Tracing resident antagonisms in urban development: agonistic pluralism and participatory planning

Cameron McAuliffe[1]* (iD) and Dallas Rogers[2] (iD)

[1]*School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia*
[2]*School of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia*
*Corresponding author. Email: c.mcauliffe@westernsydney.edu.au

Abstract

This article draws on research with resident action groups and other alliances in Sydney. It investigates the ways in which citizens work beyond the formal planning system to approach and achieve their urban development goals. The post-political treatment of community voices in planning relies on the centrality of consensus politics in current participatory planning regimes. By providing a democratic outlet that is far removed from the actual development outcome, powerful urban actors can silence through inclusion. Planning theorists have posited that one pathway beyond this post-political moment in urban planning is provided by Chantal Mouffe's critique of Habermasian communicative theory and consensus politics, which she bases on her theory of agonistic pluralism. Following Mouffe, to achieve a productive agonistic politics, any rigid antagonisms between "enemies" need to be moderated to more mutable "adversarial" positions. However, we have little knowledge of the conditions that might precipitate such a change in praxis. To address this gap between theory and praxis, we use focus group data to show how local resident action groups and urban alliances work through three modalities of antagonism to achieve their urban development goals. We add empirical weight to the idea that citizens can shift from rigid and fundamental antagonisms to the potentially more productive adversarial politics of agonistic pluralism but therein expose some limitations with how Mouffe's ideas are being applied to urban planning.

Keywords *urban planning; agonistic pluralism; resident action groups; participatory planning; urban development; Sydney*

Introduction

This article reports on a study that analysed how local-level and metropolitan-level resident groups and other urban alliances engage in the politics of urban development in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. We were interested in understanding how local resident groups and metropolitan alliances mobilise and slide between antagonistic and agonistic encounters with government and private sector actors. Two interrelated contributions to the post-political critique of urban governance are covered (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; McClymont, 2011; Pløger, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2011). The first adds conceptual clarity around Chantal Mouffe's claim that to achieve a productive agonistic politics, the antagonisms that exist in political encounters need to be moderated to more mutable adversarial positions (Mouffe, 1992, 2005, 2013). For such ends, we contrast Mouffe's "politics", which is tied to antagonism and agonism, with what we call the "formal politics" of the planning system. To date, little empirical research has considered the conditions

that might precipitate the transition from antagonism to agonism in the urban politics and praxis of local citizenries (Mouat *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the second task is to add some empirical weight to how local resident groups and urban alliances engage with the post-political city. We use empirical data to extend Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism as it has been applied to urban development politics. The actions of these groups and alliances are shaped to some degree by the reconfiguration of the formal planning governance arrangements in New South Wales. This reconfiguration includes the changing statutory demarcations of local and state governments, which are exemplified by recent local council amalgamations, the periodic discussion of a national urban agenda (Ruming *et al.*, 2014), and the development of new metropolitan-level planning bodies such as the Greater Sydney Commission. New forms of infrastructure delivery that are the responsibilities of both public and private sectors are shaping the urban politics of these groups and alliances too. There are new opportunities for the private sector to deliver infrastructure as the government withdraws from large-scale infrastructure provision of, for example, housing and transport (Pawson *et al.*, 2015). Under this new market-centred urban planning paradigm, urban development is increasingly valued as an economic process and as a driver of the economy (McGuirk, 2005), rather than as a social process that might create more just or equitable cities (Fainstein, 2010).

These changing regulatory, resident action, and community alliance arrangements introduce a set of new dilemmas that may negatively affect community involvement in urban planning and development in cities such as Sydney. As Schatz and Rogers (2016, p.42) argue, what makes 'neoliberal governance different is that private sector actors are increasingly invited to be "responsible" in economic and legal terms, for public infrastructure and social service delivery, but may not necessarily deliver the desired broader public benefits that are bounded up in delivering these projects'. In other words, while infrastructure provision has been contracted out to the private sector the 'responsibility for social democracy still resides with the government' (Schatz & Rogers, 2016, p.42). The ways in which governments and other actors engage with residents and other urban alliances are in flux—made mobile across local, metropolitan, regional, and even national scales. The timeframes over which these groups are being asked to be involved are changing too, as

evinced by the push for upfront consultation on strategic plans.

The public, private, and non-government sectors and local-level and metropolitan-level citizenries are involved in the politics of urban development in diverse ways and through different political spaces. Some use formal political acts, such as submitting planning objections or attending consultation events; others use informal acts, such as attending protests or engaging in backroom deals. The visibility or invisibility of these acts is important and can range from public meetings to corruption (Rogers, 2016). Professional planners have the challenge of balancing their long-term strategic vision for a city with shorter-term—and sometimes parochial—issues raised by local residents and urban alliances. The challenge for urban planners is to optimise management of urban change, such as population increases, housing pressures, environmental concerns, and transport provision, in ways that are economically viable and lead to more equitable outcomes, now and into the future.

