Article

# Challenges and Opportunities for Public Participation in Urban and Regional Planning during the COVID-19 Pandemic—Lessons Learned for the Future

Marijana Pantić [1,*], Juaneé Cilliers [2], Guido Cimadomo [3], Fernando Montaño [4], Olusola Olufemi [5], Sally Torres Mallma [6] and Johan van den Berg [7]

1    Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia
2    Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney 2007, Australia; jua.cilliers@uts.edu.au
3    Department of Art and Architecture, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Universidad de Málaga, 29016 Málaga, Spain; cimadomo@uma.es
4    Digital City Science, HafenCity Universität, 20457 Hamburg, Germany; fermontz8@gmail.com
5    Independent Researcher, Tanner Court, Oakville, ON 1497, Canada; solaoluf@yahoo.com
6    Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Universidad Ricardo Palma, Lima 15039, Peru; sally.torres@urp.edu.pe
7    Urbanissimo bv, 3650 Dilsen-Stokkem, Belgium; info@urbanissimo.be
*    Correspondence: marijana.d.pantic@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred significant changes in the fields of economic development, social issues, everyday life, etc. Activities that used to depend on face-to-face communication were firstly suspended and then shifted to new forms of communication. This includes the public participation process in urban and spatial planning. Therefore, this study explores the new domain developed in urban and spatial planning with regard to public participation and surmises future realms in the post-pandemic era. On the occasion of the virtual collaboration platform Cyber Agora organized by the ISOCARP (International Society of City and Regional Planners), chosen participants got together virtually to share, discuss, and compare their practical knowledge in public participation before and during COVID-19. In addition, they addressed the potential benefits of shifting from traditional to virtual participation and potential benefits in the post-COVID-19 era. Considering the collected data and understanding them in the light of the available literature, this study concludes that the application of a combined approach (using both traditional and virtual modes of participation) is recommended because it would enable a larger number and higher diversity of participants. The study also elaborates particular modes of virtual participation with the pros and cons of their use in a particular context.

**Keywords:** collaborative decision making; urbanism; spatial planning; online platforms; lockdown

## 1. Introduction

Public participation in urban and regional planning increases the chances that decisions correspond to the diverse interests and needs of different stakeholders and citizen groups [1–5]. It also brings implementation closer to cost-effective investments and builds the trust and satisfaction of citizens toward the government [5]. However, at the beginning of its development, participatory planning was reserved solely for the elite [6], which changed in some countries in the second half of the 20th century [3]. The relevance of citizen participation has increased and become necessary in planning processes [7].

Since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a lockdown in almost all countries in the world [8], governments and planners were forced to improvise or develop a new functionality for public spaces [9] and methods of participation [10–13]. Many techniques characteristic of the traditional approach to participation, which required face-to-face interaction, have become unviable with the COVID-19 outbreak [14]. Therefore, the use of