



## Co-Creating the Future City: Imagination and Participation in Formal Education of Students

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### Abstract

*In the article we illustrate our recent efforts and experience as urban anthropologists and university teachers to encourage future literacy in participatory urban planning among students and residents. Guided by the need to strengthen the links between education and society, i.e. the relationship between academic knowledge and the various societal issues, and to improve participatory and democratic processes in urban planning in Croatia, we have recognized that a step towards the aforementioned could take place within the framework of collaborative projects of the academy and civil society organizations. In the next three years, we intend to connect students, citizens, city governance bodies and the academic community through the research and workshops, using service-learning method. The aim is to design a new syllabus and enhance students' skills for future thinking about the city, public space and governance; to facilitate residents in voicing their needs; to strengthen governance – citizens communication channels and ways of negotiation and involvement. In this article we outline the collaborative project based on service-learning, address the importance of civic participation in urban planning, and discuss the concept of futures literacy in contemporary university education.*

**Keywords:** urban anthropology, service-learning; futures literacy; participatory urban planning

### Introduction

What kind of cities do we want? This question lies at the core of our ongoing project on contemporary urban transformations of urban visions, practices and ethics in Croatian cities (funded by European Union – NextGenerationEU), which builds upon a prior bilateral project exploring urban futures in several Croatian and Slovenian towns (funded by Croatian Science Foundation, and Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency) ([www.citymaking.eu](http://www.citymaking.eu)). Both research projects are rooted in urban anthropology (a subfield of cultural anthropology) and are grounded in its qualitative methodology. The Urban Anthropology course is taught at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb focusing not only on theoretical social, cultural and spatial issues but also aiming at developing applied skills and competencies for managing urban social processes. Beyond academic research and university teaching, we collaborate with civil society organizations and various local and urban initiatives. Recently, the cooperation has expanded into the design of a joint educational program based on service-learning. This experiential pedagogical method has not previously been utilized within the Urban Anthropology course, nor within the broader curriculum of the ethnology and cultural anthropology education in Croatia. The new educational program specifically aims to enhance participatory and democratic processes in urban planning in Croatia.

### Project PARTICIPARE and Service-learning Method

In collaboration with the initiative *Društvo i prostor* (Society and Space) and the NGO *Pravo na grad* (Right to the City) we have conceptualized the project *PARTICIPARE – Civic Participation and Spatial Planning: Developing Qualitative Approaches, Youth Engagement, and Local Community Involvement*. Within the next three years the project intends to: a) provide a platform for training university teachers and NGO professionals in service-learning pedagogy; b) design a new syllabus integrating the service-learning method with a focus on participatory urban planning within the Urban Anthropology course; c) implement this syllabus to cultivate students' capacities for future thinking about the city, public space and governance; facilitating residents in voicing their needs; and strengthening communication channels, negotiation mechanisms, and engagement strategies between local governance and citizens in participatory planning frameworks.

Service-learning constitutes an established pedagogical method that has been used in higher education for many decades. Our approach adopts a comprehensive definition, conceptualizing service-learning as a “hybrid methodology of socially responsible teaching, collaborative action, and experiential learning that fosters the personal and professional development of students and the community through a partnered, organized, and structured experience of working to resolve social problems in the local community” [3, p. 11]. Precisely its experiential dimension is of particular importance for our approach, as service-learning places equal emphasis



on both community service and learning components, with the aim of expanding knowledge and acquiring new skills [15, p. 286].

Furthermore, the service-learning method extends the educational process beyond the classroom, and the conventional teacher-student binary. It introduces the third actor – NGO professionals, who are familiar with current local social needs and experienced in coherent and immanent articulation and problem-solving. The fourth partner is the local community itself. In this setup, service-learning is not only oriented toward fieldwork in the community and the acquisition of personal and methodological skills (by students) but also contributes to community empowerment, influencing social change within the community – primarily through democratic involvement in problem-solving and decision-making processes on relevant issues.

