

IN THIS ARTICLE

Seoul has directly involved residents in land use planning since citizen engagement was institutionalised in 2011. The Centre for Liveable Cities welcomed Dr Inhee Kim of the Seoul Institute as a Visiting Fellow in November 2019. This article, co-authored by Dr Kim with recent updates on the ongoing 2040 Seoul Plan process, examines Seoul's use of participatory planning in the 2030 and 2040 Seoul Plans and proposes lessons for cities to harness citizen participation in the shaping of built environments.



Figure 1: A neighbourhood-level participatory planning workshop in Seonyugol, Seongbuk-Gu.
Source: The Seoul Institute

Seoul Plan: A New Era of Citizen Participation

2030 SEOUL PLAN: A NEW EMPHASIS ON CITIZEN-LED PLANNING

Centralised Planning in Rapidly Urbanising Seoul

Urban planning in 20th century Seoul was led by experts who took an administrative and centralised approach to urban planning. This was an accepted way to ensure efficient use of limited resources and timely supply of public infrastructure, which was in urgent demand during Seoul's rapid urbanisation that began in the 1960s. There was also the underlying assumption that individual citizens were inclined to seek short-term self-interest ahead of long-term public benefit. Citizen participation, therefore, was deemed by the authorities to be a waste of time and money.

The introduction of a system of local self-governance across South Korea in 1995, however, paved the way for a more participatory approach to city planning. Then Seoul Mayor Cho Soon made it a key priority to reflect citizens' insights and needs in the policies rolled out by his administration. The Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) opened up opportunities for public participation, which in the beginning mostly took the form of surveys and public hearings for citizens to air their views on various issues. However, the same level of public participation did not extend to the realm of urban planning. The authorities largely maintained the view that urban planning ought to be led and conducted by professionally-trained experts.

Citizens' Knowledge and Experiences as Planning Assets in the New Millennium

At the beginning of the 2000s, the SMG introduced wide-ranging policies that included efforts to boost Seoul's economic competitiveness, preserve the city's cultural heritage and upgrade ageing urban infrastructure. Seoul's citizens understood the intentions of these policies, but also felt that they offered no significant or tangible difference to their quality of life. In part, this was due to the sometimes haphazard way in which these policies were implemented, resulting in problems such as environmental damage and the displacement of residents as a result of land clearance and redevelopment.

