

Table of Contents

Episode Information 2

Transcript..... 2

 Episode Introduction (0:08 – 1:56)..... 2

 Introducing Changing Cities (1:57 – 7:32)..... 3

 Justice and Sustainability in Changing Cities (7:33 – 16:24) 4

 Struggles of (Meaningful) Participation (16:25 – 28:22) 6

 Post-Interview Discussion (28:23 – 33:20)..... 9

 Guest Contribution (33:22 – 36:07)..... 11

Disclaimer..... 12

Episode Information

Topic: Participation and the Distribution of Urban Space

Hosts: Ian M. Cook, Kate McGinn, and Sophia Silverton

Guests: Isabell Eberlein and Denis Petri from Changing Cities

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Transcript

[Music]

Episode Introduction (0:08 – 1:56)

Ian: Kate, did you ever stop to think about what arrangements keep this podcast going?

Kate: You mean this podcast Urban Arena, a podcast about just and sustainable cities?

Ian: The very one?

Kate: Well, sure, we need people to interview. We need ideas. Hilarious scripts, of course. Microphones, recorders, editing software, skills, thrills and so on.

Ian: Exactly. And all of these things are arranged through certain processes and interactions. For instance, the wider project of, this podcast is a part of the university where I work and where you were once a fellow. The skills we built up through whatever training we've had in the past,

Kate: Ian this is all very interesting. But what does it have to do with creating just and sustainable cities?

Ian: Well, a colleague of ours, Sophia Silverton, a junior researcher with the University of Freiburg in Germany, is interested in a different type of arrangement.

Kate: Tell me more.

Ian: So she's interested in governance arrangements or more specifically, governance arrangements for sustainable and just cities. So here, governance doesn't only refer to formal political actions like passing a law and so on, but also to dynamic processes and interactions between public, private and civil society actors. And she's gone around and she's looked at cases or initiatives that are focussed on just and sustainable cities, and she's looked at in what the patterns were related to governance, so the governance arrangements patterns, that were helpful in allowing these initiatives to flourish, or in other cases not.

Kate: That sounds great. Did she, by chance record discussions with people as she did this?

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

Ian: Why, yes Kate, funny you should ask that! Yes. Yes, she did.

[Music]

Introducing Changing Cities (1:57 – 7:32)

Sophia: Okay, so welcome to Isabelle and Denis. Thank you for coming in to speak with me today and for lending your voices to the UrbanA Podcast. Right now in our team we are preparing for our third arena in March, which is all about governance for sustainable and just cities. And as Ian said in our introduction, the topic of governance is quite broad. So I'm really excited to have you two in our virtual studio to help focus the discussion a little bit, and give our listeners some examples of governance for sustainable and just cities in action. I would like to start with the basics and get to know your initiative a little bit better. Maybe, Denis, you could kick us off and tell me a little bit about changing cities. What's your story?

Denis: Yeah, thank you for the invitation, and thank you for the possibility to do this podcast here for the UrbanA Project, and Changing Cities originated in the Berlin Bicycle Referendum Initiative, which started some five years ago, and we were aiming at that time to make cycling safe and comfortable for everybody in Berlin by actually using a referendum approach for a new law for the Berlin bicycle law, which should make the administration build faster and better infrastructure for cycling and Changing Cities was founded firstly as the institution for donations for the Bicycle Referendum Initiative, but always with the having in mind that after any success of the referendum initiative, we will have to keep track on the results and also that it's not enough to to reshape cities only for bicycles, but also to reshape cities, for pedestrians, to reshape it for short distances, and also to do this with the bottom up approach.

And so we define ourselves as a kind of network for different initiatives aiming for liveable cities and not only Berlin-based anymore, especially the Bicycle Referendum Initiative, like was in- an example for now, some 40-45 initiatives all around Germany, which also do the referendum approach in their cities to convince local governments to do more for bicycle infrastructure. Today our- our actual campaign is for, something we call kids blocks, which is actually an adaption of the Barcelona super block idea. In Berlin, we have kids assembly found or empower many little initiatives in all the little places in Berlin. Which is also like a bottom up participation approach. So this is our theory of change that we have to create many little islands to form a greater impact. But maybe Isabell has something more to tell about.

