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PARTICIPATIVE LABORATORIES FOR THE CO-PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC SPACE: REDEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEANING

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1. Introduction

This paper provides an outline of a study of the development (production, modelling) of new strategies for an integrated process for the design of public space. The context of the study is a pilot experience of participative laboratories for the design of public spaces. The participative laboratories involved experts and lay citizens in multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary discussion throughout the design process, and opened the dialogue from technical considerations to social issues. The intention of these pilot laboratory experiences was to evaluate the capability of a local project's dynamic to enhance the social and urban development.

This paper initially focuses on the reorganisation of the design process, which was intended to serve as a catalyst to allow a richer approach to the project. The paper then considers the impact of this laboratory approach on the development of a wider negotiation regarding the possible choices of project, enlarging the overview of the local technical and social specifics, the multiplicity of expectations, the urban issues and the social and political mechanisms.

A particular objective of the study was to analyse the various uses' and users' conflicts of meaning related to time, space and actors, through the experience of participative laboratories. The purpose was to evaluate whether redefinition of both the design process and the decision-making achieved the objective of elevating social meaning to a primary role in the development of public space.

2. The experience

This paper studies methods used by the research-team 'Habitat and Development' of the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) in five projects realised in France, in the context of the 'Formation–Action–Recherche sur la coproduction et gestion des espaces publics' (Education–Research–Action for the co-production and management of public space), with the support of the State and of the Region Nord – Pas de Calais.

These projects have been developed in the context of the priorities of the Politique de la Ville, a strategic plan developed in France for the urban and social development of the town, since the end of the '70s, applied in the social and urban activity at the local scale, for the development of projects of public space. [Anderson and Vieillard-Baron, 2000].

The participative laboratory method was used in projects in the French Region of Nord – Pas de Calais, at: Avion, Bruay-la-Buissière, Communauté de Communes du Val de Sambre, Haubourdin Centre, Haubourdin Petit Belgique, Saint Pol sur Mer, and Tourcoing. Another was Saint-Josse-ten-Noode in Belgium.

3. Reflection

The question of use of participatory laboratories in the design process for public space projects seems to be particularly pertinent because it allows recognition of the complexity of the *'quality of the living environment, the place around home'*. [Healey, in Madanipour et al., 2000, p.53]. This definition includes at the same time urban planning, architecture, building and social issues.

The acknowledgement of the distance between the perception of inhabitants and users, and the point of view of *'experts such as managers, planners and designers'* [Madanipour, 2000, p.83] is a strong signal of warning for the experts.

3.1 Urban planning

For definition, Lacaze [1997, pp.7-22] discusses the character of urban planning as being neither a science nor a technic. This argument is fundamental in the approach to the practice of urban planning, and particularly interesting in the approach of the participative laboratory.

3.2 Architecture and building

The characters of the architectural project and of the building production for social housing in France in the '60s and '70s were strongly influenced by concepts of modernity, particularly developed there by Le Corbusier. Some of the case studies are characterised by this type of architecture and planning, exacerbating problems of appropriation of the space and production of social meaning.

3.3 Lack of interaction of disciplines

The separation of these disciplines (urban planning, architecture and sociology) results in living environments that are characterised by disconnection and isolation. Quarters and precincts are considered in isolation from the town (or the city centre), housing is considered in isolation from services and urban networks, and inhabitants are considered in isolation from the everyday life of the town. This isolation and disconnection of considerations often results in situations of exclusion of the inhabitants, who are most directly affected by the outcomes, from the decision-making processes. [Madanipour et al., 2000].

4. Question of participation

Lacaze [1997, p.14] raises the question of values, and argues that the participative approach tends to substitute the abstract values carried by the experts with the concrete values of the uses in the criteria of choice for the preferred options of the project. Lacaze's view suggests that the participative approach reverses completely the approach of the experts to the project. This infers that, in a participative approach, expertise will be acknowledged, but *informed* lay opinion will prevail [Lacaze, 1997, pp.54-69]. The study demonstrated that Lacaze's view would be realised in a situation where the process is *really* participative.

Also, the study demonstrated that careful attention to management of the process did achieve *real* participation of the various actors, and led to integration of both the expert advice and the lay opinion, identifiable in several meta-objectives. These meta-objectives could be summarised as:

- **Spatio-temporal representations** that approach the question of urbanity in its complexity, as spatial and social meanings that differ according to time;
- **Sociological meaning**, associated with increased active citizenship, through the participation of inhabitants in the local project's processes;
- **Political meaning**, associated with facilitating local political realizations of direct democracy (adhocracy).