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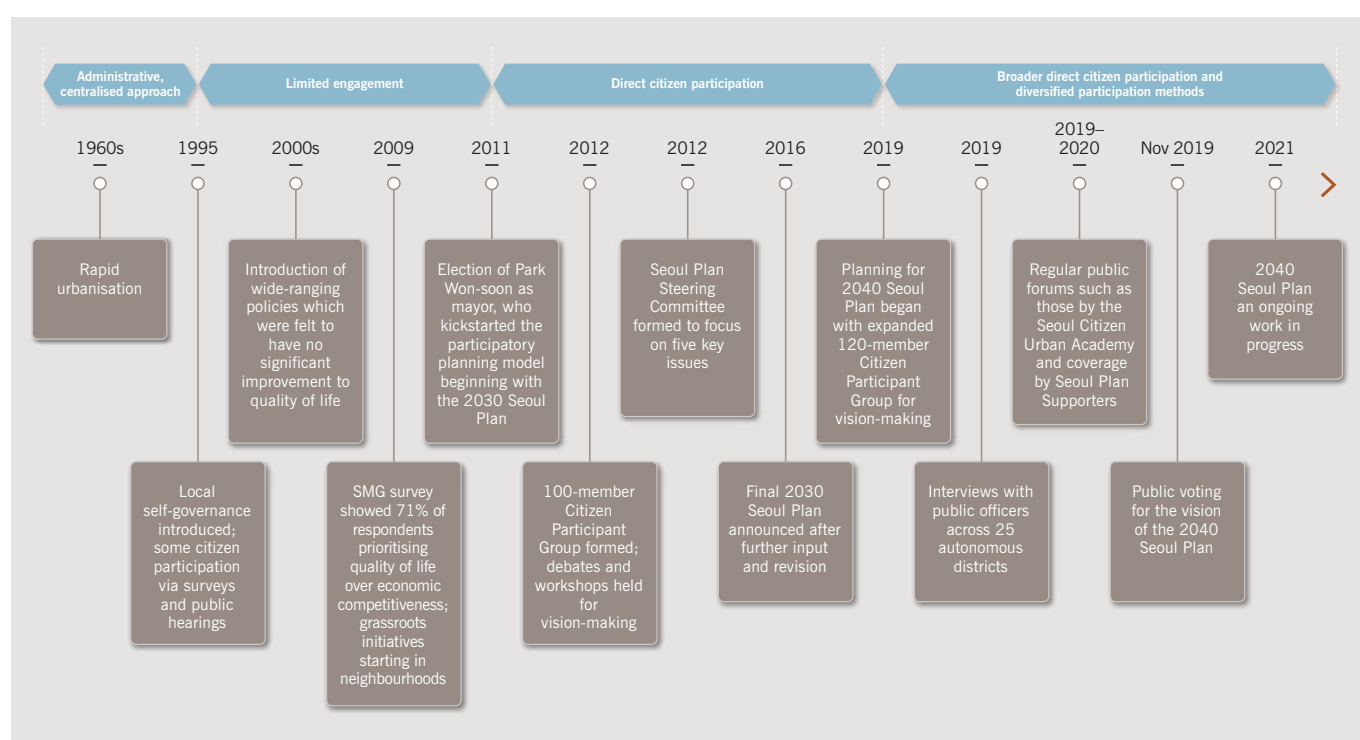


Figure 2: The evolution of citizen participation in Seoul's approach to urban planning. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

For many Seoulites, these undesirable consequences highlighted the inherent limitations of an administrator-led approach that prioritised growth over quality of life.

According to a 2009 SMG survey on citizens' attitudes towards the future development of Seoul by 2030, 71% of respondents chose quality of life over economic competitiveness as their top priority. This was reflected in the numerous grassroots initiatives that individual citizens were already starting in their neighbourhoods—small but meaningful efforts to address issues

like human rights, environmental sustainability, community living, restoring and maintaining old residential areas, and improving pedestrian walkways. These initiatives were an early manifestation of the participatory model of community and urban planning that would soon take root across Seoul and gradually replace the centralised administrator-led planning approach.

Groups of citizens may actually be better placed than administrators to make objective decisions about matters affecting their communities. This is because they possess first-hand

experience of handling and negotiating these issues. As Seoul's grassroots groups became more resourceful in the first decade of the 2000s, the unilateral administrator-centric model began to give way to a collaborative model that sought to harness the mutually-complementing expertise of both experts and citizens.

2011: A Turning Point for Citizen Participation

The 2030 Seoul Plan sets forth the future urban development vision and strategy for the city and is the most significant statutory urban master plan established

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by the SMG. To develop the Plan, the SMG enlisted the participation of as many citizens as could be accommodated, offering all the opportunity to give their input to the Plan.

Preparations for the development of the Plan commenced in 2011. Prior to that, however, citizen participation remained limited, mostly taking the form of public hearings on specific issues. The election of Park Won-soon, a former human rights lawyer and social activist, as Mayor of Seoul prompted the SMG to pivot towards an even more participatory way of managing and deciding on city affairs. Park emphasised direct citizen participation as the key guiding principle in every policy-planning and decision-making process of his administration, playing a decisive role in establishing citizen participation as the bedrock of the Seoul Plan.

Seoul Adopts First-ever Participatory Planning Model

At the time, the participatory model of planning championed by Park was still an unfamiliar and novel concept to officers in the SMG. It took more than half a year for experts in citizen engagement and urban planning to work out in detail how to apply the model to the planning process.

