Background and Aim

Public participation in urban planning and infrastructure projects has been a hotly debated topic for the last decades. Citizens particularly in developed countries are increasingly claiming the right to be informed, propose changes, and (co-)decide on planning decisions and public investments, especially on the municipal level. In Germany, the example of the well-known project to construct a new underground railway station in the city of Stuttgart (“Stuttgart 21”) has shown that a (perceived or real) lack of public participation can delay or even thwart construction projects altogether. But while projects with anticipated contestations are more and more accompanied by professional information and marketing campaigns, many smaller projects continue to proceed with little public notice.

At the same time, digitalisation is quickly proceeding and opening up new opportunities for interaction, consultation, and feedback. The individual costs – regarding money, time, and effort – to participate in public debates, but also the costs for the administration to generate meaningful feedback, are constantly decreasing.

Legislation and public administration have however been slow to react to these new demands and opportunities. Some municipalities have introduced ‘complaints apps’, with which citizens can report potholes or broken street lights in their vicinity. These apps remain far beyond the potential of this approach. It is only in May 2017 that municipalities will be legally obliged to provide information about new planning policies on the Internet, alongside the printed notice on a poster as done previously.

Here lies a potential for an applied research project that proves the prototypical functioning of a mobile app for citizen participation.

Task and Potential Outcomes

The students in this IdP project will develop an app for mobile devices that enables citizens of a case study municipality to participate in planning processes digitally and from any place they wish. Participating students should use the design concept for
such an app, which has been previously developed by a group of architecture students as part of another studio course. Students from this course are also available to work in interdisciplinary teams. The case study municipality will be decided upon based on the interests of the project participants and interest by cooperating municipalities.

Some functionalities of the app could include, but are not limited to:

- Displaying ongoing planning projects, and their status, on a map and a list
- A comment, rating, and favouring function for existing planning proposals, and the comments of other users
- A function to propose new planning projects
- Push notifications when passing / entering an area with an ongoing planning project
- Notifications on new projects, or developments regarding favourite projects
- A function to facilitate input and moderation by the municipal planning administration.

Participants should also think about different types of user input and how to intuitively engage users, e.g. in the form of gamification. At the same time input should generate relevant and utilisable output with least additional work for municipal administrations. The app should also conform to the applicable planning laws, so that the generated feedback can be used in official planning processes.

The proposal is suitable for single students or work groups of up to five people. The associated lecture courses ensure that students acquire a general understanding of the German building laws.

Outlook

Besides its potential market demand by municipalities, the described app could have numerous civic benefits not internalised by the market, particularly greater public engagement and satisfaction. The app could also potentially be developed into a spin-off later.
Further Reading

More Information about zoning plans in the case of Munich can be found at http://maps.muenchen.de/plan/bebauungsplan

An English version of the German Federal Building Code can be read here: