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# Activist Researchers: Four Cases of Affecting Change

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Researchers in urban planning are frequently motivated by the desire to facilitate positive social change. In seeking better ways to effect change, the researcher becomes an activist by engaging with social and environmental issues in a meaningful way to solve a problem. It is also often at this nexus where practice and academia meet, where the researcher adopts an activist role. In this paper we argue that activist research requires researchers to place themselves in one of two dominant positionalities or engagement positions: the insider or the outsider, as they join efforts with their research participants and activities. Using four case examples from our own research, we discuss how each positionality influences the production of new knowledge in both practice and theory. We reflect on challenges faced by early-career activist researchers in adopting activist research approaches, highlighting implications for undertaking this type of research in urban planning, and the need for a rethink from current discourses to set a path for a more hopeful future.

**Keywords:** Activism, planning, engagement, methods, action research.

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### Introduction

‘Knowledge is always gained through action and for action’ (Torbert 1981, p 145).

The complexity of urban problems and climate change challenges facing humanity discourages making space for hope. These realities have spurred many young researchers like ourselves to be more proactive in our research changing the way we think, operate, and act in the world. Our researcher position lends itself to being active in negotiating and participating in these realities across the theoretical divide into everyday practicalities. These experiences and opportunities for deep self-reflection and exploring led us to wonder, are we activists and researchers?

Historically, urban planning and activism have been linked throughout the development of cities. Activism is not easily defined, but generally has been associated with physical action (Svirsky 2010). In the context of urban planning, activism could mean the occupation of space as a representation of a purpose, such as protests or demonstrations (as the most obvious). Activism across the globe does not possess a singular understanding though, it varies according to context, place, and history. Likewise, planning practices are forged from various professional backgrounds, disciplines, or values adopted, yet bonded by a shared interest in space and place (Fainstein & DeFilippis, 2016). Many professional practitioners choose to dismiss theory, however academic researchers rely on theory to inform and improve practice (Fainstein & DeFilippis, 2016). This nexus point where practice and academia meet the researcher can adopt the activist roles: making partnership with other actors, organisations or entities to assist them in positively altering their practices to achieve change (Healey, 1992; Hillier, 2002). If the researcher can be an activist, then what form does that take in urban planning and literature? The activist researcher engages in the practices of activism, placing the academic researcher as an activist through the production of knowledge. Clear definitions are a staple of scientific literature, the ability to classify and organise into neat categories. However, one of the main arguments of this paper is that activist research does not fit neatly into clear delineations. Activists play different roles throughout the engagement and dissemination process, moving between roles, as the research stages and relationships change.

The aim of this paper is to understand the roles of activist researchers who focus on a unique aspect of social and environmental issues in a meaningful way to inform change in theory and/or practice. We begin by defining activist research and the role of the researcher within it, using the theoretical framework of the Action Research participatory enquiry method (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Secondly, we discuss the methodological framework developed for the analysis of our case studies. The Action Research framework is then applied to understand the different positions of engagement a researcher may undertake during research phases, in particular, data collection and dissemination. This presents our own doctoral research as case studies to explore the varieties of activist research in urban planning. The discussion section explores the implications of performing activist research roles, using these methods in urban planning research, and future areas to develop and strengthen the use of activist research.

This paper continues in the next section with an introduction to systems theory which underpins this study followed by a discussion of planning support tools that may be well-suited to support planning at an early stage. After introducing the case study, we describe the strategy-making session and method for analyzing the data that was collected during the session. We then report and discuss the empirical findings. Finally, we conclude the paper

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with a discussion and reflections on both the potential and limitations of the analysis method as it relates to the advancement of professionally supported collaborative planning sessions.

### **Understanding the Activist Researcher**

The lack of connections between practice, theory, activists, and researchers offer opportunities to bridge different processes of knowledge production. Activist research is one way to improve these connections. This section describes the components of activist research, which will frame the case study discussion section. It begins by defining action research to explain how the researcher engages participants as an activist (its positionality), and the impact of the activist role and research role using constructive and critical discourse. The identification of these elements provides the groundwork to code the case studies and support the development and greater use of being activist researchers.