The highlight of the participatory planning model envisioned by the SMG was to enable direct citizen involvement in the articulation of the vision statement for the 2030 Seoul Plan and in defining the key issues that the Plan would address. The SMG formed a Citizen Participant Group to work directly with it on

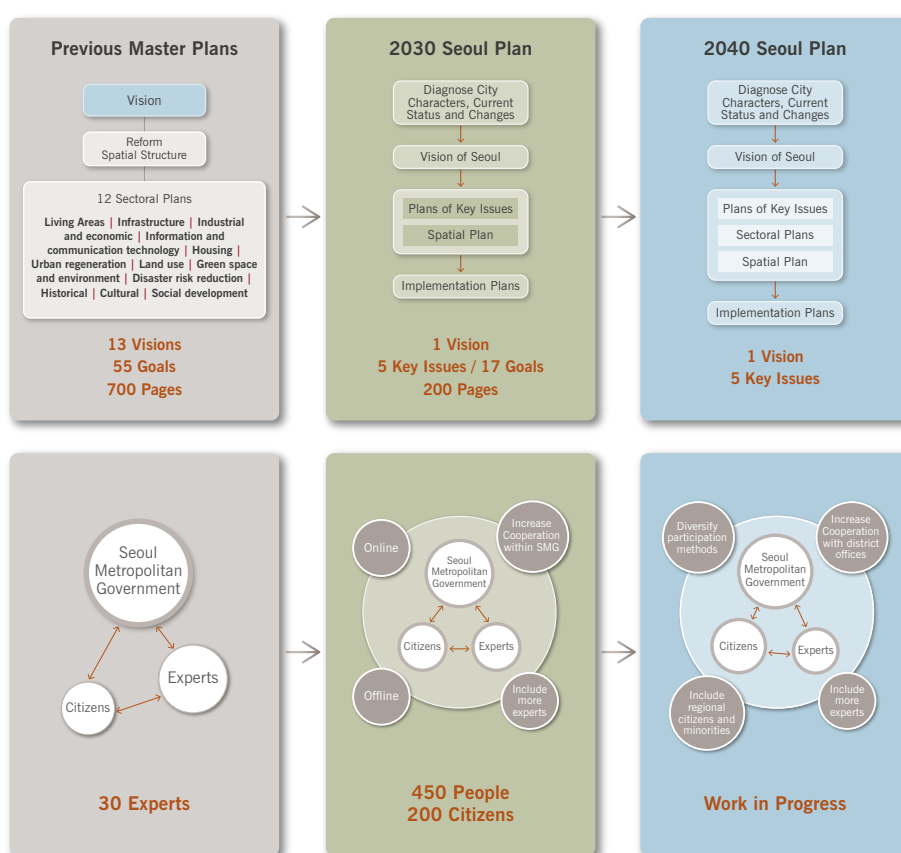


Figure 3: The evolution of the Seoul Plan over time, which sees an ever-increasing scope of citizen involvement. Source: The Seoul Institute

developing the Plan. The group consisted of 100 individuals, which was deemed the optimal size for participative decision-making, and comprised Seoul citizens of different genders, age groups, areas of residence and occupational profiles who were collectively representative of the city's demographic profile. The selection criteria were also intended to prevent over-representation from any single interest group or civic organisation that would have otherwise sought to advocate for their own specific interests.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE 2030 SEOUL PLAN

A Vision for Seoul, Developed by Citizens

Before the 2030 Seoul Plan, the practice of developing a planning vision for Seoul had relied on statistical forecasting, surveys and public discussions. Citizens played a limited role, such as by participating in surveys or voting on proposals from the SMG. It was not

The 2030 Seoul Plan, when completed, was not going to end up as just another urban planning document to be filed away in office cabinets, but a blueprint that fully reflected the interests and concerns of citizens.



Figure 4: Members of the 2030 Seoul Plan's Citizen Participant Group discussing challenges faced by Seoul, and their vision for the city. Source: The Seoul Institute

until the 2030 Seoul Plan that citizens became directly involved in proposing and finalising the vision for the city, rendering the Plan more meaningful to its citizens than any of its precedents. For this reason, many view direct citizen participation as the most significant achievement of the 2030 Seoul Plan.