Isabell: Yeah, thank you, thanks for having us. I think what Dennis is trying to say and what I would also like to focus on is that changing cities is not only about the mobility transition, but what we realised is that the bicycle is a tool for us. It's a tool for change. But what we are actually tackling is that we want to transform our cities how they are at the moment. In Germany, we are- I mean, it's not only in Germany, but I guess Germany is very car centric and because it's like the country of the automobile industry so far. And what we are trying to do is redistribute public space and also divide our cities in a fairer share, and also more equally. You know, we have- in Berlin, at least we have very wide streets. But it's like four car lanes and it's a not an existing or very tiny bicycle path, and also the space for pedestrians, is in some place is very limited. And what we are trying to

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

do is just change how the cities look like. We started off in Berlin. It's really a movement that started and people who were maybe not so engaged with the topic before came together. And it also made the topic accessible because mobility is really a topic for all. That's something that's our holistic approach to just link, um, link mobility as a political topic in changing our, um, changing our cities look.

Denis: Another topic Isabell just opened, um, I think what we did is somehow re-radicalised all the other organisations or many other organisations in Germany. Is that way with the referendum initiatives, we politicised transport- transportation policy. Before it was like, you know, you have tactical routes, and you have to execute them. Administration execute tactical routes. But as we demanded like the redistribution of public space, we politicised transport policies.

Justice and Sustainability in Changing Cities (7:33 – 16:24)

Sophia: Thanks for that introduction. So maybe it's pretty clear at this point, but it'd be really great to spell it for our listeners the the main ways in which Changing Cities takes issues of sustainability and justice together.

Denis: In our opinion, the distribution of public space. We call it flashing a restless cat. So it's like a just distribution of public spaces, also like a just representation of people. Right now, we have a representation of more or less car owners or car users and public space. There's little bit for pedestrians, little bit for the cyclists, a little bit for the public transport, but mainly public space is occupied by cars. But not everybody has a car. Poorer people have less cars, children, older peo- elderly people, people without a driver's licence. They cannot use cars, and they are all like pressed to their little bit left over to the room, which is left over by cars. And if you're not represented in the public space, you have a lack of democratic representation. All these groups, if we managed to give them more public space, it's a more democratic public space, which also lead to a more democratic society.

Sophia: Isabell did you have any comment on that, on the intersection between sustainability and justice, as it's shown in your initiative?

Isabell: I mean, I used to grow up as a climate activist, so in my background, I was actually far more radical and blocking coal power plants and so on and so forth. And it was really interesting to come and to shift into this urban mindset. And what is interesting that on the one hand, it is very much, our movement is very much driven by sustainability and by change and by also linking to other groups. But having been in different activist backgrounds, I always experience that it's a more practical approach to be a cycling activist, maybe, or to be like a city changer activist. I feel it's more, it's more practical because it's also based on cooperation, on co-creation, also with different actors. You have to bring a lot of people together to conduct or to get through a mobility transition. You cannot do it on your own. You need different, you need different groups and like public authorities on different levels.

And what is interesting is also, I think what you're aiming to is like different kind of groups that are engaged in this topic, right? There is a lot of interaction happening with other groups, but it also could be more diverse. It is like a strong coalition with, um, with groups from the climate justice movement because it's like there's an obvious connexion between mobility and, and climate. But I think there can be so much more. You know, we have like a lot of urban neighbourhood initiatives, and I think we can also link it better,

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

for example, with the mobility, with a mobility topics. And I also feel that when we look at ourselves and I mean, this is a critical point to take, it's also we also could be more diverse and who we are as ourselves. And I would also say it's like a very particular group, and it's still a very homogeneous group.

Yeah, that's also something interesting to touch upon, and I think it is also necessary for ourself to to diversify and to reach out to other people in order to make this change, really growing and getting, you know, becoming a wave or like having even more impact and having more having a bigger anchor in society.

Sophia: Yeah, that's really interesting that you bring that up, because in the last UrbanA Podcast, there was talk about the environmental movement being fairly dominated by white middle class groups. And so that's what I was hoping to get in with. You get into a bit with you guys today was about what the changing cities movement looks like. Do you have people that fall outside of this description?

Isabell: Unfortunately, not so many in the Changing Cities board, we're six people, we have a, um, gender equality there, but we have like three people who have a doctoral or post- a post-grad degree. And I think we also, we are, of course, very white, privileged, middle class. And I think we still have a lot of work to do to reach out to other groups and we are already doing. And I think we- we also made this our big goal for 2020 already, but to diversify and to reach out, to maybe post migrant groups or to to just other groups in the city.

Because in the city of Berlin, it's a very vibrant city, a very diverse city, actually. And these communities, because it is such a big city, these communities are always very separate and they're not necessarily linked to this mobility topic. So I think it's always quite, quite a challenge or quite a thing to reach out to these groups and to translate, maybe, between these groups, not in a language sense, but also in a mindset, in a mindset that you always have to, you have to understand and you have to approach. A very nice example that I usually have, there's like a- I'm also very engaged with some feminist groups around cycling and there's, for example, a Turkish, a Turkish women group who also does empowerment around cycling. And I think they usually come from a different angle. And it was also really interesting for me to understand what is empowerment for them. And, um, but it's a really long process of building trust, building relationships and understanding and then also translating this again back into our Changing Cities cosmos, I think, will take some time.

Denis: Well, I'm totally with, with Isabell. The problem we are dealing also with this that our political counterpart has more or less the same homogeneity like we have, like if you say like administrations like parliaments, but also think tanks and lobby groups for automobile and fossil fuel. They're the same for the white middle class, upper class people. So we can't develop much more power if we acquire all these, these diverse backgrounds.

Isabell: Yeah, for sure, I mean, regarding the gender equality or regarding a gender balanced representation, we've already been pioneers when it comes one to the lobby organisations. I think we already had an impact there. And I think it is really the representation for us that matters. It is not diversity just to have it like a nice add on or looking good or something because we, we truly understand that if it's only a

homogeneous group at the table making decisions, it can only be a homogeneous decision in the end.

And when we're dealing with such a complex topic of cities and different needs and different perspectives, it's, it's important to have these different needs represented to have them met in the end. And I think that's also the consequences from the cities we see at the moment. They're building a very mono perspective in the regard to mobility.

Denis: This somehow, yeah, closes the circle, like what I said in the very beginning about representation in the public space. The- There's a vast amount of literature, especially some from the feminist urbanism critique starting in the in the late 70s, which already criticised like the cities built today, are built for male car-driving commuters. And if you represent only this group, it's always the group who executes the power in the alternative society. The most powerful groups, the most privileged groups in society. So diversity, representation, it's like two sides of one coin.

Struggles of (Meaningful) Participation (16:25 – 28:22)

Sophia: So what I'm gathering here is that it's really important t, yeah, listen to this diverse group of people and their needs when it comes to designing city spaces. But what's interesting is that I don't think this is a surprising point at all. It's not anything new, but from what we're talking about and from what I've been reading about, this lack of meaningful participation in city making remains a persistent problem. And so it is an important theme within governance for sustainable and just cities. And I'm wondering, I was just I was just thinking the other day, maybe this problem is rooted in different views of what could be considered meaningful or successful participation process. So maybe there's a gap between what you Changing Cities might consider a meaningful process and how perhaps the city of Berlin when it's running its formal citizen involvement initiatives, how, how they might see a successful way of involving people. I'm curious to hear your thoughts on on this idea.

Isabell: Maybe I start off because from the things you also summarised, that came one important thing that I want to mention here. Because when we drafted our campaign or when Dennis and all the others they started off, they had in mind that they want to- they're not planning – when it comes to cycling infrastructure – they didn't want to plan it for the people who are already cycling, but for the vast majority who is not cycling yet and to really understand also why they're not cycling, because that's also a problem of representation that comes up when when you're actually designing for someone who is not participate- participating in the in the process.