In order to explore activist research, we have chosen to situate activist research in planning in the theoretical understanding of Action Research. Action research is primarily value-laden, with researchers being morally committed and seeing themselves as a participant (in the organisation or activity being undertaken by research participants) (Dick, 2015; McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Action research is a reflexive process that occurs in cycles (observing, planning, acting and reflecting) in order to solve a problem or understand future predictions of change (McNiff, 2013; William Foote Whyte et al., 1991). Researchers who utilise this approach are placed on a continuum indicating their relationship with their research participants (See Figure 1) (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Historically used in educational and health research, the defining positionality with research participants provides the grounding to choose analysis methods or deal with ethical issues. In planning, we can see action research taking the form of living labs, co-design, or participatory action research for example. Defining this positionality between researchers and research participants provides context for activist researchers in urban planning fields.

We acknowledge that other theoretical frameworks incorporate aspects of activist research as they engage research with an ultimate agenda to create change. This is particularly relevant in planning as the appropriation of space happens as it is inhabited, creating different marks, models and shapes which challenge or constraint it (Stanek, 2011). Thus, theoretical frameworks to approach and assess planning research in different ways provides insights into different forms of spatial appropriation and can be situated within an activist research dimension. However, for the purposes of this paper, Action Research offers a useful framing for exploring in more depth the position of the activist researcher, and how they may affect change in theory and practice, as discussed further in the following section.

### **Action Research and the Positionality of the Researcher**

Action research frames its understanding of the researcher engagement with its research participants based on the position of the researcher in relation to the reflexive process cycle. This can also be framed as the positionality of the researcher within the process of activist research through which a variety of roles are assumed by the researcher. Thus, positionality is the stance and role of the researcher as an activist during engagement with participants. Positionality in this context is built on three aspects, first is the role of the researcher engagement (insider/outsider) with their research case and participants. Positionality is delineated on a sliding scale from insider or [1] outsider/external researcher showing in grey its contribution to practice and change and in the black its roots in academic traditions as shown in Figure 1 (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

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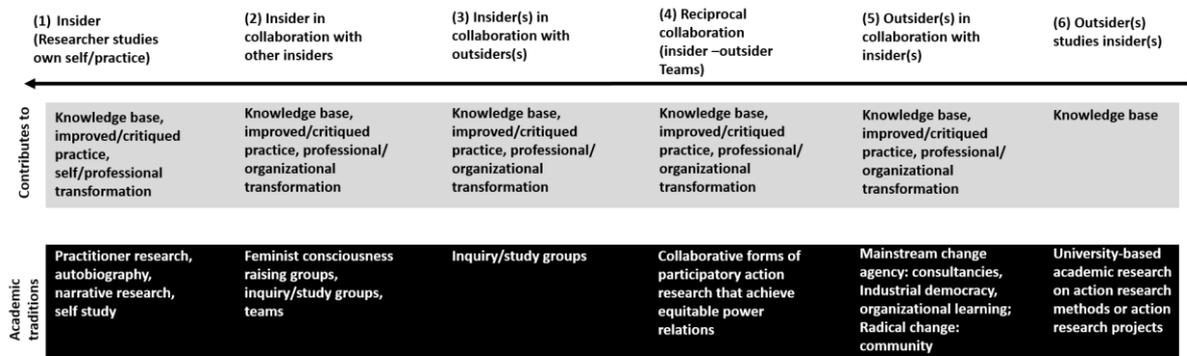


Figure 1. Continuum and implications of Positionality, adapted from Herr and Anderson (2005, p.31).

The second aspect of positionality is the type of iterative reflexive process between the research participants and researcher. Here, the researcher assumes a participative role within the case of research. In planning research, this takes place by engaging in continual iterative involvement with social and urban issues (such as environmental) in a meaningful way to assist in the researched cases' problem. For example, by engaging with the immediate struggles of grassroots movements challenging institutions, power and organization (Choudry & Kuyek, 2012; Jordan & Kapoor, 2016).

Lastly, the level of constructive or critical contributions made by the researcher and their level of reflection within the researched cases' processes. These contributions could relate to two different areas of knowledge production: e.g. practice-based and academic-based. Practice-based knowledge production refers to operational impact on planning practices. Meanwhile, theory-based refers to the academic impact on planning theory and academic discourse. Impact of knowledge to produce positive change may be either constructive or critical, often being both as it is assumed planning research studies aim to produce critical yet constructive contributions to practice and academia.