The 100-person Citizen Participant Group selected 10 of its members to develop a report on the vision-making process and key implementation tasks of the 2030 Seoul Plan. Two representatives were later chosen to officially announce the vision statement to the media.

From a Cabinet Plan to Everyone's Plan: Nurturing a Sense of Ownership among Stakeholders

In order to deliver the vision of Seoul as a liveable city of dialogue and respect, the SMG established a Seoul Plan

Steering Committee to draft the Plan in a more inclusive, horizontally-structured way. The Committee, separate from the 100-person Citizen Participant Group, consisted of 108 individuals selected from academia, the civil service, the Seoul Metropolitan Council, various citizen committees and the Seoul Institute. This approach too was a major departure from the previous system in which the Urban Master Plan was drafted by a 10-member research group composed solely of policymakers and subject matter experts.

The Seoul Plan Steering Committee oversaw five sub-committees on: (1) welfare, education and women; (2) history and culture; (3) industry and jobs; (4) environment, safety and energy; and (5) city space, maintenance and traffic. This arrangement provided platforms for discussions on a plethora of important planning and societal

issues, attracting greater public attention. The composition and dynamics of the Steering Committee, and its scope of work and responsibilities, sent a clear signal to the public that the 2030 Seoul Plan, when completed, was not going to end up as just another urban planning document to be filed away in office cabinets, but a blueprint that fully reflected the interests and concerns of citizens.

A Good Start in Terms of Scale of Participation and Planning Outcomes

Many Seoulites had a hand in developing the 2030 Seoul Plan in various ways. About 200 citizens were directly involved in the 2030 Seoul Plan through the Citizen Participant Group, Seoul Plan Steering Committee and Youth Group. Another 3,500 were indirectly involved —1,000 citizens expressed their feedback through the Seoul Plan website,

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consultative roundtables and public debates, while two surveys conducted in 2009 and 2012 received a total of 2,500 respondents.

The 2030 Seoul Plan articulated the vision and broad strategies for the city, but did not provide detailed guidelines for urban management at the regional and district level. Thus, it paved the way for subsequent local planning programmes that also leveraged extensive citizen involvement. The Seoul Community Plans, introduced in 2014 by the SMG, had a total of 913 participants who offered clear directions and specific guidelines to inform the statutory Urban Management Plans under the 2030 Seoul Plan. To ensure translation on a more granular scale, the SMG formed 14 Community Planning Groups of about 75 residents each to draft and implement the neighbourhood-level plans with guidance and funding from the SMG.

A 2015 study by the Seoul Community Support Center found the outcomes of citizen participation to be very positive. In a survey involving residents who benefited from these initiatives, 82.6% expressed happiness, 87.6% felt a sense of community, and habitability had increased from 59.4% to 88.4%. The 2030 Seoul Plan and its subsequent plans had successfully unlocked social innovation, created spaces that people take ownership for and nurtured ground-up stewardship with roles for citizen-led urban management.



Figure 5: Citizen planning groups at Seoul City Hall discuss the vision for 2040 Seoul Plan in 2019.
Source: The Seoul Institute

The final statement chosen... vividly articulates citizens' desire for Seoul to develop into a refreshing and enjoyable city that offers an outstanding quality of life.

2040 SEOUL PLAN: DEEPENING AND EXPANDING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Expanding Eligibility and Including Marginalised Communities in the Planning Process

After the completion of the 2030 Seoul Plan, various issues were raised by citizens with respect to how representative the Citizen Participant Group was, and how more people could have been involved in the effort. One of the most common suggestions was to engage even more citizens and reach out to marginalised communities who were left out of the process.