A meaningful participation or something that Changing Cities or the referendum movement revolutionised it's the collecting of signatures in a really short time and way above the quorum, it is- participation I think can at one point be understand as like, people giving their voice and make a really clear communication about what they're giving their vote to. Maybe also to come more to our current campaigns, in the kid blocks or what we usually do is we try to work with the people living there and we try to bring them on board. And so there are measures such as motions, so people are asked again to give their vote and and to participate. And then all these votes or signatures are collected and giving a- given again to the public authorities.

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

So it is really an interactive process with the people involved. And I think that is a very crucial point because in Berlin, we also saw, saw cases where public authorities moved forward and they wanted to make the streets look nicer and they just brought in all their ideas. But they simply forgot to ask the people. And so the processes failed in the end. And I think it is very, it's very crucial to really interact and to really integrate the residents, the people living there, the citizens, all the differe- I mean, the people who are the city. And yeah, I think that's that's what we're trying to do. But I'm really curious to hear Dennis thoughts on this.

Dennis: Maybe I'd like to add one or two aspects. Changing Cities is not a participation company. We do not organise, like, we not get paid- we're not getting paid for a- for doing participation. There's different agencies in all this city reshaping processes, there's like NGOs like Changing Cities like we do agenda setting, we do advert the referendum approaches, we do this with the funny accents, and we try to get involved with other people.

But then it comes to the administration. And in Berlin, we have the, in recent years, we have many, many, many approaches of participation organised by the administration, and most of them they're crap. They were just like disorganised, and many of them failed because also they were done. Like, for example, they were done by the road building engineers, yeah, and not by participation experts. So, and this is why they failed why they cannot- it was impossible to include the needs of the people. And now we have some people of Changing Cities working on that, like we tried to introduce or help administration to introduce other ways of participation, like representative participation, like going to the people and not only making like, you know, make a gathering of people, and then you have some, some sticky notes and people put them somewhere, in the end somebody is coming with the camera to take photos and this is okay, so we did, we made the participation, so check mark, exactly. So, but I think this is changing, and this is also Changing Cities to- to force that new approaches on participation.

Sophia: Could you tell me some examples, maybe Isabell, of where citizen participation in city planning has actually prevented positive change towards more sustainable or more equitable outcomes, for example, in Berlin?

Isabell: You'll always have a lot of people who are critical to your, um, to change in general. Because they like things how they are, and then if they experience it differently, then they can imagine. I, I recently heard about school kids who were supposed to imagine a city without cars, and they couldn't. So when they were, when they were drawing, they were always cast because this is what they see, and it's sometimes difficult to imagine something that you're not used to.

Denis: In the end, for many also, the all the participation processes, you have male people, male white people in their 50s till 70s. They are the major group of going to those gatherings. And so they are the only ones represented in the, in the, the results. And the other group of people going there is people who might lose their privilege. For example, if we do this, something like this in Berlin and parking space is going to vanish, yeah, and you will have all the people with all- many, many, many arguments, and sometimes also very aggressive, to defend the parking places. And you should do this even though sometimes there will be results in which will- maybe we will not like it. So but it's like the better way to convince people and select a better way to fulfil the needs in the city.

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

Sophia: We're getting towards the end of our discussion here, and I'd like to ask one final wrap up question to both of you. And reflecting on what we talked about today or anything else that might come to mind, if you had the chance to speak with the mayor of Berlin, what would you say to them?

Isabell: Okay, so maybe a little bit of background story to our, our mayor of Berlin, he has not really engaged in any mobility, mobility topics except when in his streets, where he lived, they wanted to take away parking lots. Then he started a local initiative so that the parking lots can be kept in front of his house. And I think that's a typical and the best example for Not-In-My-Backyard mindset. And thank God, we're approaching elections in, in the fall. And addressing the current mayor, I would, if I can, phrase a really optimistic question, I would really challenge his mindset on the mobility question, and I would really like to get it into a future discussion because at the moment, it is really, really based into car-centric thinking. There's not even another thought about any other transport mobility, except maybe for public transport, we have a really well-built public transport system in Berlin.