These issues force us to rethink how planning practice, and the social and spatial logics that underpin it, might be shaped by formal regulatory frameworks and planning decisions made by governments, as well as by the diverse interests and ideologies of planning professionals, interested citizens, industry advocacy groups, the media, politicians, and other social actors (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Rogers, 2016). Under this expansive notion of urban planning, *participatory* planning is understood as an ongoing process undertaken within an entire civic-political system (Schatz & Rogers, 2016). The planning process is understood as a dynamic governance system, rather than as a stable and independent formal governance system. This perspective acknowledges and accounts for the structural constraints of the NSW planning system, and at the same time, it includes the many extra-planning processes and actors that contribute to planning governance and urban development in the city (Gleeson, 2006; Grant *et al.*, 2011; McGuirk, 2005; NSW Government, 2013; Pillora & McKinlay, 2011; Prior & Herriman, 2010; Ratcliff *et al.*, 2010). It is a planning system that must, therefore, be increasingly thought of as always provisional. In short, it is a negotiable set of planning agendas, regulatory practices, and planning decisions, as well as an always-contestable and contested political process defined by its high frequency of regulatory change.

In response to the provisional characteristics of planning so understood, local resident groups are

forming wider metropolitan-level alliances—perhaps to mirror and respond to new metropolitan-level statutory bodies. Some claim that the planning system is broken, or that the planning system serves powerful groups, or that community consultation and engagement is a farce, and that metropolitan issues often override local concerns (Legacy, 2017; MacDonald in this special section; Rogers, 2016). These new alliances engage with the planning system using a diverse suite of civic-political processes. It is not just through strategic planning or development assessment consultation processes that these alliances contribute to the planning and development of their cities and neighbourhoods. They also engage through political lobbying and political party activities, and through the media. They mobilise local resistance and use whatever political processes are available to them at the time to bring about planning and/or urban change. In this sense, resistance might simply be an antagonistic act, a lashing-out against emerging post-political planning conditions. In this case, it is a manifestation of their inability to affect or destabilise the current hegemony. On such grounds, urban scholars are paying more attention to the diverse methods that these groups use to influence or protest against urban planning and development in excess of any formal state-created engagement processes and events (McClymont, 2011; Mouat *et al*., 2013; Rogers, 2016).

We are interested in the possibilities for community action that hold to account a range of powerful public and private urban actors, politicians, and professional planners. Created by citizens rather than other actors, these political processes require us to reconsider the old and new political spaces that citizen groups and alliances can open up *themselves* to engage with the development politics of the city (Rogers, 2016). It is not just governments, or their community engagement consultants, or formal citizen-state relations that shape the way residents inform urban development. Individual citizens and community alliances are assembling outside the formal politics of urban planning systems to create new configurations of citizen, state, technology, media, business, and academic relations.

To explore these new political configurations, the next section, 'More than communicative theory', critiques the hard consensus politics that is framing community engagement in planning. The following section, 'Researching the agonistic politics of the city', sets out the study context and methodology. Next, the section 'Sliding between rigid and strategic antagonism' presents the data from the study to show how the groups and alliances moved between antagonistic and agonistic modalities of political action, before considering some of the specific ways these groups networked in an effort to achieve their political goals in the penultimate section. The concluding section discusses agonistic politics as a counter-political project to the consensus-seeking post-political treatment of resident action in urban development in New South Wales.

More than communicative theory: in search of agonistic pluralism

Using Chantal Mouffe's conceptual tools, we present empirical data that explore where the resident groups and alliances in our research were located in Sydney's urban development politics. A central platform of this argument is formed by Mouffe's (2013) interpretation of agonistic pluralism, with its critique of consensus politics, and by the work of others indebted to her theorisations. For example, Fraher and Grint (2016, p.1) define 'agonistic governance' as an approach to 'decision-making that is premised on the acceptance that complexity generates paradoxes and contradictions and, to be successful, organisational actors must have the agency to positively embrace these, rather than try to eliminate them'. This approach is perhaps a useful provocation for government planners in relation to their dealings with the urban politics of resident groups and urban alliances. However, it is often far removed from how planners and engagement consultants conceptualise community engagement and participatory planning, which is often based on a limited reading of Habermas's (1984) communicative theory whereby we might eliminate conflict in planning and urban development using rational argumentation to lead to consensus. Yet, as Swyngedouw (2011) argues, while post-political spatial governance sought to replace antagonism and agonism with consensus, conflict has not been removed from planning—it is just more carefully choreographed to suit the neoliberalising conditions of city governments (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012, p.89).