In addition to Seoul residents, eligibility to participate in the 2040 Seoul Plan was extended to those who commute daily to Seoul from other nearby cities for work and regular leisure and cultural activities. The Citizen Participant Group was expanded to 120 members, comprising 100 Seoul residents and 20 non-resident daily commuters. Separately, insights were gathered from 44 individuals from five minority groups —youths, the physically-challenged, foreign workers, those living in *gosiwon* (loosely translated as “flophouses”, these refer to cheap and substandard residential facilities occupied by many of the city’s urban poor), and members of the LGBT community. The expanded 120-member Citizen Participant Group was thus more diverse in profile than for the 2030 Plan. It enabled a much wider swathe of Seoulites, including many in the city’s marginalised communities, to directly participate in the process of developing the Plan.



Figure 6: The citizens identified five indispensable goals for the final 2040 Seoul Plan Vision: “Sustainable and Pleasant Seoul”. Source: *The Seoul Institute*

Engaging Every Citizen to Decide on the Vision Statement for Seoul

One of the highlights of the 2030 Seoul Plan was the formation of the 100-member Citizen Participant Group tasked with proposing and finalising the vision statement for the city. It was commended for its consensus-building, and for how it facilitated thorough and detailed discussions. Nonetheless, one shortcoming of the process was the inadequate communication and promotion of the Plan to the general public.

To address the issue of limited representation, the final six vision statement options that the Citizen Participant Group shortlisted for the 2040 Plan were put to an online vote. This move to engage an even wider group of citizens in the decision-making process

enhanced the legitimacy and impact of the 2040 Plan’s vision statement. The final statement chosen is translated into English as “Sustainable and Pleasant Seoul”. The Korean term literally translated into “pleasant” actually has a much richer and fuller connotation: for example, the word is often used to describe the sensation of a cool breeze on a hot day. It can perhaps best be said that this statement vividly articulates citizens’ desire for Seoul to develop into a refreshing and enjoyable city that offers an outstanding quality of life.

Communicating and Promoting the 2040 Seoul Plan

Aside from the Citizen Participant Group, the Seoul Citizen Urban Academy was set up as a yearly programme conducted by the Korea Planning Association to provide

While consensus-building became difficult at times, the authorities never sought to abandon this approach because they understood citizen participation to be a critical and indispensable part of creating a liveable city.

information and exchange insights with the general public on various themes of urban planning. In 2019, 9 public forums were held to complement the making of the 2040 Plan. With a turnout of over 200 citizens each time, the Academy generated even more public attention towards the Plan.

In order to communicate the Plan to the general public, 250 citizens were recruited as Seoul Plan Supporters or “citizen reporters”. Using social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and blogs, these individuals shared the results of various surveys, and information on the process of crafting the Plan’s vision statement. This generated additional buzz and promoted even greater citizen interest and involvement in the development of the Plan.

BROADER ADMINISTRATIVE INVOLVEMENT FOR EFFECTIVE EXECUTION

Expanding Opportunities to Engage Policymakers, the End-users of the Plan

The Seoul Plan is a blueprint for the development of Seoul’s 25 autonomous districts, and the SMG’s officers are responsible for its implementation. However, only selected public servants and a few autonomous districts participated in the development of the 2030 Seoul Plan. As a result of this, many officers lacked a full understanding of its principles and objectives, and the context in which they were developed. They were thus unable to fully translate the Plan into effective action.



Figure 7: An outdoor townhall meeting where residents are given the autonomy to decide on neighbourhood-level issues. Source: The Seoul Institute

To make the 2040 Seoul Plan more meaningful and practical to policymakers, insights from officers from all 25 autonomous districts were collected from district offices. The SMG also interviewed officers from across its various divisions to solicit and gather input on the Plan. Engaging public servants in this way also gave them a greater sense of ownership and empowerment.

THE PARTICIPATORY PLANNING MODEL IS STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS

Future Challenges of the 2040 Seoul Plan

A decade ago, the Seoul Plan was established through the use of citizen

participation as a key building block. A group of citizens was entrusted with a high degree of authority as planning stakeholders, and oversaw the entire vision-making and deliberation process. The 2030 Seoul Plan became the first-ever citizen-led initiative in administrative planning in South Korea and deservedly attracted much public attention. The Plan no longer belonged to a small group of expert planners, but had become a transparent initiative that citizens had a stake in.