I don't know, maybe Dennis has a good, a good idea how we can, how we can shift his mindset, but maybe that's, maybe that's already too late. For the new mayor, I think it is really to make Berlin the hub for future mobility; and the future mobility, not in the sense that it's always talked at conferences, talking about hydrogen and all these things, but a people-centric future of mobility. I mean, we have our mobility law, we have our mobility law that's really prioritising this. And this mobility law came into place because of us, because of the people power. And, but I really want this to be understood by the leaders because what we are currently lacking and that will be my hope for the new mayor, what we're lacking in Germany is a leading figure as a mayor. It is a lot of movement from bottom up, but we don't have an Anne Hidalgo like they have in Paris and we don't have a, um, we don't have an Ada Colau as they have in Barcelona. These are- we don't- and maybe the next mayor can be one of these figures who also standing for change and really implementing change. So as you can see, I'm more optimistic for the future than for the present.

Denis: Actually, I already did talk to our mayor during his last election campaign. He started a bicycle tour in the area where he was the candidate about some two months after we brought 100,000 signatures to the administration and then there were about 15 to 20 people with the T-shirts of *volksentscheid fahrrad* the bicycle referendum T-shirts, and about 10 other people. So he was surrounded by, by us. One of our guys, he was on a, on a tandem, like a bicycle for two persons and on the backseat there was a skeleton sitting and we had a very good photographer with us. And there's so many pictures and I think Michael Müller, which is our mayor, he hates us ever since, but he's not running for office anymore.

I'm hoping to talk to all the people who have a chance to be the next mayor before the election, and I will tell them, everybody, every one of them, I will tell you can redistribute public space and you can win election. And I think redistributing the public space and making the city fit for climate change and making the city more or less preventing climate change, is one of the prerequisites to be elected. This is what I'm going to tell them. I hope as a board member and I think for quite an important organisation in the city as well right

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

now, I think it might be possible to get an appointment with every one of the maybe four possible candidates.

Sophia: I should think so as well. Well, I'd like to thank you both again for coming in, that was a good discussion that covered a lot of ground. Thank you.

Denis: Thank you for the invitation.

Isabell: Thank you.

[Music]

Post-Interview Discussion (28:23 – 33:20)

Ian: So we've just listened in now to Sophia talking about that really interesting Changing Cities initiative in Berlin. Yeah. What, what were some of the things that you thought were most interesting?

Kate: Certainly a very, very interesting podcast, and it touches upon some of the themes that we have previously uncovered and past episodes. One of the issues that I was grappling with while I was listening to this podcast was, you know, she obviously talked about diversity being essential in creating any type of change when you're thinking about something as complex as a city because you need multiple people to share, you know, their needs, demands, to share their experiences, but something that I was thinking about is, you know what, if the people that you are wanting to design for are not interested in designing themselves because they don't even see a place for them to do any sort of impactful change? And so it's kind of like the chicken and the egg problem where you want to design for a person who doesn't feel the need to design because they've never seen themselves in that position in the first place.

Ian: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And so there maybe maybe fundamentally, it's about a question of how to draw people in, what sort of stakes you need at some level to get people engaged. Because if people don't feel like they have any ownership over their city or their country or whatever things are happening there, then why would they engage, right, it's just empty engagement? So, I was wondering, like, what are the sort of lowest levels? And that's why I thought was interesting in terms of the idea of using petitions, right? Because petitions are really low, low, low level entry to, like, you know, doing something, you know, so someone comes along, says, okay, I can give 30 seconds of my time to write down my name and you know, and to say that I agree with something and to listen to about.

So maybe that's more than 30 seconds, maybe just a few minutes, but at least, you know, that's something. And then if that actually brings about change, and let's be honest, most of the time that we sign petitions, it doesn't bring about change, but sometimes it does. And if it does, then that gets people wanting to be involved more seriously in bringing stuff about.

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

I mean, a good case of this in Hungary, which does relate to just in sustainable cities in some ways, was a few years back when there was a group of activists in the city who didn't want Budapest to have the Olympic Games. And mostly it was about, it was like anti-corruption campaigning because they didn't want the government basically to give lots of contracts to their friends. But it's also a question also about like cities and Olympic Games being constantly, constantly built and demolished, and, you know, what this, what this means for for sustainability and so forth.

