

Are Transition Towns insurgent planning?

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Introduction

Questions about how we might make cities more sustainable, or indeed whether the notion of a sustainable city is an oxymoron (K' Akumu 2007), have become dominant concerns of the planning discipline in recent years. Increasingly, it is becoming apparent that sustainability imperatives demand not only leadership from government, but also the active involvement of civil society. One interpretation of the contested image of the sustainable city is a settlement where energy generation, resource cycling, and the production of food and other necessities are re-localised and de-coupled from the fossil fuel economy (Hopkins 2008a; Trainer 2007). This vision of local resilience and self-reliance emerging from community engagement with sustainability issues lies at the heart of the Transition Towns concept.

Transition Towns originated with the work of permaculture teacher Rob Hopkins, and was conceived as a practical flaxroots response to the impending challenges of climate change and peak oil (Hopkins 2008a). The model has gained considerable purchase in the popular imagination, with both Transition Town Initiatives and research into the concept proliferating in recent years, particularly in the United Kingdom.¹

The objective of this paper is to explore the extent to which Transition Towns can be viewed as instances of insurgent planning. A conflict can be discerned between the insurgent or radical impulse inherent in the Transition Towns movement's approach to building sustainable communities and the process of 'formalisation' of individual Transition Towns. After outlining this tension, the paper briefly reflects on the impact of this on Transition Towns in Aotearoa/New Zealand, using the issue of how groups are structured as an illustrative example.

Transition Towns: bottom up, or top down?

Broadly, insurgent planning can be understood as community action that wrests some of the traditional functions of local government planning from local government institutions. It is an oppositional form of planning practice, one which recognises and responds to systems of governance that fail to address local concerns, and which is both utopian in spirit and transformative in practice (Sandercock 1999). Mirafab defines insurgent planning as 'counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative', as it challenges the established structures of power, transgresses 'time and place' through a re-claiming of historical consciousness, and imagines 'the concept of a different world as being ... both possible and necessary' (2009, p.33). These characteristics, it is proposed, can all be identified in the Transition Towns movement.

The Transition Towns model is intended to encourage communities to push forward a sustainability agenda in their local area; in particular, the model focuses on building community resilience, which Hopkins characterises as the ability of a settlement to survive external shocks such as fuel and food shortages, and to adapt to changed circumstances (Hopkins 2008a, pp.54-55). A critical principle that distinguishes Transition Towns from other community-focussed sustainability initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 is that the Transition model is initiated and driven by the community itself, rather than by central or local government agencies. In light of this, the Transition Towns movement can be read as an instance of insurgent planning.

The manner in which the Transition model is spreading further illustrates its insurgent nature. The framework

¹ While it only captures 'registered' Transition Initiatives and researchers that have chosen to participate in the research audit, a useful indication of how the movement is growing can be found on the Transition Network website: www.transitiontowns.org.

proposed by Hopkins in *The Transition Handbook* (2008a) and on various websites¹ is readily available to any community with a public library and/or internet access.² This allows for an organic and unstructured spread of the Transition Towns model, whereby diverse expressions of the Transition impulse can evolve to meet specific local concerns. This democratised, decentred quality exemplifies the spirit of insurgent planning.

While Transition Towns does, therefore, represent a model for addressing sustainability challenges through insurgent planning, the development of a system of formalisation potentially undermines this aspect of the project. The Transition Network³ has published a set of 14 criteria (relating to structure, approach and commitment to joint projects), which Transition Towns must conform to in order to become formalised initiatives, registered with the Network (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008 pp.13-17; Hopkins 2008a, pp.220-221).⁴ Although Hopkins states that the Transition model is not intended to be 'prescriptive' (2008a, p.148), the criteria for formalisation do in effect constitute a prescription. Rather than allowing communities to employ parts of the Transition Town strategy as they see fit, the Transition Network has taken a directive approach, determining how the concept should be applied. This problematises the notion of the Transition Town movement as a flaxroots initiative: it is, in a sense, governed by the Transition Network.

A tension can be identified, therefore, between two competing impulses: the insurgent, flaxroots planning that Transition Towns offers, and the de facto governance structure that the Transition Network has created. This tension is evident in the experiences of some Transition Towns in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Structuring the Transition: experiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand

One aspect of the Transition Network's criteria that undermines the insurgent potential of Transition Towns is that they call for a formal structure.⁵ Case studies carried out in Aotearoa/New Zealand as part of a wider study of Transition initiatives indicate that there is considerable uncertainty about this issue. The Transition Towns investigated are torn between the need to have a formal structure in order both to become registered with the Transition Network and to access funds from local government and the way in which this threatens the organic quality of the movement.

Some respondents from the Aotearoa/New Zealand case studies suggest that a critical element of the Transition model is that it is fluid and dynamic, and does not require a management structure or an 'artificial legal entity.' They speak about it as a 'decentralised and dispersed model,' and argue that its great strength is that people can get involved with issues of interest without having ongoing demands placed on them. Moreover, the process of adopting a formal structure is perceived as both a drain on time and resources, and a potential source of conflict. One respondent from an Initiative that is investigating becoming a charitable trust expressed wariness about the move:

'we also don't want to get too structured, because then that's going to stop people just getting on with the stuff that we [do]... we could end up like so many groups – imploding from our own in-fighting.'

Despite these concerns, a number of Transition Towns in Aotearoa/New Zealand have either become registered or are working towards registration. The key perceived advantages of formalisation are being part

¹ Hopkins's blog (www.transitionculture.org) and the Transition Network site (www.transitiontowns.org) are two U.K.-based examples.

² Clearly many communities are not thus favoured; the dominance of middle-class Europeans in the Transition Towns movement and the constraint this places on its potential to effect substantial change is an important area of inquiry (see Andrews 2008, and Hopkins's response, 2008b), but falls outside the purview of this discussion.

³ The Transition Network is a U.K.-based charity, founded by Hopkins and Brangwyn, which promotes the Transition concept.

⁴ Brangwyn and Hopkins state that formalised or official Transition Towns have access to additional resources through the Transition Network wiki (including use of Transition Network 'branding'), as well as 'transition training' workshops (2008, p.13).

⁵ While Brangwyn and Hopkins do not specify a particular structure, the criteria include: that a group should have a written constitution or similar, 4-5 people who are prepared to take on 'leadership roles' (including two who will attend training workshops and one who has a permaculture design qualification), and a regularly updated presence on the internet (2008, pp.14-15). These requirements indicate that the group must have governing documents, and a 'committee' to put these into effect.

of the Transition Network, improved public profile, and the increased likelihood of getting funding from local government and other agencies. At present, Transition Towns in New Zealand appear to have an ambivalent relationship to the competing notions of insurgency and formalisation.

Conclusion

Transition Towns does in a number of ways exemplify an instance of insurgent planning directed towards sustainability goals. It is community-initiated and is spreading organically, and offers an appealing vision of communities that are both empowered (through engagement) and powered-down (in terms of fossil fuel use). What confounds this understanding of Transition Towns as insurgent, however, is the re-centralisation of the project: the Transition Network's accreditation process functions to take power back from communities, as it dictates how they should operate. While the founders of the concept are, of course, entitled to assert ownership in this way, this aspect of the Transition model may constrain the model's considerable capacity to contribute to sustainability goals.

Further research investigating this tension, comparing the experience of Transition Towns (both official and ad hoc) across a number of countries, is required to determine how significant a challenge this poses.

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