For the 2040 Seoul Plan, further improvements to the development process were introduced, including the deepening of the engagement of both citizens and policymakers. Naturally, this added complexity to the process, making coordination more challenging

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and prolonging decision-making. While consensus-building became difficult at times, the authorities never sought to abandon this approach because they understood citizen participation to be a critical and indispensable part of creating a liveable city.

The final outcome of the 2040 Seoul Plan—the newly attempted participatory planning model—is still a work in progress, but hopes remain high that the achievements of the 2040 Seoul Plan will provide firm ground for even more novel and improved citizen participation initiatives in the development of the 2050 Seoul Plan.

LESSONS FROM SEOUL

The breadth and depth of citizen participation is expansive in the 2040 Seoul Plan. The process of developing this plan enabled the views, feedback and ideas of citizens to collectively become a crucial tool for envisioning the city's future and co-creating its urban projects, beyond traditional tools like statistical forecasting. Establishing platforms, institutionalising participation processes and providing resources are some action steps that cities can adopt to more greatly integrate citizen participation in its urban planning process.

Establish Accessible Platforms and Channels for Public Action

As many leaders begin to realise that there is a wealth of ideas and energy that can be harnessed from the residents



Figure 8: Pop-up engagement activities, walking conversations and resident workshops were held by CLC and community organisation Participate in Design for a study to reimagine the neighbourhood of Tampines. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

of a city, community participation is increasingly being used to help a city better meet the needs of its people.

The SMG's commitment to community participation has resulted in the creation of numerous platforms and channels for government officials to work together with Seoulites in a synergistic atmosphere of openness and mutual trust, sharing and benefiting from each party's experiences. Together with active citizens, real action can be delivered. The 2030 and 2040 Seoul Plans' respective calls for participants were filled in a matter of days, despite low viewership rates for the advertisements posted on

websites and in newspapers. Citizens were not only keen to participate and spend time strategising on city-level issues themselves, but were actively rallying others to do so too.

Today, many citizens are interested in issues such as conservation, sustainability and human rights, and movements calling for them to play important roles in shaping the future of their country through the development of critical liveability outcomes have taken root. For instance, Singapore Together provides a clear invitation for people to channel their energies and collectively advocate for improvement in the community.

Under the Centre for Liveable Cities' Building Community Resilience @ Cambridge Road project, local champions—with support from research institutions and government agencies—lead the creation of localised solutions to help their neighbourhood build resilience to climate change.

Under this movement, the National Parks Board's (NParks) Friends of the Parks initiative brings together like-minded individuals to form localised networks that not only promote stewardship and responsible park use, but also take part in the design, development and management of parks and green spaces. Pasir Panjang Park, set to open later this year, is the first national park to be designed and built in collaboration with over 170 members of the community.

To encourage public participation, governments can start by not only identifying the issues and concerns of their people, but also understanding why these are important to them, and then establish accessible, multi-stakeholder platforms that allow them to regularly meet, discuss and work together.

Under the Centre for Liveable Cities' Building Community Resilience @ Cambridge Road project, local champions—with support from research institutions and government agencies—lead the creation of localised solutions to help their neighbourhood build resilience to climate change. Surveys and discussions on what constitutes community resilience kickstarted the process in 2019, and subsequently shaped the ongoing prototyping of a green walkway with NParks and rain garden demonstration with the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and PUB. Participants meet weekly for discussions, which were sustained through online platforms during the pandemic. This has



Figure 9: The Centre for Liveable Cities conducted street surveys as part of its Building Community Resilience @ Cambridge Road project to hear the views of people on community resilience. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

helped to cultivate a sense of ownership among participants, and catalysed a stream of community projects sustained by a strong network of volunteers who care deeply about the issue.