4.1 Spatio-temporal representations

Design of a public space project is inevitably a multidimensional process [Madanipour et al., 2000, p.279 et seq.]. Even the traditional process of 'expert design' that excludes the lay community is a multidimensional process, involving economic, political and cultural issues related to a bounded

space. However, the specific territorial logic involved in the traditional 'expert' approach prevents involvement of the community most affected by the outcomes, and prevents real integration of social and technical issues into a comprehensive solution that meets technical, social and political expectations.

Touraine [1987, chap. 1] supports the principle of social interaction such as through participative laboratories, recognising a social benefit in reinforcing the collective consciousness of 'the system'. Touraine refers to the media, whose objective is the capability of 'mediating' among the individuals and reducing the competition, regulating the social redistribution and giving it value, and thereby avoiding the danger of 'dissociation between system and actors…' [Touraine, 1987, p.8] and the danger of the separation between the individual persons and the system, which takes a value in itself.

4.2 Sociological meaning

Madanipour [2000, p 78-79], analysing the role of the space in the acquisition of social identity through the definition of the spatial references of everyday life, shows how space and spatial boundaries create social exclusion.

4.2.1 Distinction between space and place

The evolution and transformation of the condition of work, and the increased necessity of movement between the house, the place of work, and other points of reference of everyday life, influence the lifestyle of people and change their relationship with the territory as source (place, space) [Montulet, 1998].

The multiplication of spatial references, and the physical spatial separation between house and work place, explode the boundaries of the 'place', to include different territories and different 'parts' of life of people. The neighbourhoods are no longer the socio-spatial reference for the construction of the identity [Healey, in Madanipour et al., 2000, p.55].

4.2.2 Variable spatio-temporal meanings

Montulet [1998] introduces the question of mobility and refers to 'individual webs' as representations of spatio-temporal behaviour with four 'figure-types' of relations to the space and time. In studying the mobility as spatio-temporal meaning, Montulet analyses people having different behaviours according to different perceptions of space and time. Perception of space varies from the 'place' as local, almost adimensional (in the sense of the town as absolute spatial reference) to the unbounded space. Perception of time varies from the instantaneity to the permanence; from daily routine to morphology.

He characterises four extreme 'figure-types' as: the provincial (whose entire experience is focused on the place); the metropolitan person (who experiences the city as a world containing different environments, in the boundaries of which he changes instantaneously from one to another); the traveller (who travels across the world, discovering places); the businessman (who pursues ephemeral relations in the unbounded space).

4.2.3 Individual webs and collective meaning

The definition and the role of individual webs highlight the meanings that people weave on the space. The articulation of different meanings associated with different time factors is probably one of the major issues for a collective representation of a public space and its purposes. For instance the mobility of the individuals becomes a comprehensive social phenomenon, contributing to a society by allowing the contemporary spatial and temporal presence of its members. [Montulet, 1998, pp.171-172]. Spatio-temporal co-existence produces collective meaning, changing the perception of innumerable individual webs from a complete autonomy to a series of links and interactions producing 'society'.

This therefore challenges the concept of a – more or less – homogenous society in a spatially defined habitat. The social neighbourhood or precinct is no longer a definitive reference. Each individual creates a particular spatial network, and a distinct identity in the social context [Healey, in Madanipour et al., 2000, p.55]. Collectively, the community that inhabits a neighbourhood or precinct will attribute

multiple simultaneous meanings to the space and to its relationships with other neighbourhoods and precincts. The variations from one time of day to another in relationships between spaces transcend all boundary lines. Conventional concepts of definition and the boundaries of a space must therefore also be challenged, and a new territorial logic must be introduced.

4.3 Political meaning

Participation is a democratic issue in itself. Conventional concepts of democracy are based on ideas of 'elected representation', in which 'democratically elected' representatives act on behalf of the citizens, including acting to appoint experts to provide technical advice. Participative engagement of citizens in the processes of governance challenges the conventional concepts of representational democracy and introduces a concept of participative democracy, where the legitimacy and the value of the participatory process are embedded in the procedural criteria of the process [Ratcliff and Wingenbach, 2000].

Opening the participation in the decision making process to a growing number of people reduces the distance between the 'king' and the 'subject' [Ricoeur, 1985, p.10] and, at the same time, sharing responsibility for the decision. Conceptually, this idea of participative association brings the idea that the system of representative democracy can evolve towards a different democracy, open to a larger base [Ricoeur, 1985, p.10]. The idea of association of the State with other stakeholders challenges the concept of representative democracy, and the hierarchy of elected representatives, from the State to the local governments, as well as their respective powers and responsibility for decisions.