And what they managed to do because of, of a governance arrangements in Hungary, which is if you collect enough names on a who say they want to have a referendum, then you are allowed to have a referendum. They managed to collect enough names saying they wanted this and then so the government withdrew Budapest from the running for the Olympic Games, and I think they were down to the last five or maybe even the last three cities and then Budapest basically withdrew because they didn't want, this government didn't want the referendum to take place because they thought they would lose. So they just withdrew that case. So that was super successful, and after that, then these people went and formed a political party.

I don't particularly like that political party, but you know, they've managed to, they've managed to be a successful political party in the sense they now have MEPs and so on. And so actually, it was, it was a case of like really low level, okay, we want to change this city in a certain way. And in this case, it was like, let's not have, you know, an Olympic Games here and then from that they really actually manage to build in more people and have a wider movement that then became a political party. So I think in terms of people feeling disempowered and disengaged, maybe something like petitions is a really interesting way to, you know, to draw them in for the first time.

Kate: Hmm. And I think again, I mean, it requires one minute of your time. So I think that's one, one aspect that makes you more likely to participate and then also is just something very immediate. So instead of thinking about how do you increase mobility within a city, all these conceptual frameworks and topics, it's something very specific, like how should we deal with the Olympics coming to Budapest? I mean, that is something that I think most people have an opinion about, and they don't have to be experts on to, you know, voice their concerns.

Ian: Hmm. Hmm. Mm hmm. Totally. You know what else only takes just a few minutes of people's time?

Kate: What?

Ian: It's getting in touch with us. There are a few different ways that people can get in touch with us, and you can check the show notes for that, I know Kate normally says that, but I'm saying that this week.

But one of the other things you can do is actually leave us a voice recording of what you think is a just and sustainable city. And you could do that in one minute or three minutes, maybe maximum of three minutes, but one minute is totally fine. And we're interested in that because we like to play out the show with different listener submissions. Basically, people talking through how they imagine a just and sustainable city might be. And this month we have a recording from the future [Laughs]. Really, we do.

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

So I mean, the submission it comes in from a gentleman named Duncan Crowley, and I don't know where he is because it is the future, and he is, I think, like, a few decades down the road and he sent us, he's sent us a voice recording of what life is going to be like, should we listen?

Kate: Absolutely, let's go.

Ian: All right. Until next month, Kate, bye!

Kate: bye!

[Music]

Guest Contribution (33:22 – 36:07)

Duncan: Life in the sustainable and just city begins with the dawn chorus; listening to the birds that live around the rivers, all the trees, all the fruit trees that, that are in this neighbourhood. This is after the great transition happened in the last 30 years. Now, in the year 2050, things are a lot better than they were back in those dark times of climate breakdown, and climate emergency. And the change happened because normal people just said we've had enough. We have to do something.

And they found ways to start- just change in their own backyard, becoming part of their communities, reconnecting, developing visions of what this future sustainable and just city would look like, and then actually taking concrete steps to make it all happen. There was tough times. There was challenges. But people came together. That resilience that was shown was incredible, and people found that community is all it took. All it took was to get to know your neighbours at all the different scales as well though.

So inspired by the *Tekmîl* process that came from Rojava in Syria in those dark times, people started organising in assemblies using the sociocracy model from the street, the block, the neighbourhoods and then into the municipality, to wider city and the bioregion. And that ability for people to participate in the construction of the future that they wanted, that was the key to making these sustainable and just cities. And it sparked and it grew everywhere.

The trees, the life came back so much. The birds, people watching the birds on their balconies, the Mr and Mrs Blackbird, coming down and eating food, other little birds flying around. People were starting to [inaudible] the city, starting to [inaudible] the neighbourhoods, the fruit trees, the physalis that were growing, the everything. People were involved in the political process. It went so much further than how it had been before with the, you vote this political party to that one.

The ones that you eat your least dislike to an actual process of people engaging with each other about the issues that they want to facilitate the change. It was a, it was a strange process, but it had to be done because the alternative was the end of the human species. And once people realised that it kicked in, the spiritual dimensions of that kicked in and people found that they could solve the problems just by getting together and working it all out together at all the different scales.

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 13 Transcript

[Music]

Disclaimer

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