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**70 | CLOSED PLANNING PROCEDURES AS INSTRUMENTS
FOR OPEN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING? A RETROACTIVE
ANALYSIS OF THREE PLANNING PROCESSES RELYING ON
CHAT**

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ABSTRACT: In a review of participatory planning literature, Liisa Horelli (2002) comes to the conclusion that the core problem (of participatory planning) lies in the fuzzy relationship between participatory planning and decision making or in that between direct and representative democracy. Participatory planning, she argues, is unpredictable by nature, driven by dynamic and heterogeneous citizen initiatives. Decision making, in contrast, requires stable and long term agreements in order to plan and supervise complex projects. Participatory practices are therefore often caught in generic procedures that turn these practices into formalities that are de-politicized and thus irrelevant (a/o De Bie et al., 2012; Olesen, 2014). To overcome this ‘core problem’, Horelli (2002) suggests to not try and open up the procedural nature of planning, but to rather reconceive it as an iteration of communicative transactions that support learning and capacity building of citizens, experts, and decision makers.

There is quite some literature on how to organize single communicative transactions (a/o Steyaert & Lisoir, 2005) and there is a growing body of knowledge on spatial planning as collaborative learning (a/o Albrechts, 2004; Teitelbaum et al., 2015). But this literature does not provide frameworks on how to turn closed planning procedures into open collaborative learning processes, as Horelli (2002) suggests, that can support strategic planning.

The aim of this paper is to explore the contours of such a framework. It will do this by applying Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to three ongoing participatory planning processes. CHAT is a theory that conceptualizes learning as a social practice firmly situated in a cultural and historical context (Engeström, 2009). All three cases are initiated by the Spatial Development Department of the Flemish Government. And all three have to comply with a distinctive policy context.

The paper will first introduce the three cases. It will then apply CHAT. The paper will end with a discussion on potential strategies to turn (standard) planning procedures into instruments that can support collaborative learning.

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