

Conference Report

The 2nd International Conference on Urban E-Planning, 2017

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The development and widespread use of new digital technologies opened up new conditions and possibilities in the field of Urban and Regional Planning and confronted it with new challenges and opportunities. In order to explore and discuss these changes in the field of urban planning and the challenges and opportunities with which it is increasingly confronted, the International Journal of E-Planning Research (IJEPR) established, in the framework of the Urban e-Planning Research Network (UEP-NET), the regular organization of an annual international conference, with the aim to provide a forum for the critical discussion of new perspectives, approaches, methods, and digital tools in the field of Urban e-Planning. Following the successful first Conference in 2016 (<https://sites.google.com/site/ijepr2016conference/home>), the 2nd IJEPR Annual Conference on 'Urban e-Planning' was held in the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, in the Rectorate building of the University of Lisbon, on 20-21 April 2017 (<https://sites.google.com/site/uep2017conference/home>). Convened by Carlos Nunes Silva, Editor-in-chief of the International Journal of E-Planning Research, this second conference confirmed the relevance and usefulness of an annual international meeting on this emerging and rapidly changing research field.

The two-day conference was organized in 14 sessions and addressed four main research themes: Theme 1 - Governance and Planning of Smart Cities; Theme 2 - Citizen e-Participation and Community engagement; Theme 3 - The inter-relatedness of real and virtual in Urban e-Planning; and Theme 4 - Collaborative Urban e-Planning. It included also a Networking session at the end of the first day. The conference attracted more papers than in 2016, with sixty-three papers effectively presented, involving 144 authors from 21 countries, out of around 100 papers abstracts submitted, which have been peer-reviewed by an international scientific committee of 18 scholars, all of them members of the IJEPR Editorial Review Board. The large majority of the papers presented focused a specific case or area in Europe, although a number of other papers dealt also with cases in other countries outside Europe, namely in Canada, USA, Mexico, Brazil, Chad, and Israel. Theme 1 on the Governance and Planning of Smart Cities was dominant in the 2017 conference with almost 60% of the papers dealing with issues related to smart cities planning and governance, an expression of the importance of smart cities related issues. The second largest group of papers presented dealt with themes 2 and 4, focused around issues of citizen participation.

The opening plenary session, with two papers, dealt with issues of citizen engagement in local policies. The first paper explored the challenges and opportunities of a Geoweb platform within the academy, and the second discussed the need to upgrade public participation. In this plenary session as in the following 13 panels that made up the full conference program, the debate was initiated by three discussants, followed then by an enlarged discussion with other participants in the conference room, which allowed a systematic and fruitful questioning of the research findings presented and of the arguments put forward by the author(s) of each paper.

Considering the diversity of research themes and issues included and explored in the conference program, the quality of the papers presented, and the value of the discussions held in each panel, led by the respective chair and discussants, we have to conclude that the second annual conference of the International Journal of E-Planning Research fully met its main goals. The 63 papers explored, from numerous points of view, the themes proposed for the conference, challenging established ideas about the role of the new information and communication technologies in urban planning, by exploring new approaches, methods and digital tools. If in some of these papers there is a clear endorsement of the advantages of the new digital technologies for a better urban planning and for building smart cities, as have been argued in most papers presented in the first conference in 2016, for other authors in this second annual conference, as in the 2016 conference too, these shifts are seen from a more critical perspective, one in which technology is perceived as a tool and not as an end in itself. For this reason, the second annual IJEPR Conference seems to corroborate the main conclusions reached in 2016. In other words, citizen engagement in urban e-planning and in the governance of smart cities requires face-to-face contacts as well as new tech interfaces, since none of these interfaces seems to provide all the conditions for a proper community engagement in urban planning decision-making processes.

In sum, considering the positive result of the first two conferences, held in 2016 and 2017, the IJEPR will continue engaged, in the context of the Urban e-Planning Research Network (UEP-NET), in the organization of this series of annual international conferences on Urban e-Planning in the following years. A selection of the papers presented in the 2017 Conference have been submitted for publication in the International Journal of E-Planning Research and are expected to be included in the IJEPR 2018 volume. Additional information on the second conference held in 2017, its full program, abstracts, oral presentations, and a photo gallery, among other aspects, is available in the conference website. A word of appreciation and gratitude is due to all those engaged in the organization of the second IJEPR Conference in 2017 at the University of Lisbon: the 144 authors of the papers presented; the 18 members of the conference scientific committee; the 14 panel /session chairs and the 40 discussants in the 13 panels and plenary session; the administrative staff in the hosting institution, the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning – University of Lisbon; and the group of 13 students who acted as volunteers in the supporting activities during the two days of the conference. The third International Conference on Urban e-Planning will be held at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Portugal, on 3-4 April 2018 (<https://sites.google.com/site/uep2018conference/>). Its program includes some of the themes discussed in the first and second conferences and new issues as well: Theme 1: Smart Cities: Governance and Planning; Theme 2: Citizens e-Participation & Collaborative Planning; Theme 3: The real and virtual in Urban e-Planning; Theme 4: Theory, Ethics and Methods in Urban e-Planning.

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