At this post-political consensus-seeking moment, it is useful to clarify Mouffe's model of agonistic pluralism and consider how this model of democratic thought might be applied to the case of community engagement in urban development. Mouffe's agonistic pluralism relies on the tension between antagonism and agonism. These two dimensions are marked by specific relationships to what Mouffe calls "the political" and "politics". A key goal of her pluralist politics is to transform

antagonistic positions between enemies into agonistic positions between adversaries to produce a meaningful democratic politics. As noted above, consensus politics is ultimately concerned with eliminating antagonism between actors, through rational argumentation, to reach the best possible agreement between parties. However, for Mouffe, antagonism cannot be eliminated from social relations. It is fundamental and persistent, and forms the basis of 'proper political questions', which always involve decision-making between conflicting alternatives (Mouffe, 2013, p.3). Again, for Mouffe, the search for universal consensus based on reason, which is the basis of liberal democratic models, ignores the persistence of antagonistic positions. The aspirations of consensus politics to eliminate conflict thus reveal 'liberalism's blindspot' (Mouffe, 2013, p.3). This is not to deny that social processes produce social order but that any social order is built on temporary and unstable ground. Social order is not the product of rational consensus but rather is the product of the arrangement of power relations between antagonistic parties; following Gramsci, this is what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) termed hegemony—a temporary and fragile configuration of power relations.

Mouffe usefully proposes a distinction between what she calls the political and politics, which helps to differentiate between the fundamental antagonisms in social relations and what she sees as agonistic engagements. The political defines the antagonistic dimension that is inherent to all human societies. It takes many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. Whereas politics refers to the 'ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order and to organise human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of "the political"' (Mouffe, 2013, pp.2–3). The antagonistic dimension is the political because it is suffused with a contestation over ideas. However, antagonistic contestations are between "enemies" and, as such, are not conducive to the formation of social order. In contrast, agonism is more productive due to its commitment to a particular social order as an outcome.

Mouffe's democratic model of agonistic pluralism requires that democracy and democratic institutions must work to transform antagonisms into agonisms; this work will bring the actors involved into the politics—as stakeholders—and thus into the contestation over the current social order (that is, hegemony). Those in the political and in the antagonistic dimension outside politics are unable to effect change because they are not able to play a part in destabilising the nascent arrangement of power relations and cannot substantively effect the shift to implement a new hegemonic order. We suggest that types of antagonistic politics that are often called NIMBYism exemplify the motivations of groups *outside of the politics* of the city: they are trapped in the antagonistic dimension.

Researching the agonistic politics of the city: three modalities of antagonism

We now add to recent work that uses agonistic pluralism by testing Mouffe's theoretical argument empirically. We explored the potential role that agonistic perspectives on urban politics might play in rearrangements of power relations in urban development in Sydney. Doing so allowed us to trace some of the transitions that resident action groups and their members undergo in their attempts to influence urban development politics using practices that fall outside of the formal consensus-seeking politics typical of contemporary community engagement practices.

This paper draws on research undertaken to identify pathways to more effective democratic involvement of stakeholders in urban development in contemporary Australian cities. The research involved a representative survey of NSW residents (*n* = 1,000) investigating their knowledge of the NSW planning system, a set of focus groups conducted with resident action groups and other urban alliances from the Sydney metropolitan area, and an expert panel to further analyse the focus group findings in relation to the structural capacity of the NSW planning system for incorporating general public input (Rogers *et al*., 2017). We draw here on data from the second phase of the research involving a series of four focus groups conducted with resident action groups and other urban alliances engaged with planning and broader urban development issues in central, eastern, and western Sydney in 2016. Two focus groups were conducted in central/north-eastern Sydney, and two were conducted in western Sydney. Each focus group had six to 12 participants. The focus groups explored how individuals and alliances engaged with planning and broader urban development issues in Sydney to determine how their individual members, and the groups as collectives, participated in planning and urban development matters. The rationale for the focus groups was that more empirical data are needed about how members of the public participate in planning matters both within and outside of government-sanctioned community engagement processes. The focus

groups were intended to provide insights about how individuals and groups operate in and around the formal processes of participation and engagement, which often fail to adequately address the concerns of minority dissenting stakeholders in urban development processes. A focus group methodology allowed us to collect qualitative data about the decision-making and agenda-setting processes of individuals and groups who felt that the formal pathways for engagement were inadequate. The focus groups were designed to identify the presence of community politics beyond formal planning systems by investigating the different strategies and tactics used by resident action groups in their attempts to influence urban development processes, the levels of success of these different approaches, and the ways that informal processes interface with the formal planning system.

