure that a counterweight is maintained over entrepreneurial state and planning agencies, it is necessary that the marginalized groups make their voice heard, publicize their concerns and mobilize their organized efforts at multiple scales. Planners and policy-makers committed to the cause of fostering more democratic planning processes working within a predominantly market-driven policy realm, therefore, must enable marginalized groups in their effort to maintain counter-weight on and possibly override the hegemonic order of things. As is clear from the above discussion, this cannot be achieved simply by bringing multiple and contradictory interests at the table and asking them to build consensus about the common good as equal participants. Rather, this demands planners' proactive role to make those that are not-All to be aware of the wrongs of the current order of things; to design decision-making processes that are open to radical criticism, dissensus, and disagreement (which is a challenge for planners working for predominantly entrepreneurial state agencies); and to guide the marginalized to claim their right to equality using innovative political strategies. As such, instead of eliminating power inequalities and conflicts or making them invisible, truly progressive and democratic planning processes should mobilize these inequalities and conflicts to formulate alternative and counter-hegemonic discourses/practices.

Acknowledgement

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