Institutionalise Participatory Planning Frameworks and Processes

Another compelling feature of the 2040 Seoul Plan process is its clear, multi-level structure that clarifies the roles, aims and scope of work of various multi-stakeholder committees. Its strategic goals are translated into other subsidiary plans such as local neighbourhood plans to assist with the implementation of projects at a technical and operational level. Plans

by other government departments are also coordinated through the Seoul Plan.

In many cities, community engagement is mostly carried out on a project-specific basis. While this approach has its advantages—for example, by enabling a focused and targeted route to solving specific issues—the result is that government departments are often left to pursue their individual objectives, limiting their community engagement to a small number of citizen advocates and interest groups. Another shortcoming of department-led engagement is that it tends to be more prescriptive in nature, with officers sharing draft plans and proposals as a means to seek

Another shortcoming of department-led engagement is that it tends to be more prescriptive in nature, with officers sharing draft plans and proposals as a means to seek feedback, at the expense of a more truly collaborative, dialogue-based approach.

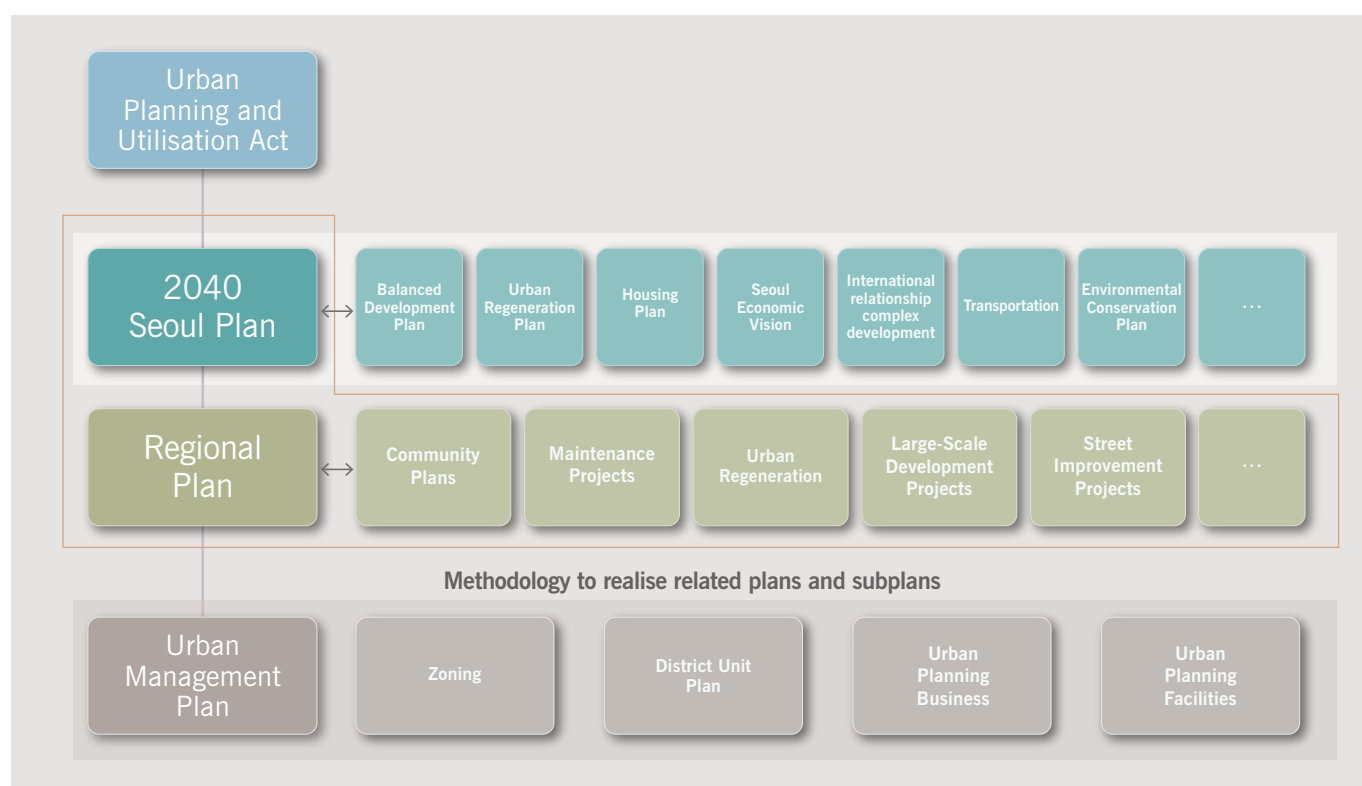


Figure 10: Seoul's sophisticated urban planning system integrates plans on both horizontal and vertical levels. Source: The Seoul Institute

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But there are notable and encouraging signs that this practice is changing. For example, in Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) five year consultation on the Rail Corridor, the agency assembled a group of civil society representatives, academics and activists to chart the engagement plan and thereafter work with other interest groups, students and members of the public to form a Concept Master Plan for the area from scratch. This plan was later exhibited

to the general public for further feedback. Valuable ideas were additionally gathered through workshops, walks and interactive platforms that involved a wide range of people such as the youth and elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Such initiatives, involving collaborative partnerships wherein citizens are empowered power to make decisions, including on matters of national interest, are a move in the right direction.

Hearteningly, amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, some governments like the

SMG have continued to engage their people in discussions on matters such as the built environment.

This approach recognises that valuable synergies and positive outcomes can be achieved through the coordination of plans under a broad systems-based framework with citizen participation at its heart. It may be worthwhile to consider the establishment of a specific office to oversee inter-agency citizen participation efforts and nurture public-private-people cooperation, with a dedicated and consolidated fund for community