It was necessary to further refine Mouffe's understanding of antagonism to better analyse the positionality of individuals and alliances in the politics of urban development. Rather than simply aligning the antagonistic dimension with the political and agonism with politics, we introduce three further modalities of antagonism to better understand the transitions that our participants made from antagonism to agonism. These are outlined in Table 1 as (1) rigid, (2) soft, and (3) strategic forms of antagonism. Our notion of "formal planning politics" is here rendered distinct from Mouffe's notions of the political and politics. In fact, the formal planning politics of community engagement bridges these two dimensions. On the one side, we observe that formal planning processes appear to function through a modality of consensus politics, bringing groups together in an attempt to find a rational agreement over the outcomes of urban development. On the other side of this formal politics, those who take part in these processes do so only to be ignored due to a misalignment of expected outcomes among different parties. That is, minority actors are an absent presence in these formal processes—silenced through their inclusion and unable, therefore, to effect change. In short, they remain outside of the politics, and their persistent opposition is dismissed by powerful actors governing the formal politics as unreasonable or beyond reason, and therefore incommensurable with development outcomes, which are presented as rational products of formal consensus (Rogers, 2016). According to this current community engagement model, being successful within the formal planning politics is predicated on alignment with the expected outcomes of powerful actors. That is, to be inside the politics of urban development in these formal engagement processes is to take part in a limited version of democratic

Table 1   Transitions from antagonism to agonism: three modalities of antagonism

Modality	Definition	Example
Rigid antagonism	A position typically underpinned by a moral intransigence, where antagonism denies plurality and privileges a political position based on non-negotiable moral values.	The so-called NIMBYism of a local resident group
Soft antagonism	An antagonistic position that accepts a plurality of different views but remains unable to effect political change. Like agonism, this modality stresses a commitment to the shared ethico-political values that underpin negotiated social outcomes despite enduring differences. Unlike agonism, this commitment does not result in the shift from "the political" into "politics", remaining outside of the negotiation of power relations that will underpin the articulation and disarticulation of hegemony. It represents a transitional position between rigid antagonism and agonism, a post-political position outside of the politics.	Attending and participating in a state-led community consultation event in good faith, only to realise decisions had already been finalised
Strategic antagonism	The performance of antagonism from within the politics. It is more correctly seen as a modality of agonism, as it seeks to bring into being a counter hegemony but does so by moving outside of existing formal political institutions and protocols.	Simultaneously attending formal state-led community consultation events and directly lobbying politicians who might influence development outcomes

politics, where powerful actors such as urban managers, senior planners, and major developers define the parameters of any urban development outcome. Formal politics fails to provide a forum by which to destabilise nascent power relations and rearticulate new power relations to produce a new hegemony.

As we detail below, the inability of some community groups to affect existing power relations in the formal politics of community participation in urban development can lead them to choose to operate from outside of the formal planning politics to influence the existing social order. We call this choice and form of political action "strategic antagonism".

Sliding between rigid and strategic antagonism

Historically, a strong discourse of antagonistic community activism has framed the way many groups discussed and engaged with powerful social actors in the city, and sometimes reacted against them. In such political actions, the different parties engage in oppositional politics, which are often framed by rigidly demarcated interest positions. This description parallels a common definition of antagonistic politics in the literature, understood as active hostility mobilised through opposition. We found that the discourses and practices of antagonistic engagement with urban politics and development play an important role in many local resident action groups and organisations in Sydney. Some participants in the focus groups expressed no desire to work towards a negotiated agreement with government and other urban actors, whether through formal engagement processes or more informal mechanisms. These groups appeared to inhabit a more rigidly antagonistic position, demonstrated, for example, by a single-minded resistance to most, if not all, of the proposed urban development for their areas. Statements by participants in the focus groups about such rigidly antagonistic engagement with the planning system and planners were common, especially, but not always, from the newer, smaller, or more locally focused groups. As one participant noted, when discussing their resident action group, 'we formed in 1984, primarily to fight the original [large-scale transport project]. We're still fighting' (Participant B: focus group in central Sydney).

For these more rigidly antagonistic groups, fighting the oppressive power of the state was central to their actions. As another participant stated plainly, 'I'm battling for the community … I'm not battling for me' (Participant N: focus group in western Sydney). In this respect, consider how Mouffe problematises antagonism as leading down the path to violent confrontation. Thus, the "battles" laid out in these cases and the commitment to "fight" urban development were typical of comments in groups whose members demonstrated a zero-sum game mentality in contestations over planned urban development. Yet, for other local resident action groups and urban alliances, rigidly antagonistic engagements with urban development could also be deployed as important *political* tools, reflecting a shift towards a more agonistic politics. That is, for these groups, operating outside the formal politics was a way of being political—of being "in the politics". A commitment to a political process mobilised through oppositional politics that was operating from outside of the formal planning politics appeared to be a more strategic form of antagonism. Contra Mouffe, we argue that this is moving towards a form of agonistic politics because some of the groups undertaking these types of rigidly antagonistic actions sometimes expressed surprise that they appeared to be effective in the political sphere. There were many reports in the focus groups of so-called 'effective' opposition to urban development and planning issues. Responding to news in a press release, one group member stated:

