THE IMPACT OF ARCHITECTURAL VISUALIZATION ON PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of architectural visualization on participatory urban planning, emphasizing the role of 3D images, animations, and immersive simulations as communicative tools that bridge the gap between urban planners, government agencies, and citizens. Architectural visualization lowers the cognitive barriers to understanding complex planning proposals, enabling wider civic engagement and fostering collaborative problem-solving. By making future scenarios visually and experientially accessible, visualization strengthens transparency, enhances trust, and supports informed participation. The analysis highlights the potential of visualization when integrated into participatory frameworks such as Planning Support Systems and Public Participation GIS, while also addressing ethical concerns, the risks of manipulation, and the importance of inclusive design. Ultimately, the paper argues that visualization is not merely a representational device but a democratic instrument that enhances deliberation, equity, and legitimacy in public decision-making.

Keywords: Architectural visualization. Participatory urban planning. 3D modeling. Public participation. Planning support systems. Virtual reality. Digital twins. Urban governance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Architectural visualization has become a strategic language for participatory urban planning, turning abstract regulations, datasets, and engineering constraints into imagery and motion that wider publics can grasp and debate. High-fidelity 3D images, animated walkthroughs, and immersive simulations allow residents to “read” the potential futures of their streets and squares, while enabling planners and officials to test scenarios in ways that are both technically rigorous and socially legible. The core promise is communicative: by lowering the cognitive barriers to understanding proposals—mass, scale, sunlight, traffic flow, tree canopies, flood risk—visualization widens the circle of competent participants and can shift engagement from reactive opposition toward collaborative problem-solving. At the same time, evidence and long experience in environmental visualization show that choices about realism, interactivity, and narrative framing shape public response; ethical guardrails and inclusive design are therefore essential if visualization is to improve—not manipulate—collective decisions (Al-Kodmany, 1999; Bishop & Lange, 2005; Appleton & Lovett, 2003; Sheppard, 2001).

Visualization strengthens participation because it meets citizens where they are: in a visual culture where “seeing is believing.” Classic work in planning communication emphasizes that images condense complex trade-offs into forms laypeople can interrogate quickly—How tall is “tall”? Where will shadows fall in winter? What might a bus-priority corridor feel like at rush hour?—and that interactivity (e.g., toggling alternatives, scrubbing timelines, viewing from a balcony height) deepens understanding and trust. In comparative experiments, interactive and real-time representations outperform static images for exploration and negotiation, while carefully calibrated realism (rather than photorealistic “sales renders”) tends to elicit more critical, reflective feedback (Bishop & Lange, 2005; Appleton & Lovett, 2003; Al-Kodmany, 2001).

The participatory value of visualization aligns with long-standing democratic frameworks in planning. Arnstein’s ladder remains a touchstone, distinguishing tokenistic consultation from genuine citizen power; visualization can be used either to “inform” (a lower rung) or to co-design and co-decide (upper rungs). When images and animations are built into deliberative processes—allowing residents to propose edits, pose “what if” questions, and see their input immediately reflected—the medium helps climb the ladder toward partnership and delegated power. Conversely, when visuals are delivered as faits accomplis, they can mask power imbalances and erode legitimacy. For this reason, many

scholars argue visualization should be embedded within Planning Support Systems (PSS) and public participation GIS (PPGIS) that are transparent about data sources, uncertainties, and trade-offs (Arnstein, 1969; Geertman & Stillwell, 2004; Kahila-Tani et al., 2016).

Technically, the ecosystem has matured from static renderings to multi-layered communicative platforms. City dashboards and participatory data portals contextualize 3D scenes with performance indicators (housing, mobility, emissions, heat), while real-time feeds and scenario sliders let users see how policy levers ripple through space. Reviews of city dashboards emphasize user-centered design (clarity of purpose, audience segmentation, plain language explanations) and caution against techno-solutionism and "dashboard positivism." Done well, dashboards and 3D models complement each other: metrics show why change is needed; images and animations show how it might look and feel. Empirical studies find that poorly designed dashboards can exclude non-expert users, whereas participatory dashboards that support contribution foster durable civic engagement and more equitable outcomes (Kitchin et al., 2014; Kitchin & McArdle, 2021; Lock et al., 2020; Young et al., 2021).

Immersive media expand these benefits. Virtual reality site visits, augmented-reality streetscape overlays, and CAVE-style visualization rooms translate drawings into embodied experience—critical for issues like pedestrian comfort, noise, and microclimate that are hard to infer from plans. Reviews of VR in planning and architecture report consistent gains in stakeholder comprehension, presence, and recall, and indicate that VR is particularly effective when paired with facilitated discussion and clear annotation, rather than as a standalone "wow" technology. Similarly, AR "cityscapes" have been used to explore complex sensor data and development scenarios collaboratively, supporting shared understanding among planners, engineers, and community members (Almurshedi, Singh & Erfani, 2024; Lock, Leão, Bednarz & Pettit, 2020).

The rise of urban digital twins—dynamic, data-connected 3D models of city systems—further blurs analysis and communication. In planning contexts, digital twins can stream real-time conditions, simulate policy impacts, and display them through visual narratives that non-experts can interrogate. While proponents highlight gains in transparency and resilience planning, leading authors warn against overclaiming fidelity and urge careful governance of data rights, model uncertainty, and explainability so that

twins enhance deliberation rather than replace it (Batty, 2018; Batty, 2024; Kitchin et al., 2015; Ilieva et al., 2023).