5. The participative laboratories

The laboratories involved three main components of participants: elected representatives, inhabitants, and technical experts. The participation of all of them was essential to give social meaning and legitimacy to the process, as well as to achieve communication and interaction between the participants.

The laboratories were based on the hypothesis that the active participation and contribution of inhabitants in each step of the development of the projects was essential to ensure a better social appropriation of the public spaces and collective equipments [Romice, 2001].

Active involvement of the stakeholders, moreover, allowed realignment of social relations capable of improving the communication, diluting the conflicts between the divers participants, and producing a collective negotiated answer (compromise) to a complex problem [Greenwood, 2001].

In order to achieve real co-production, however, it was also considered necessary that people have the wish to work together. The expression of a strong political willingness, and the experience of participation accumulated in past experiences, were important strategies to overcome cynicism and reluctance by all participants from the start of the demarche.

5.1 Structure and organization of participative laboratories

The organisational structure for each laboratory included a local team of facilitators and a steering committee, regrouping the Institutions involved in the management of the 'Contrat de Ville'. In the French organization of Municipalities, the piloting committee could coincide with the 'Commission Urbanisme et Cadre de Vie' (Commission for Urban Planning and Quality of Life). [Anderson and Vieillard-Baron, 2000, pp.111-114].

A local team was responsible for facilitating the local network created around the initiative: coordination of the program of the activities, formal invitations to participating, mobilization of the participants (stakeholders), recording the discussions, and publication of a linking bulletin.

In some cases, the local team of facilitators was supported by another external team, which had the tasks of organizing and structuring the demarche of action research, developing a networked experience of exchanges, moderating the impact of the direct involvement of local stakeholders, and diluting the problems of communication produced by the different technical languages.

5.2 Multidisciplinary aspects

In the laboratory, each participant brought a competence: the inhabitants brought knowledge of uses of the city in everyday life; the elected representatives brought experience as managers and decision-makers; the technical experts ensured the professionalism of the outcome. Everybody was free to express his/her opinion. Each person was also expected to listen to others and to allow them to express a contradictory opinion. The laboratory gave all participants a deeper knowledge of the neighbourhood, and a better understanding of the logistics and contributions of the various participants and other contributors in the development process.

A peculiarity of the experiences studied was the interaction between Institutions and individuals. The facilitation of the interaction thus became a principal key for the success of the demarche, and the facilitator became a key-person. The facilitator needed at the same time to have the theoretical knowledge of the method [Romice, 2001], the capability of mediation [Declève, 1994. p. 140-3] and the know-how of the technical languages and tools (in design and building practice as well as in the social approach).

In the planning and design of public space, and in the particular case of participative laboratories, the facilitators have a particular responsibility of articulating at a conceptual level the contributions and the expectations of the inhabitants, which are experiences expressed in a global approach to everyday real-life [Declève, 1994, p. 300-5], within the possibilities allowed by the institutional and political system, the economic resources and technical feasibility.

The organization of the relationships among the stakeholders conditioned the effectiveness of the participative laboratory, in its internal dynamic, as well as in its external impact of perceived power and legitimacy [Greenwood, 2001].

6. Anecdotes from the laboratories

Extracts from two case studies show the objectives of these participative laboratories, and some reactions and opinions of the inhabitants. A deeper analysis can be found in: Declève B., Forray R., Michialino P. (eds.), "Coproduire nos espaces publics", Presses Universitaires de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2002.

6.1 Avion

The participative laboratory made an analysis of the quarter, for developing a proposition for the projects.

Two approaches, with different tools have been experienced:

- A sensitive approach, through a critical walking tour
- An analytical approach, through
  - Realization of a model and
  - Schematic drawings, plans, sketches

6.1.1 Word of the inhabitants

"We made a big model, which is at the school, the model of the urban park, and the exhibition with the Architect…"

"I was working everyday with my father, at home… the biggest problem was the time."

"We calculated the scales, we learned about materials that we didn't know before."

6.2 Haubourdin, P'tit Belgique

A 30 months long story, starting from a theatrical representation of 'Reminiscences', and developed at the crossing of the urban, social and cultural approaches.

The participative laboratory emerged as a political act, and worked on over 30 dossiers concerning urban and public issues. It was a support for decision-making at various levels, from the preliminary consultation to realization of micro-projects like planting plants in the public gardens, or painting the fence on the border of the public space.