> It was just that I was a bit surprised when the announcement for parts of the [large-scale transport project], the [motorway] extensions, that they … mentioned that it wasn't going to be damaging to the [local environment]. I thought, well there it is. That means we had an impact; some effect. (Participant C: focus group in central Sydney)

In some cases, these instances of effective opposition were pointed to as zero-sum game victories, framed in the rigidly antagonistic language of fights and battles: 'We've had six campaigns over the years … and we've won five of them and we've not lost the other one yet' (Participant K: focus group in western Sydney). Yet, where rigid antagonism met success, this opened up the possibility of moving into the politics in a more strategic manner. For some, this move involved shifting from a singular oppositional stance to a mode of political engagement that recognised that there were many players at the table and that, in this plural context, they had some power in the politics of urban development. This point is key for understanding the operation of agonistic pluralism *in praxis* in Sydney. It is not as simple as writing off

antagonistic politics as being outside of the politics, as Mouffe suggests. We identified transitions that started from a more rigidly antagonistic position, which, in turn, led to more sophisticated engagements with the politics of urban development. In these cases, strategic opposition to formal politics both was effective and could act as the starting point for a slide into a more strategic modality of antagonistic engagement with the politics of urban development. For example, participants' engagement with the media was a common entry point into our discussions about the slide from rigid to strategic antagonistic politics. In very diverse ways, local resident action groups and urban alliances engaged with the media as a form of political action. Some groups took a rigidly antagonistic and oppositional position, while others were more sophisticated and strategic in the ways in which they approached the media. Several groups and alliances remained antagonistic but sought to build productive relationships with journalists and media organisations. In one especially dynamic case of media engagement, a group's email list and newsletter was reportedly being used by journalists to source stories, as one participant explains: 'part of the Murdoch press will pick up things from the normal email that we send round to supporters' (Participant E: focus group in central Sydney). When asked if they thought that this type of more strategic media engagement was an effective form of urban politics, another group member responded by saying 'somehow or other [this New South Wales state government politician] is being advised that it would be just as well not to antagonise this group' (Participant C: focus group in central Sydney).

Evident here is that some of the groups and alliances are very conscious that a course of political action—in this case media engagement—can drift on a continuum between rigidly antagonistic and strategically antagonistic (that is, agonistic) action. In some cases, the members of the groups reported that they consciously and purposely moved between these two political engagement strategies. The following statement by one local resident action group member best exemplifies this political versatility. He stated:

> We want to be involved in there in the discussions inside the [government] team. But we also reserve the right to actually go outside [of the government's consultation processes] and if they come out and say stuff that is not acceptable or they don't talk to people in the community then they won't be surprised that we actually go out and attack them in the media

and make a noise about some of that. I think you've got to be prepared to do both. (Participant E: focus group in central Sydney)

What these and other examples demonstrate is that some local resident groups and broader community alliances are very competent and thoughtful political actors in the city. They understand the political efficacy of rigid and strategic antagonistic action, and they can competently draw on and drift, perhaps even linger, between the two. This more fluid form of political engagement in urban development is a problem for the dominant consensus politics approach that tends to limit local citizenries to post-political forms of soft antagonistic action in planning and development issues. The next section moves on to the discussion of the new agonistic networks and arrangements of power that we observed.

Agonistic networks and ephemeral arrangements of power

Short-term single-issue groups discussed strengths derived from networking with the seemingly more effective multi-issue and big-picture alliances. Some urban alliances were even organising themselves around a *post-consensus* discourse of community action, predicated on recognition of the enduring plurality of community voices, and the need to play the long game by staying in the politics. We found that many of the larger and/or longer-running resident action groups and alliances had started out as single-issue (and often as) local groups. In particular, there were several cases where environmental groups matured into complex organisations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many originally having had ties to the feminist politics of the environment that was ascendant in the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, we hear this in the following comment by a long-standing member of an environmental organisation:

> We've been going for 60 years [as an environmental action group]. It was established initially to protect and prevent destruction of our local bushland reserve. And we've broadened our perspective since then … by joining the Better Planning Network we were bringing strength to them. We were also putting them in a better position to speak on behalf of a larger group. (Participant A: focus group in central Sydney)

Taking a more agonistic approach to the political formation of their groups was common when

group members reported on the groups' evolution. Agonistic politics, as we define it here, is about being open to plural values and ideas and agreeing to disagree through action, dialogue, and debate. It is about being open to other interest positions and to different possible membership cohorts. It is about seeking broad political change by considering a broader view of the urban political landscape and planning as a civil society concern (Rogers, 2016). The larger and more integrated alliances appeared to have a more reasoned and complex set of values that were informing their political actions. Many groups and alliances outlined an understanding of the limitations of rigidly antagonistic NIMBY positions. As one participant simply stated, 'NIMBYism will not get you anywhere' (Participant E: focus group in central Sydney).

However, this member also said that political capital was generated by an initial performance of NIMBYism in their area and was being recruited, harnessed, and converted into other forms of agonistic political capital by the group: 'I think [NIMBYism is what] gets people going. Our experience is that gets people going and then suddenly they realise that there is a much bigger issue around' (Participant E: focus group in central Sydney).

For these groups, with scale and hindsight have come perspective and the possibility of a much more fluid plurality of moral frames with which they could negotiate complex or "wicked" urban development issues. Unlike the bulk of the newer single-issue action groups, where evidence of rigid antagonism was an indicator of limited impact on urban development politics, some of these larger alliances demonstrated a willingness to enter into more agonistic power arrangements and discussions. The seemingly more effective multi-issue and big-picture alliances were quite successful in drawing in single-issue groups to bolster their broader political objectives and capital. They understood and accepted that the people interested in single issues—many of whom are pursuing their political interests through a binary, rigid antagonistic politics—will very often be in it for the short term. This tendency did not seem to matter to members of many of the multi-issue alliances, and they appeared to be more opportunistic in that sense, seeking to draw in the political capital of these other groups as a short-term political strategy. At the same time, the larger and seemingly more agonistic multi-issue alliances brought greater levels of cultural and political capital, and longer-term strategic thinking, to the more ephemeral groups. Thus, to the longer-term agonistic alliances, the smaller, more rigidly antagonistic

single-issue groups brought people and passion, which were also viewed as valued forms of political capital. Together, if only for short periods of time, these groups formed and engaged in politically powerful ephemeral *moments* or *events of action*. We argue that they are strategic, but opportunistic in that sense.

The multi-issue and big-picture alliances also seemed to work with whatever political tools they could pull together for their political purpose. These attempts to influence urban development might involve post-political soft antagonism associated with sometimes frustrating attempts to work within formal engagement processes, or informal strategic antagonism that took them outside the formal politics of community engagement, or more directly agonistic engagement that resulted in negotiated development outcomes. Meanwhile, the single-issue groups tended to use a form of rigid antagonism in an all-or-nothing approach to political intervention. However, when the single-issue groups and multi-issue alliances were brought together, the multi-issue alliances' existing cultural and political capital tended to inform, and in some cases drive, the actions of the single-issue groups. Some alliances even moved beyond advocating for a predetermined planning objective or course of action. One group was organised around a post-consensus discourse of community action, as this participant's statement shows:

> We've tried to work across the political spectrum rather than go into it, but we've also basically been aiming to try and find ways of keeping government accountable for what they do in the area. We have a charter, which is very much aimed at ensuring that … a diverse range of voices are heard rather than prosecuting a particular view. (Participant E: focus group in central Sydney)

While this group's political strategy was unique in our study, it is important because it highlights the potential role that multi-issue alliances might play as "networking organisations" and as the collectors and distributors of diverse views and information about an urban project. Similar evidence of a shift to multi-issue perspectives was found in some of the established groups in western Sydney. In one case, an established cohort resurrected a defunct group in order to pursue a broader set of priorities, beyond the local:

> A number of our members were focusing entirely on [local] historical changes that were being brought by the Council … but there are

other members in our group who have a broader longer term interest … We felt there was going to be benefit by the [original RAG] reactivating as an independent body. (Participant H: focus group in western Sydney)

Some participants noted that it was difficult to make the transition from single issue to what they called a broader perspective. Failing to progress from a single issue led to the dissolution of groups, as the passion and energy dissipated once the issue was resolved. As one participant noted, a group he initiated, 'subsequently failed because nobody was very interested in getting involved in bigger issues and the developer looked after us pretty well' (Participant H: focus group in western Sydney).

The scale at which the political action was mobilised and directed was important too. While local governments were often the first port of call in contestation over urban development, they often had 'no power whatsoever' (Participant F: focus group in central Sydney), requiring resident action groups to reorient their political activity towards state and federal governments. In several cases, it was recognised that it was 'the planning department that has the power' (Participant F: focus group in central Sydney). For some groups, possibilities to operate across scales opened up with the emergence of metropolitan-scale advocacy—for example, in the form of The Better Planning Network, allowing even single-issue groups to form alliances without losing focus on their *raison d'être*.