Equally important is the need for standardised training programmes to equip public officers with the skills to not only conduct public engagement well, but process and translate the input from residents effectively.

participation and the implementation of community-initiated projects.

Provide Knowledge, Support and Training

A culture of openness and transparency is critical to enable residents to better understand government objectives and appreciate policy-making trade-offs. In Seoul, statistics and data are shared with citizens to help them prioritise actions, make objective proposals and even prototype their own solutions. The Open Information Communication Plaza and Seoul Open Data Plaza are integrated platforms that share city documents and a wide variety of constantly updated datasets, such as public Wi-Fi hotspots, daily public transportation ridership and real-time air quality measurements, respectively.

Beyond the provision of such information, it is vital that people are equipped with the capabilities and tools to interpret and leverage it in an informed and objective way. In the absence of such capabilities, public participation exercises may result in uninformed disputes. Plural, multi-cultural cities may be especially vulnerable to such a scenario, especially if they seek, like Seoul, to engage as diverse and representative a group of residents as possible in our planning process. However, while social diversity may be a unique challenge in bringing people together to find common ground, it also provides an opportunity for people to learn the concerns of others, empathise with fellow citizens from



Figure 11: With help from experts, the SMG developed a manual with detailed instructions for the entire citizen engagement process so that district officials and facilitators could effectively hold local planning workshops. Resident volunteers are also given training. Source: The Seoul Institute

vastly different backgrounds, and understand the concessions required to reach societal consensus on critical development plans and policies.

A standard curriculum that highlights the stake that each citizen has in developing the country can perhaps be introduced in schools to nurture the young in a culture of civic consciousness and participation. Equally important is the need for standardised training programmes to equip public officers with the skills to not only conduct public engagement well, but process and translate the input from residents effectively.

CONCLUSION

Planning with the involvement of citizens does not preclude the use of experts but rather creates inclusivity and enhances the richness of the conversation. Seoul's successful reform, built on the legacy of Park Won-soon (the city's mayor from 2011 until his death in 2020), is a strong testament to this. With growing threats of disruption to urban life from pandemics and climate change, the need for an ecosystem of empowered and connected stakeholders is greater than ever in order for cities to not only survive, but also adapt and thrive.

Authors



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