However, one of the method's biggest challenges lies in balancing educational outcomes with social impacts, alongside the potential risk of inadvertently reproducing existing stereotypes and unequal power dynamics [13, p. 9]. "Critical service-learning" represents one of the approaches through which these challenges are addressed, primarily by encouraging continuous critical reflection and collaborative efforts aimed at achieving social justice and social transformation [13, p. 10]. Cultural anthropology also holds the capacity to respond to such concerns, as certain elements of social service-learning align with the core approaches of the ethnographic method, which is at the very heart of the discipline cultural (and urban) anthropology.

Specifically, these convergences encompass fieldwork premises, qualitative interviewing grounded in interpersonal relations, active participation within the studied community, the understanding of local experiences, collaborative approaches, and systematic reflexivity on research process. Precisely because of these qualities, cultural anthropological approach to service-learning holds particular potential for balancing its educational and social dimensions while fostering more critical, socially sensitive, locally grounded, future oriented, and transformative forms of learning and civic participation that are grounded in present social realities. In other words, there are many points of convergence that make service-learning a close and easily applicable method in the teaching of cultural and urban anthropology. These overlaps can be perceived as "a valuable route to melding good anthropological practice and citizen activism with effective teaching and scholarship" [12, p. 6].

### Civic Participation in Urban Planning

Within the framework of the Urban Anthropology course, a significant part of learning is devoted to participatory and democratic processes in urban governance, specifically focusing on urban and spatial planning. In many contemporary societies, democracy and participation are mutually constitutive, reinforcing and sustaining one another. In its broadest sense, participation entails citizens 'taking part' (Latin: *pars, partis + capere*) in collective social action, while in a narrower political sense, it is vital to democratic systems because it implies the direct involvement of citizens in political and public decision-making processes. Precisely because it constitutes a foundational pillar of civic political subjectivity, integrating the concept of participation into all levels of education is exceptionally important. Namely, participation can be learned experientially through socialization processes, the family environment, and informal education, where various forms of engagement (in the local community, at school, etc.) may not explicitly emphasize participation as a core value but nevertheless build a certain civic *habitus*. Formal education, however, should provide systematic learning about the ways and possibilities of participating in specific spheres of society and political decision-making. Ideally, the integration of formal, non-formal, and informal learning and experience would lead to the acquisition of knowledge and skills on how to achieve participation, as well as the development of attitudes, affects, and moral values regarding the importance of participatory action.

A 2021 study, conducted within the Urban Anthropology course with approximately thirty students, indicates that while all participants recognize the significance of civic action and participatory decision-making at both local/neighborhood and institutional levels, none had actively engaged in any form of social or political action – such as formal local government bodies, civic associations, grassroots initiatives, or university student unions. As articulated by the students, the primary drivers of this disengagement or reluctance to act were a profound distrust in formal decision-making channels and governance structures, coupled with a pervasive conviction that individual and collective agency remains ineffectual. These insights – reflecting political apathy, institutional distrust, and a sense of futility – mirror common themes in everyday discourse and align with broader empirical research examining citizens' attitudes toward public administration [14, 10, 25]. Therefore, learning about participation seems exceptionally important within the university environment in which we operate, with the goal of strengthening students' 'capacity to aspire' [1] as well as encouraging and nurturing an 'ethics of possibility' [1] that integrates imagination, hope, and social action leading to the active shaping of the future.

Within the Urban Anthropology course, participatory processes in urban planning in Croatia are an important topic. Participation is a foundational value promoted across numerous global and European policy documents, such as *The New Urban Agenda* (UN Habitat, 2016) or *The New Leipzig Charter* (EU 2020). The former states, among other principles, that cities should provide inclusive platforms that "allow meaningful participation in



decision-making, planning and follow-up processes for all” (NUA art. 41). Similarly, the latter emphasizes that “experimenting with new forms of participation can help cities manage conflicting interests, share responsibilities and find innovative solutions while also reshaping and maintaining urban spaces and forming new alliances to create integrated city spaces” (NLC, sec. C). Regarding urban spaces and built environment, this democratic imperative is formally operationalized through participatory planning – the systematic inclusion of citizens in planning and decision-making processes, which is legally regulated at both national and municipal levels.