Timing was also important for the bigger and more strategic groups. As one member reported:

Normally by the time the submission stage is reached everything's been locked up. We're keen to try to get into those conversations well before that happens and have had some success in that sort of space … There are things you can do in terms of getting in early. (Participant E: focus group in central Sydney)

Temporality and scale were important considerations for groups whose members sought to be and remain in the politics. Many groups moved from local to metropolitan concerns over time and aimed to get into the political discussion early. As some groups matured and diversified their membership base by bringing in new members, their rigid and single-issue stance shifted into multi-issue positions. In our focus groups, this change was often accompanied by a shift in the scale of focus from single-issue local concerns and action to broader metropolitan or regional concerns and networked action across several sites and groups.

Conclusion

It is our contention that in stopping short of providing empirical validation for the transition from antagonism to agonism, Mouffe missed an opportunity to bring more analytical precision to her conception of antagonism. While she calls on us to move beyond a consensus politics by theorising a move from antagonistic to agonistic politics, her work has provided little guidance on how we might actually enact this transition in praxis. The findings from this study provide one way of theorising a movement beyond a limited consensus politics that serves to reinforce a post-political engagement with urban development. The post-political moment is driving a shift in governance where engagement serves to reinforce particular arrangements of power, and thus it fails to unsettle the hegemonic structures that serve to entrench the common suite of powerful actors who are driving contemporary urban development.

As elsewhere, the tendency in New South Wales to rely on consensus processes in community engagement does not provide an adequate democratic response to the structural inequalities in processes of urban development. This inadequacy of consensus politics is backed up by our research into resident action groups operating in Sydney, where there was a sense of dissatisfaction at times bordering on despair about contemporary planning engagement mechanisms. In our discussions, we found evidence of increasing degrees of marginalisation *through* formal participation, which was widely seen as tokenistic and instrumental, particularly in local government planning where community engagement mechanisms were routinely seen as tick-a-box processes, with contributions from community simply passing "into a void". Community activists in resident action groups spoke of their frustration with these mechanisms and recognised their post-political nature even if they did not used this term. Yet many continued to participate in order to remain in the politics. Their recognition of the limitations of the formal processes of community engagement led many groups to take the politics outside of the formal political processes, in what we have described here as strategic antagonism.

Through actions in the media, lobbying, direct action, and networking with other groups, resident action groups and urban alliances emulated the successes of past "people's movements" in

Sydney (Iveson, 2014). The effectiveness of actions taken from outside of the formal processes of community engagement indicates that they remain within Mouffe's politics by moving outside of the formal processes. But, by remaining there, they are performing a modality of agonistic pluralism that we feel is akin to a strategic antagonism—a performance of antagonism to formal process that nevertheless remains invested in the politics through its commitment to search for an acceptable negotiated outcome. For these actors, the ability to influence the outcome through actions beyond the formal process was seen as a positive contribution to the politics of urban development.

For others, disillusionment with formal processes of community engagement reflected their inability to conceive of an acceptable outcome from urban development interventions. In those cases, even concessions achieved through the formal process, or derived from actions outside the formal process, remained unacceptable. Framed by a zero-sum game mentality, the only acceptable outcome for these actors was no change. Even concessions fought and won were conceived as a loss if the development went ahead *in any form*. These actors demonstrated a rigid antagonism mired in a moral framing of development as bad or wrong. In our research, the smaller, single-issue groups with little experience of the processes of negotiation over urban development were more likely to take this rigidly antagonistic stance. Their experience of the formal processes of community engagement often left them feeling they were being left behind—marginalised and silenced through inclusion in the formal process.

There was evidence that these smaller resident action groups were sometimes enlisted in the actions of larger groups, where singular perspectives formed a voice in a plural coalition seeking to operate within the politics. In these cases, we observed a nested set of antagonisms, where a political act (for example, a media intervention or a protest) might have different meanings for different members of the larger coalition—some seeing a performance of rigid antagonism, while others ascribing a more agonistic reading to the event. Finally, some expressed a desire to be involved in a democratic process of engagement, indicating shared ethico-political values and an understanding of the need to negotiate outcomes among plural actors, yet felt they were not able to effect change. These actors inhabited Mouffe's conception of the political but were outside the politics. However, they did not demonstrate a rigid antagonism, but rather exhibited a soft antagonism—a

commitment to an outcome underpinned by shared ethico-political values—but without the ability to impact the politics.

