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**Institutions and
Civil Society
in Urban Space**
Beyond the
Collaboration–Conflict
Dichotomy

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INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN URBAN SPACE

Beyond the collaboration-conflict dichotomy

edited by Nadia Caruso, Giulia Li Destri Nicosia, Elena Ostanel, Laura Saija.

For decades, planning scholars have emphasised the need to understand spatial planning not only as an enterprise driven by institutional decision-makers and professionals but also as a field in which civil society plays a constitutive role (Friedmann & Douglass, 1998). Within this perspective, the relationship between civil society and institutions has been analysed through a wide range of interpretive frameworks, often situated along a spectrum from sharp conflict to peaceful collaboration.

On the collaborative side, dialogical–communicative approaches view civil society as a set of interest groups that institutions must engage in discursive practices aimed at shared solutions. Over time, this approach has been largely reframed by the paradigm of co-production, which emphasises the potential for civic organisations to participate in various forms of shared governance of spatial commons and/or to act as legitimate players in strategic spatial planning. Co-production can be a resource for local governments seeking to mobilise citizens in the delivery of public services while pursuing their own goals; conversely, it can be a tool for citizens to gain empowerment and strengthen belonging and participation.

On the conflictual side, there is a long North American tradition of extra-institutional advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965) and guerrilla planning (Goodman, 1971), as well as more recent

attention to the socio-spatial impacts of independent groups or social movements opposing institutional power (Swyngedouw, 2014). Some have conceptualised spatial co-production as inclusive of conflict (Watson, 2014), particularly in relation to institutional instability and power imbalances in the Global South. Similarly, other scholars have investigated civil society's ability to positively influence institutional spatial planning (Purcell, 2008) through an agonistic vision, in which political conflict is a vital driver of democracy, provided it is channelled non-destructively. Others embrace more radical views in which civil society itself becomes the only politically meaningful space for creating autonomous niches of spatial, socio-cultural, and economic change (Savini, 2023).

Overall, this broad literature suggests that there is no single ideal or universally desirable relationship between civil society and institutions in spatial planning. What emerges is a dynamic, context-dependent set of interactions that may evolve over time and span the full spectrum (collaboration, co-production, conflict, agonism) depending on local conditions. The key challenge thus becomes how to interpret and evaluate circumstances, desirability, and contextual specificity. Despite the richness of existing scholarship, important gaps remain.

From the institutional side, for decades institutions have often been perceived (scientifically and publicly) as inefficient, costly, and distant bureaucracies, sometimes deliberately underfunded or weakened. Some scholars even regard them as the tangible expression of a sovereign, universal power structurally incapable of recognising social vitality (Porter, 2014). Yet many studies counter this negative narrative. A long-standing scholarly tradition explores how individual planners can act virtuously within complex institutional machinery: adopting explicit equity-driven stances (Krumholz, 1982), pragmatic approaches (Forester, 1999), or working in "trading zones" (Balducci & Mäntysalo, 2013). Others move beyond individual agency to organisational learning processes (Salet, 2018). Still, we know little about how institutional learning navigates tensions between the universal and the particular, and how it interacts with civil society and its fragmented or emergent social demands.

From the civil society side, after decades of optimism and unconditional trust, scholars increasingly recognise its complexity: not all social practices emerging locally have equal meaning or legitimacy. Following Esposito (2020, 2021), several argue that despite the multiplicity and fluidity of social demands (often traversed by tensions and differences) civil society has *instituting* potential: the ability to generate norms, bonds, and structures that transcend individual needs and move toward collective spatial action. Yet this cannot be taken for granted. Further research is needed to provide explicit, operational insights into how such instituting civic practices actually materialise in context.

This call for papers seeks contributions that advance the debate on the significance of civil society–institution relationships in planning, with a specific focus on context. We aim to deepen scientific understanding of how individual agency and/or organisational, regulatory, and socio-cultural arrangements (within civil society, public authorities, or their partnerships) enable:

- individuals, groups, or communities in difficulty to recognise the collective dimension of their particular struggles, promoting initiatives and/or influencing public decisions and spatial dynamics;
- institutional actors to successfully valorise existing institutional frameworks, or design new ones, to effectively improve quality of life.

We particularly welcome contributions that:

- embrace a genuinely transdisciplinary perspective;
- build on both empirical/practical knowledge and conceptual/theoretical reasoning;
- develop interpretive and operational tools to assess the role of both civil society and public institutions in spatial planning, supporting the transformative outcomes they can generate by promoting broader representation and inclusion.

INFO

The call is open until **January 15, 2026**.

To submit your full paper, please go to our submission platform:

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Registration and login as Author with the CONTESTI system is required to submit and follow the submission process online. Later, the account is necessary for following the status of your submission.

The proposals have to be unpublished and written in Italian, English, French or Spanish; the article length has to be between **4000 and 7.000 words**, including spaces, title, authors, abstract, keywords, captions and references.

Please pay attention on how to ensure a **Double Blind Review** when submit your paper.

The proposals can include a maximum of **10 pictures** with good definition (at least 300 dpi/inch and 25 cm the smallest side) free from publishing obligations or accompanied with the specific permission.

The selected papers will be published in the **1 | 2026** issue of CONTESTI.