Importantly, visualization is not neutral. Guidance has emerged on ethics and good practice: disclose what is modeled and what is illustrative; avoid seductive photorealism that implies false certainty; show multiple options and their trade-offs; represent seasonal and diurnal variation; and depict “less visible” effects such as wind, heat, or accessibility for people with disabilities. Research on “sufficient realism” shows that too-perfect imagery can bias preferences, whereas calibrated realism plus interactivity supports reasoned judgment. Codes of ethics in landscape visualization similarly call for transparency about data, methods, and limitations, along with stakeholder review to correct misreadings and detect unintended bias (Appleton & Lovett, 2003; Sheppard, 2001).

On the ground, 3D images and animations improve meetings between urbanists, agencies, and communities in three practical ways. First, they compress time: animations can show construction phasing, tree growth, or traffic calming effects over years, making long-term benefits visible to residents who otherwise face short-term disruption. Second, they localize impact: cut-through views and eye-level frames allow people to assess what matters to them, yielding more actionable comments and fewer generic objections. Third, they spur co-creation: parametric tools let facilitators adjust setbacks, add bike lanes, or test courtyard planting in response to suggestions, producing immediate visual feedback that builds trust. Case experience also suggests that residents with lower planning literacy benefit disproportionately from well-designed visualizations, which can counter informational inequities often seen in conventional town-hall formats (Al-Kodmany, 1999; Bishop & Lange, 2005; Warren-Kretzschmar, 2005).

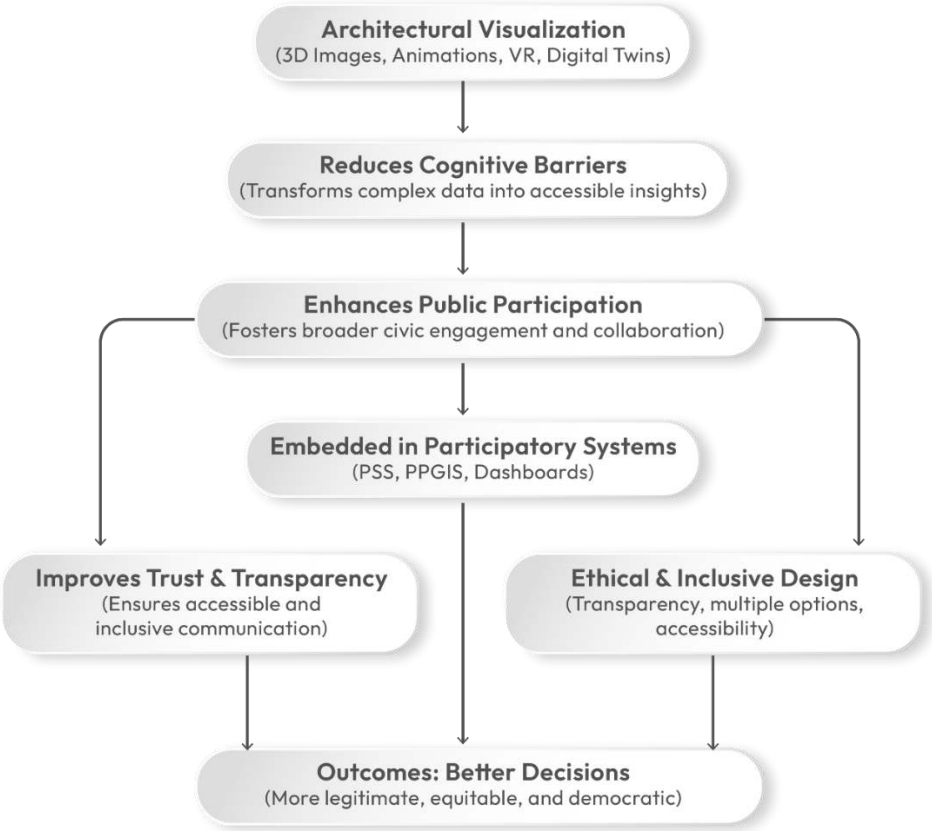
Evidence from PPGIS and PSS research adds nuance. Systematic reviews note that participatory mapping and geovisualization can broaden representation and capture local knowledge, but only when processes are intentionally inclusive and when outputs feed back into real decisions. Evaluation frameworks recommend measuring not just attendance but comprehension, perceived fairness, and actual influence on options selected. Emerging work also emphasizes “data justice” in participatory observatories: who gets to define indicators, which neighborhoods are visible in dashboards, and how uncertainties are communicated visually. These concerns translate directly into how 3D

scenes and animations are composed, labeled, and narrated in public engagement (Kahila-Tani et al., 2016; Lock et al., 2020; Piedad et al., 2022).

This flowchart illustrates how architectural visualization functions as a communicative bridge in participatory urban planning. Beginning with 3D images, animations, virtual reality, and digital twins, visualization reduces cognitive barriers by translating complex data into accessible forms. This accessibility enhances public participation, fostering wider civic engagement and collaborative dialogue. In turn, participation strengthens trust and transparency, while also integrating with participatory systems such as Planning Support Systems (PSS), Public Participation GIS (PPGIS), and urban dashboards. Ethical and inclusive design safeguards—such as transparency, multiple scenario options, and accessibility—further ensure fairness. Together, these elements converge toward outcomes of more legitimate, equitable, and democratic urban decisions.

Figure 1

Flowchart of the Role of Architectural Visualization in Participatory Urban Planning



Source: Created by author.

Taken together, the impact of architectural visualization on participatory urban planning is best understood as a virtuous triangle: visuals translate complexity into shared understanding; shared understanding enables better participation; better participation produces decisions that are both technically sound and socially legitimate. To unlock this triangle, planners should pair calibrated realism with interactivity; embed visual tools within transparent participatory systems; adopt ethical visualization codes; and design for inclusion from the outset. When citizens can literally see their options—and see their fingerprints on the outcome—images and animations become not decorations but democratic instruments.

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