6.2.1 Word of the inhabitants

"The important is that we have been trusted, and about urban matters. We could imagine things differently, we could dare to say if this or that would be good."

"What did change? Everything that has been done with the other inhabitants of the quarter; the travels to Paris, to Belgium, the quarter's parties…"

"We measured everything for the project of what became the kindergarten… Our quarter is more beautiful, more alive. Simply walking here, the trees, the lane, the toys, and the children playing. The quarter is revitalised!"

"I was interested because AT LAST they asked the opinion of the inhabitants! …the inhabitants know the place. But they need the support of an expert … somebody with whom we think together… The laboratory allowed this exchange."

7. Outcomes

The greatest demands on the facilitators were in the role of mediation, and ensuring the legitimacy of the decision-making. The openness of the participation to the largest possible panel of participants in the project's process was kept between two extremes: the openness of the participation to everybody and the closedness of the institutional (administrative) management of the process.

Complete openness and the participation of all possible actors remain utopian ideals [Declève, 1994, p.269-272]. In the process of the laboratories, the inequality of position and influence of the respective participants was modified by the process itself and according to the stage of the process.

The change of the perception of the legitimacy, the competencies and the practical capability of a valuable, positive and effective contribution was reciprocally recognised among the various participants, inhabitants, elected representatives and technical experts. These contributions changed the approach to the practice of each stakeholder to the project's process.

7.1 Multidisciplinary aspects

In the participative approach, a major challenge is facilitating the dialogue among different languages, different disciplines, and people with different status and power [Romice, 2001; Declève, 1994]. The participatory dynamic allowed the participants to meet in different socio/economic and socio/cultural fields, increasing the educative potential of the process [Lacaze, 1997, p.62-66].

The involvement of a wider panel of participants, including inhabitants, changed the approach to the project's process, with the collective formalisation of the successive steps of the project. This enhanced the value of the process in itself, and allowed a multiplicity of inputs coming from the variety of the experiences carried by the participants.

This approach valorises the richness of the multidimensionality of the urban processes.

7.2 New relations of power and legitimacy

The creation of a 'space' for the negotiation between the different participants challenged the boundaries of power and disrupted the conventions and structures of the official power, creating a 'belt' of interaction [Healey, in Madanipour, 2001, pp.64-69; Declève, 1994, p. 205-207].

The importance of the participative process was in its capability of legitimising the political outcomes, as result of a step in which participation in the expression of the multiplicity of individual choices or opinions produced a collective outcome of preferences. [Radcliff, Wingenbach, 2000, p.990].

7.3 Readapting the professional expertise

The loss of conventional authority and power was initially felt most acutely by the professional experts, whose formal training did not include the capability of creating and facilitating networks of knowledge, integrated to the project's process, or competence in guiding the participants in exploiting their webs. Declève [1994, p.294], defining the ideal professional background and the expertise for this task, looks for an 'expert of the generality'. The idea of development of such an expert of the generality, and the idea of participatory design, however, are together viewed by the urban design establishment as leading inevitably to banality of the 'uniformitarian product', or the 'junk-space' that Rem Koolhaas refers to, eg in the exhibition 'Mutations'.

8. Conclusion

The political will to experiment with participative laboratories on such a scale in France recognises the evolutionary progress of society, from modern to post-modern, from representative democracy to participative democracy. The benefits of engagement of the complexity of the **spatio-temporal** meanings of public space, and enhanced **sociological** and **political meanings**, were clearly demonstrated by the experiment. Further applications of direct democracy and formal acceptance and engagement of adhocracy can therefore be expected.

These changes will put added pressure on the professional experts to develop the competences required for leading these project's processes and to adopt an operational logic continuously *in fieri* [Anderson and Vieillard-Baron, 2000, Ch. 2].

In a context characterised by complexity of the problems, multidimensionality of the inputs, and multiplicity of the perceptions, the problem is not to make the "right" or the "more right" choice in a specific project. The central focus shifts from external criteria of value (right or beautiful…) to the procedural criteria [Lacaze, 1997, p.14, Radcliff and Wingenbach, 2000, pp.986-987].

The importance of this shift appears in the analysis of the process of the project of urban spaces.

The participation of a large panel of stakeholders, including the inhabitants, to the diagnosis, changes the approach to the whole project's process, focusing essentially on endogenous criteria, and does indeed achieve the objective of elevating social meaning to a primary role in the development of public space.

Acknowledgements

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