In the Republic of Croatia, the *Physical Planning Act* prescribes the principle of public and civic participation in spatial planning (Art. 16). Alongside “expert discussions” with invited participants (public, private, economic, and other stakeholders) (Art. 118-120), there is a mandatory “public inspection” period during which the proposed spatial plan is accessible to the general public. During this period, a public hearing is conducted “in which everyone can participate”, coupled with a requirement for a formal presentation by experts. This framework provides interested parties the opportunity to ask questions or submit written inquiries, allowing the public to voice “opinions, suggestions, and remarks” to which planning experts must respond (Art. 121-128). While this legal framework is respected, monitoring the processes of participatory planning reveals significant shortcomings: the lack of transparency in official procedures and the hermetic nature of technical, professional language frequently alienate citizens from planning process. Furthermore, positioning public/civic involvement at the very final stage of the planning process severely restricts the potential for effective citizen-led interventions, thereby demoralizing and disempowering the citizens.

According to the ladder of participation in spatial planning conceptualized by Sherry Arnstein in the late 1960s, the current model defined by Croatian legislation fluctuates between the levels of “non-participation” and “tokenism” (symbolic involvement) [2] and does not enable or create true citizen power. When analyzing participatory planning as a distinct niche of participatory governance, empirical research across various national contexts demonstrates that participation can also function as a mechanism of dominance and control. Specifically, it often excludes vulnerable and marginalized groups who face systemic barriers or lack access to information, formal communication channels, and political influence. Consequently, it is crucial to understand how participation “works, for whom, and with what social justice outcomes” [8, pp. 6-7]. This implies that a rigorous focus on asymmetrical power dynamics is essential both in the analytical evaluation of participatory processes and in their practical implementation, particularly when the objective is to cultivate the transformative potential that participation can possess [8].

Our insights to date, derived from ongoing research projects and observations of citizens’ involvement in spatial planning, indicate that there is insufficient knowledge regarding how the city is organized, how spatial planning processes work, how broader public interests could be articulated, and what are the specific avenues available for civic engagement in shaping spatial policies. In a recent collaboration within the project PARTICIPARE we have reflected on the necessity of integrating participatory learning into university curricula as a means to empower youth for participatory planning. The underlying intention of the project is to enhance futures literacy through educational engagement with civic participation in urban planning.

### **Futures Literacy and Cultural Anthropology in Participatory Planning**

The term Futures Literacy, coined by a futurist Riel Miller [16, 17] in the mid-2000s, emerged from the field of futures studies. Grounded in understanding anticipation as a “pervasive” feature of reality [19, p. 55], it emphasizes the human capacity to recognize and reflect on “anticipatory assumptions” that shape how futures are imagined and “used” [18, p. 49]. Its core premise is that rendering these assumptions visible can enhance capacities for engaging uncertainty and crises. Since Futures Literacy is epistemologically aligned with foresight rather than forecast, this approach privileges open-ended and exploratory engagements with alternative futures [19, p. 56]. From 2012 onward, UNESCO adopted Futures Literacy as a core competence for the twenty-first century, framing “using-the-future” as a resource for learning and decision-making (<https://www.unesco.org/en/futures-literacy>). This institutionalization helped consolidate the concept through Futures Literacy Laboratories – participatory processes through which diverse actors collaborate in exploring anticipatory assumptions [5].

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has called for a critical expansion of Futures Literacy beyond its dominant framing as a neutral competence. Marking a shift toward critical futures literacy as a reflexive, situated, and transformative “set of practices”, it simultaneously opens space for recognizing diverse already existing futures literacies [6, p. 7]. A key move in futures literacies pedagogy is oriented toward the democratization and pluralization of how futures are imagined and enacted, through forms of education that cultivate responsibility for shaping more just societies [11, p. 58]. Building on these premises, critical futures literacy links futures thinking with critical pedagogy and epistemic justice, emphasizing the importance of shaping students’ capacities to “question, co-create, and act” upon alternative futures [26, pp. 1, 3].