The activist researcher may empower citizen groups to participate in knowledge creation that will better inform government bodies and businesses in decision-making processes from a constructive practice-based position. Expanding the capacity of co-researchers, decision-makers, and shared knowledge to facilitate community change (Thomas-Slayer 1995; Kindon, 2016; Day, 2016; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Thus, insider activist researchers work *within* the system to constructively identify ways to improve, modify, and alter the existing system. Outsider activist researchers work *external* to the system to observe and recommend constructive practical changes. Similarly, the academic impact of a constructivist provides research on ways to improve, modify, or alter the existing system.

On the other end of the spectrum, aiming to make a critical statement, an activist researcher can challenge and critique the design and implementation of a framework process within a situation they seek to assess. The researcher may actively challenge unequal power relationships towards achieving social justice (Kindon, 2016). Here, both insider and outsider activists work to change a system or society by providing different levels of critical assessments that put in question the current urban planning system and established norms to carry it out. This is a reflective process that has historically been engaged in academia for critical urban planning theory studies. Thus, researcher positionality ideally places practice in an iterative process with academia. New theoretical planning knowledge is produced from practical changes in turn influenced by constant reflexive productions of knowledge.

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### Methodology

The primary research method adopted for this paper is a self-reflexive assessment of our own research, drawing from an understanding of positionality as defined by Action Research methods. We selected this framing as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the position of the researcher within activist research. As doctoral researchers using activist research methods in four different urban planning contexts, we wanted to apply this thinking to reflect on our ability to affect change in theory and practice from our individual cases (Figure 2).

#### Case 1: Social Impacts of Urban Transport in Australia & Netherlands

Lara Katharine Mottee is undertaking research into the implementation of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and management processes in railway infrastructure projects through three case studies: Parramatta Rail Link (see Mottee & Howitt, 2018) and South-West Rail Link in Australia, and the North-South Metro Line in the Netherlands. The thesis aim is to improve on SIA theory and practice to achieve positive social change outcomes from transport projects.

#### Case 2: Right to Housing in Regeneration of Historic Centres in Mexico

Monica Lopez Franco is undertaking research focusing on developing an assessment on housing strategies in regeneration programmes for Mexican historic centres of Guadalajara and Mexico City. The thesis aim is to assess housing displacement in regeneration processes to promote the reduction of inequality in historic centres of Mexico.

#### Case 3: Urban Sustainability Transitions & Grassroots Movements in London

Megan Sharkey focuses on the bottom-up community-led grassroots movement's role in socio-technical transitions and its accompanying institutional change. The thesis aim is to understand barriers to grassroots movements in London creating or driving urban infrastructure changes to attain resilient and sustainable cities.

#### Case 4: Local Development by Brownfields Social Innovative Re-Activation in Europe

Federica Scaffidi focuses on the social innovation and social activism in brownfields re-cycle processes (Moulaert et al., 2005; Phills et al., 2008; Bocchi & Marini, 2015; Carta, 2016). Some empirical references selected belong to the European scenario (Italy, Germany and Spain) in which the research activity has been carried out and where some local activists have been analysed. The thesis aim is to assess socially innovative processes that achieve positive effects to the local area.

**Figure 2.** Case Study descriptions. Source: authors.

Our first step involved developing our conceptual framework, which required an iterative process of self-reflection and engagement with the literature, to identify:

1. Our interpretation of positionality adapted from Herr and Anderson's (2016) Continuum of Positionality, as a sliding scale from insider or outsider/external researcher.
2. The link between positionality, research aims and knowledge production as:
  - a. Theory-based or;
  - b. Practice based.

Using this conceptual framing, we devised our assessment framework as shown in Table 1. This was then applied to each of our research cases, categorising our own position and contributions to knowledge production against criteria (1) to (6) of the framework (Figure 1). During analysis of our case studies, we identified two broad research groupings based on their primary research aim for knowledge production. The aims could be placed under two broad categories:

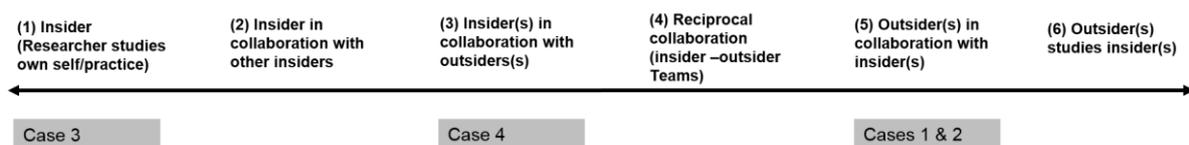
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*Research aim 1:* Analysis of planning frameworks and implementation processes  
*Research aim 2:* Analysis of urban planning changes derived from social movement

Finally, we reflected on our cases against each other using these two broad research aims, and our activist positions, to draw out any common or disparate themes and characteristics during the course of our research. Combined with our literature review, these reflections formed the implications for activist research that we felt are significant for early career activist researchers and the urban planning discipline to consider in affecting social change.

### Framing Activism: Four Doctoral Case Studies

In the process of developing research, many roles can be adopted from within (as an insider) or external to practice and process (as an outsider), to effectively gather information and enable participation towards generating positive social change. The four cases of our research are examples of activist research that display the importance of positionality as a research method to assist and achieve change as described in Figure 2. Additionally, it briefly discusses how this positionality might influence knowledge production. Each case focuses on a unique aspect of social and environmental issues in a meaningful way to inform change in theory and/or practice. Each case was assigned a positionality criteria as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** *Activist Position of our case examples adapted from Herr and Anderson (2005) to illustrate case study position.*

The final outcome from applying our assessment framework is shown in Table 1. The columns 'Practice-based' and 'Theory-based' refer to the impact of the research within the urban planning discourse, whether it aims to make a contribution to theory and/or practice.

## Discussion

### **Activist Research implications of case examples**

The four cases highlight different engagement practices undertaken by activist researchers designed to facilitate positive social change through urban planning. The positionality of the researcher in each case varies depending on the level and depth of engagement and the research aim for knowledge production.

The activist position of cases 1 and 2 correspond with criteria (5), which defines researcher engagement as 'Outsider in collaboration with insiders' (Figure 2). While both cases fit into criteria (5), it is important to note that the methods and focus of each research study engages with different urban issues and topics. The commonality of case 1 and 2 is that both aim to 'analyse planning frameworks and implementation processes'. In the research aim 1 cases, the researcher engages on a first-contact basis with key stakeholders, establishing links and in-depth knowledge of issues. The research impacts are shared directly to relevant actors and encourage practical change within urban planning networks.

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**Table 1.** Example cases coded by positionality and identification of discourse impact within practice or theory-based.

Case	Research Aim	Activist position (see Figure 1)	Practice -based	Theory -based
1	Analysis of planning frameworks and implementation processes	(5) Outsider in collaboration with insiders Researcher obtains in-depth knowledge and uses it to evaluate processes	Approaching through qualitative methods to obtain knowledge about planning processes and implementation, it contributes to assess social impact management	It contributes to existing SIA theory through the assessment and promotion of methodologies which enable wider and more equitable social participation in urban projects
2	Analysis of planning frameworks and implementation processes	(5) Outsider in collaboration with insiders Researcher learns context-based practices and from it yields knowledge	Appraising through qualitative methods to assess official and civic processes to implement rights, it contributes to evaluate inequality through displacement in regeneration strategies	It contributes to discussions relating the Right to Housing as an operative tool to reduce social inequality and to regeneration and housing literature in the global south
3	Analysis of urban planning changes derived from social movements	(1) Insider Researcher studies and is a co-designer with grassroots cycling group	Working alongside the grassroots movements, it contributes to create iterative resources and information with which to different actors make decisions	It contributes by bridging methodology and analysis of socio-technical transitions, power relations between actors
4	Analysis of urban changes derived from social movements	(3) Insider in collaboration with outsider Researcher studies processes as they happen and provides feedback	Combining the community participation with the principles of action research, it contributes to socially innovative processes development	It contributes by observing processes carried out by the social movements to support social activism theory to create new urban regeneration practices and territorial flows

In the research aim 2 cases, the activist positions engage at different levels, with case 3 corresponding to criteria (1) and case 4 to criteria (3). Case 3 is defined as having ‘Insider’ engagement while case 4 holds an ‘Insider in collaboration with outsider’ type of engagement. Both cases engage in a practice-based approach in different ways and beyond first-contact to a direct contribution-based relationship. In this way, an agreement is met where an iterative research-social change is pursued and change is derived alongside research analysis. For example, each case has a different level of contribution where case 4 supports activism while case 3 is a part of the activist movement.