The challenge we have here is to encourage a transition from antagonism to agonism following Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism *and* to understand how this transition interfaces with the formal politics of urban development, which have been designed as the site of negotiation over the outcomes of democratic engagement. We found that current engagement processes in Sydney mirror a commitment to consensus politics in community engagement at the international scale and do not adequately foster agonistic pluralism; nor do they engage with, or account for, processes of strategic antagonism that are outside the formal politics, yet inside the politics. To better understand how to foster a more productive agonistic pluralism that can account for the persistence of plural voices in democratic processes of engagement, government actors need to pay more attention to the strategic antagonism of minority voices. Rather than dismissing strategic antagonisms and dissent as NIMBYism, it is here that we feel opportunities lie for the productive expansion of democratic community engagement and participatory planning more specifically.

Acknowledgements

References

Allmendinger, P. and Haughton, G., 2012. Post-political spatial planning in England: a crisis of consensus? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(1), pp.89–103.

Fainstein, S. J., 2010. *The Just City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Fraher, A. and Grint, K., 2016. Agonistic governance: the antinomies of decision-making in US Navy SEALs. Leadership [e-journal] Early view article: Published 29 June 2016. Available at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1742715016656649. [Accessed 16/08/2017].

Gleeson, B., 2006. Rescuing urban regions: the federal agenda. In: A. Brown and J. Bellamy, eds. *Federalism and Regionalism in Australia New Approaches, New Institutions?* Canberra: ANU E Press, Ch.5, pp.71–82.

Grant, B., Dollery, B. and Gow, J., 2011. Local democracy and local government efficiency: the case of elected executives in Australian local government. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 46(1), pp.53–69.

Habermas, J., 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action; Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Iveson, K., 2014. Building a city for 'the people': the politics of alliance-building in the Sydney Green Ban movement. *Antipode*, 46(4), pp.992–1013.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C., 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.

Legacy, C., 2017. Is there a crisis of participatory planning? *Planning Theory*, 16(4), pp.425–42.

McClymont, K., 2011. Revitalising the political: development control and agonism in planning practice. *Planning Theory*, 10(3), pp.239–56.

McGuirk, P.M., 2005. Neoliberalist planning? Re-thinking and re-casting Sydney's metropolitan planning. *Geographical Research*, 43(1), pp.59–70.

Mouat, C., Legacy, C. and March, A., 2013. The problem is the solution: testing agonistic theory's potential to recast intractable planning disputes. *Urban Policy and Research*, 31(2), pp.150–66.

Mouffe, C., 1992. *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*. London: Verso.

Mouffe, C., 2005. *The Democratic Paradox*. New York: Verso.

Mouffe, C., 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso.

NSW Government, 2013. A new planning system for NSW—White Paper. Sydney: NSW Government.

Pawson, H., Milligan, V., Liu, E., Phibbs, P. and Rowley, S., 2015 Assessing management costs and tenant outcomes in social housing: recommended methods and future directions. AHURI Final Report, No.257. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Available at: https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/257. [Accessed 20/02/2018].

Pillora, S. and McKinlay, P., 2011. Local government and community governance: a literature review. Working Paper No.2. Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government Australian Government. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/938191/Local_Government_and_Community_Governance_A_Literature_Review. [Accessed 20/02/2018].

Pløger, J., 2004. Strife: urban planning and agonism. *Planning Theory*, 3(1), pp.71–92.

Prior, J. and Herriman, J., 2010. The emergence of community strategic planning in New South Wales, Australia: influences, challenges and opportunities. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, 7(Nov 2010), pp.45–77. Available at: http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/cjlg/article/view/1890. [Accessed 20/02/2018].

Ratcliff, I., Wood, J. and Higginson, S., 2010. *Technocratic Decision-making and the Loss of Community Participation Rights: Part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. Sydney: Environmental Defender's Office New South Wales.

Rogers, D., 2016. Monitory democracy as citizen-driven participatory planning: the urban politics of REDWatch in Sydney. *Urban Policy and Research*, 43(3), pp.225–39.

Rogers, D., McAuliffe, C., Piracha, A. and Schatz, L., 2017. Resident involvement in urban development in Sydney: the new politics of the city. Henry Halloran Trust Blue Sky Report, Report 14HT11. Sydney: Henry Halloran Trust. Available at: http://usyd.nikashsingh.com/hht/2017_ROGERS_ResidentInvolvement_lowres.pdf. [Accessed 20/02/2018].

Ruming, K., Gurran, N., Maginn, P. and Goodman, R., 2014. A national planning agenda? Unpacking the influence of federal urban policy on state planning reform. *Australian Planner*, 54(2), pp.108–21.

Schatz, L. and Rogers, D., 2016. Participatory, technocratic and neoliberal planning: an untenable planning governance ménage à trois. *Australian Planner*, 53(1), pp.37–45.

Swyngedouw, E., 2011. *Designing the Post-Political City and the Insurgent Polis (Civic City Cahier 5)*. London: Beford Press.