Despite overlapping concerns, there has been relatively little exchange between Futures Studies and social science and humanities approaches to the future [21, p. 6]. The anthropology of the future [20, 4, 9] offers one



way of bridging this gap by expanding the framework of Futures Literacy and connecting it with critical pedagogical approaches. From this standpoint, the pedagogical task extends beyond making anticipatory assumptions visible to also identifying and analyzing the multiple and interconnected ways of relating to the future. Situated within cultural anthropology, this approach draws on its long-term fieldwork orientation, bottom-up perspective, and close collaboration with communities. Through its methodology, grounded in interviewing and participant observation, cultural anthropology offers well-developed ways of building relationships with communities and understanding their experiences and needs, which are central to participatory processes. This perspective could inform the PARTICIPARE project (as well as broader teaching practices and community-engaged initiatives), where futures literacy is cultivated within the social-service learning framework, through learning based on experience, research and engagement oriented toward socio-spatial transformation.

Within this framework, futures literacy operates on two interconnected levels. First, at the level of student education, it involves cultivating analytical sensibilities rather than transmitting standardized competencies. These include recognizing the future as one dimension of temporality, alongside past and present [22, p. 18]; understanding anticipation as only one among multiple relations to the future [1, 4]; and recognizing the coexistence of diverse *temporal* orientations and their relation to action [24]. Such preparation leads to a better understanding of why people engage (or do not engage) in efforts to transform their living environments. Moreover, it can provide tools for understanding how various relations to the future emerge, interact, and sometimes collapse in concrete social and spatial contexts, while foregrounding everyday practices and experiences, civic engagement, power relations, and inequalities in the complex processes of “future-making” [9, 23, 24]. Second, in community engagement, students are understood as participants in processes through which existing, situated futures literacies can be articulated, reflected upon and potentially reshaped. This implies shifting from teaching futures literacy toward supporting articulation of existing relations to the future and the forms of action linked to them. Such processes remain grounded in present material and social conditions, and attentive to questions of social, epistemic and spatial justice. Although anticipation remains only one among multiple relations to the future, it may become a particularly relevant mobilizing orientation in participatory process aimed at enabling community-driven change.

It may be concluded that cultural anthropological expansion of futures literacy lies in understanding futures literacy as a relational, situated and participatory practice grounded in empirical realities, temporal and affective relations, but also in uneven capacities to imagine and shape futures. This shift builds on calls for the democratization and pluralization of futures literacy [11], while grounding them in anthropological fieldwork and methodological practice. In this way, futures literacy is approached as an evolving methodological and pedagogical practice co-developed through research, collaboration and ongoing critical engagement.

## Conclusion

Within the proposed service-learning project PARTICIPARE integrated into the Urban Anthropology course, diverse social actors will collaboratively address contemporary urban planning challenges. This cooperative framework enables participants to learn from one another while practicing democratic processes and futures literacy, which should guide the participatory shaping of urban spaces in accordance with residents’ needs and visions. The entire process of teaching, learning, and action is conceived as overlapping and complementary, yielding both tangible and intangible outcomes for local communities, students, and other stakeholders/participants in the process.

These objectives focus particularly on raising awareness about the importance of more permeable and accessible participatory processes, enhancing the recognition of civic voices in decision-making concerning their lived environments, and fostering more balanced power relations between institutions, experts, and local communities. Furthermore, the project aims to foster collaborative and participatory practices that support social inclusivity, civic engagement, and more just forms of shaping urban space. In this context, it seeks to strengthen the role, visibility and relevance of cultural anthropology in participatory urban planning by further advancing approaches that intersect research, education, and civic participation, while concurrently reinforcing transdisciplinary collaborations and promoting dialogue among the diverse actors involved in the co-creating of cities and futures.

Within this framework, the service-learning infrastructure enables futures literacy to function as a connective practice that bridges these different aspects by enabling the democratization of urban futures through the transformation of how futures are imagined and acted upon within present socio-spatial contexts. Additionally, such a participatory format for envisioning and collectively shaping urban public space would specifically serve as a model for development of participatory and educational practices, promoting decentralization, experiential learning, applied scholarship, social inclusivity, and the advancement of participatory governance practices.



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