All cases (1, 2, 3 & 4) engage with constructive and critical contributions in theoretical or practice-based areas. We acknowledge all research is in nature both constructive and critical. It is in the action of results delivery and level of social engagement that the discussion should

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be situated. We suggest that the level of research impact is based on factors such as delivery time and engagement barriers. Additionally, the two broad research aim categories discussed will also result in different types of theoretical and practical contributions. For example, case 1 states theoretical impact focus which can be correlated to the time it will take for the research to make an impact at theoretical and practical levels. The information is shared with policy actors and planners representing the near term. While the contribution for case 3 is more focused on its immediate practical contribution. It may be argued that its practice-based theoretical approach is expanding research methods and providing evidence for future research projects.

### ***Implications of activist research in planning practice and theory***

Activist research remains underutilised within the urban planning discipline, as many are noting that young researchers establishing their career may be unwilling or unable to take the time required and “manag[e] complex researcher–subject relationships, at a career stage where scholarly publishing is of paramount importance to advancement” (Siemiatycki, 2012, p. 157). Some have noted viability and legitimacy issues of activist research, commenting that it lacks the methodological rigour and technical validity for academic research, or has an over-reliance on the case studies, narrow findings and problem generalisation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Miller & Brewer, 2003; Jordan & Kapoor, 2016). In the cases exposed here, we have sought to overcome these barriers through deeper collaboration with participants and adopting flexible approaches to our research, constantly validating and improving our findings as we obtain new knowledge.

We recognise and embrace that we cannot dissociate from approaching the participants in our research cases, because this is how we can build trust and engage with them. With the aim of incrementally contributing to the improvement of underlying wider social and environmental issues. It is in the use of these dual roles (as a researcher and activist) where potential to grow and combine theory and practice lies (Gustavsen, 2003). Theory can be enhanced through activist research because any policy advice is rooted in being deeply engaged in one of the many planning processes (Turnheim et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2018; Wolfram & Frantzeskaki, 2016). The learnings are rooted in observations and backed up by empirical qualitative or quantitative data (Corbetta, 1999).

In contributing to theory and practice, there lies a challenge in moving from research findings to recommendations for positive and practical changes for implementation. Our investigations to understand existing environments, plans, programs, and contexts, and in drawing lessons from cases, empowers us with knowledge and experience to make informed recommendations. But how does this influence extend beyond our research? How can we ensure our research turns into actual social change outcomes? How can we best facilitate implementation of our findings? These questions are particularly relevant as we are often external researchers to ongoing processes, we are being critical of these processes, and providing constructive and practical feedback on them, in order facilitate change. These are questions and challenges that the urban planning discipline must consider for the activist researcher’s recommendations to have a positive long-lasting influence on society.

### **Conclusion**

This brief discussion and exploration of the question ‘are we activist researchers?’ opens more questions and implications than space here allows to answer. Our case examples highlight that the role of the activist researcher within urban planning can be both as an outsider and insider, generally moving through both positions. Some research designs may allow for the

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researcher to be embedded in an iterative process of planning and research development; it is argued that this is only one dimension of activist research. While non-iterative processes may take longer to reach practice, the positionality of the researcher as they develop their work may be relevant to affecting long-term change as sought by research goals.

Additional research and commentary are required to explore further implications and barriers. Barriers such as legitimacy of action research, for example within the use of particular methodologies or scopes of analysis in academia and practically. While no clear answers appear to diminish these barriers, the positionality of the cases used in this paper begin to expand on why and how research and practice should be connected. It is through the development of new methodologies and scopes of analysis that the young researcher provides new long-lasting alternatives to generally accepted epistemological constructs. There are significant iterative gains that connect learnings to the development of new theory and practice through activist research. For example, temporal implications of research dissemination post data collection versus dissemination that occurs in real-time dissemination. We argued in this paper that it is also through the co-production of knowledge and practice that new planning solutions to pressing challenges can develop. Consequently, knowledge has an inherently powerful position to shape future actions and experiences. Through this assertion, we are suggesting a change in the dominant discourse by placing the researcher's position not as a passive observer or commentator but as an active insider through which realities may be produced and, as an urban planner, that can create a more hopeful future.

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