EXPLORATIONS IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN FOR EQUITABLE CITIES

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The Newsletter No.7 of ASF-International focuses on questions of participatory design and planning in the construction of equitable urban environments. Including contributions from a diverse range of ASF member organisations, partners and friends, this issue of the Newsletter is understood in anticipation of a Networking Event on participatory design and planning that will be hosted by ASF-UK at 7th Session of UN-Habitat’s World Urban Forum in Medellin, Colombia, next April 2014. The collection of articles presented in the Newsletter seeks to suggest how participatory practices may provide a critical approach to the interconnected physical, social, political and economic processes that together form the highly uneven urban landscapes of today. The focus of the articles is primarily set on the tools, methods and underlying principles of participation within processes of informal settlements upgrading and transformation – drawing from the authors’ experiences in Brazil, Ecuador, Kenya (ASF-UK), Vietnam (ACHR/UCL Development Planning Unit), India (ASF-Sweden), South Africa (1:1 Agency of Engagement) and Colombia (Universidad La Gran Colombia). At the same time the Newsletter encompasses broader reflections on the meaning and role of participation in uneven urban contexts – as derived from the experience of the design practice atelier d'architecture autogérée in France, and the collective Morar de Outras Maneiras in Brazil. These contributions span a wide range of positions and approaches to the theme of participation, including critiques to the concept of participatory design and calls for its radical reformulation. At the same time the articles collectively highlight that the potential emancipatory character of design and planning may reside exactly in the process of negotiating the power to produce urban environments that are in line with the aspirations, needs and desires of those inhabiting them. They thus highlight that the question of who participates in the process of spatial decision-making and city building, and how, must be at the forefront of any critical urban practice.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND PLANNING FOR INCLUSIVE CITY BUILDING

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Since 2009 ASF-UK has explored participatory design and planning in the global south as a central theme in its international workshops titled: Change by Design (CbD), so far delivered in Brazil (2009 and 2010), Kenya (2011) and Ecuador (2013). CbD aims to advance participatory design as a way to strengthen slum communities and engage citizens in a process of deepening democracy. Unlike conventional participatory methods, it frames participation as a means to challenge the structural conditions that perpetuate urban poverty and exclusion from urban planning, design and governance.

ASF-UK's Change by Design methodology utilizes the spatial dimensions of cities to open space for dialogue between citizens and local and national governments. It explores physical elements and spatial attributes such as streets and housing typologies, density and accessibility, to generate feasible design solutions for the inclusive upgrading, densification and extension of urban areas.

At its core is a belief in problem-driven processes to achieve change. Rather than arguing from a normative standpoint that national and city authorities must change because they are out of line with international standards and concepts of good governance, CbD focuses on facilitating exchange between local stakeholders to engage in the experimental search for joint solutions to urban problems.

While the tools may focus on everyday problems, the aspiration is for structural change. This approach resonates with Andrews' position that: “change occurs when something creates a bridge between these highly embedded agents with power and low embedded agents with new ideas”. CbD acts as a catalyst to create such bridges, and by “engaging broad sets of (mostly local) agents providing different functional contributions[that] ensures reforms are viable and relevant”.

The approach and tools of CbD are continually evolving as it is implemented in different contexts. The common lesson is that by engaging with problems, the exclusionary social, political, and environmental context of slum dwellers is rendered as the target of change rather than a constraint on change.

ASF-UK plans to hold a CbD ‘lite’ workshop in London in mid-2014, then a full workshop in South Africa in 2015. In addition, following the successful Training Event at the World Urban Forum 6 in 2012, ASF-UK will hold a Networking Event at WUF 7 titled: Participatory Design and Planning for Equitable Cities - to which we hope you join!

EXPLORING PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN VIETNAM

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The ACHR/CAN/DPU1 Junior Professional Program was launched in early February 2013 with the aim of grounding the training of six DPU graduates through a six months experience working with poor communities in South East Asia. In Vietnam, the internship was supported by the Association of Cities of Vietnam (ACVN), giving the opportunity to Barbara Dovarch, urban sociologist and to Johanna Brugman, urban planner, to work with communities in Hung Hoa Commune, a rural area of Vinh City, with the task of exploring, for the first time in Vietnam, participatory processes in rural development planning.

The core of our work in the nine hamlets of Hung Hoa Commune was binding people together, fostering spaces of dialogue and building trustworthy relationships not only between us and the different actors involved in the region’s development, but also and primarily among the communities themselves and between communities and local authorities. In this sense, community mapping practices definitely held a fundamental role as catalysts of interaction, operative tools of analysis and means to set in motion people’s minds, reflections, ideas and creativity, while simultaneously increasing their understanding and awareness of concrete problems and feasible solutions. It was around the table, drawing the map of the drainage system of the area, affected by flood once a year, that people get to know the meaning of being united, acting collectively and feeling the ownership of the process. This creative production of a new knowledge gradually allowed communities to re-negotiate their power and position in dealing with local authorities. The city government welcomed this new energy with enthusiastic responses, also acknowledging the priorities identified by people as different from those considered in the plans. The resulting intention of the authorities was to replicate the same kind of process in the other communes of the urban area, raising the hope that participatory processes could become a consolidated practice in the city.

1 Asian Coalition of Housing Rights
2 Community Architects Network
3 The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, University College London

URBAN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DECENTRALIZED, BOTTOM-UP AND WOMEN-LED PROCESSES IN INDIA

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The improvement of the relationship between governments and low-income communities is critical to build the basis for a sustainable future urban development. Participatory and community driven development has proved to be essential as states fail in meeting the needs of their poorest citizens.

Since 2008, ASF-Sweden has collaborated with SPARC-India. SPARC was established in 1984 and is one of the largest NGOs in India working with housing and infrastructure for the urban poor. SPARC works in an Alliance with two community-based organisations – the women’s organisation Mahila Milan (MM) and the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) – which organise hundreds of thousands of slum and pavement dwellers to collectively produce solutions for affordable housing, secure tenure and sanitation. Survival of the urban poor is very much related to women’s leading role in the creation and maintenance of physical spaces and social relations. In the process of organising the community, the participation of women in the area is a crucial factor, as well as the engagement of local credit and savings groups.

In 2010 and 2011 professionals from ASF-Sweden worked together with SPARC, MM, the Urban Development Resource Centre (UDRC) and other local actors in a range of community-led resettlement and in-situ upgrading projects in the state of Orissa. In these projects, Swedish architects and planners have been able to contribute to the Alliance’s on-going work with plans for area layout, house drawings, planning strategies, and participatory planning methodologies. The outcomes of this work are continuously discussed with residents, state government and the development authority of Cuttack.

Long-term change is achieved by building the capacity of communities to contrast forced evictions and develop affordable housing solutions adapted to local needs, and by strengthening residents’ skills and confidence to negotiate with local governments and other influential actors. The work is done collectively at some or all stages of every project, and it powerfully demonstrates that residents can be the agents, rather than the recipients, of their own development. This approach provides opportunities to take advantage of existing qualities and to sustain social relations, while fostering the gradual upgrading of houses as residents have the opportunity and financial means. As the local community is the primary supervisor of the architectural work, technical knowledge and empowering processes can develop hand-in-hand to create solutions that ultimately affect the whole city and its residents.
PARTICIPATORY DESIGN BEYOND RE-DEVELOPMENT: JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

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The South African constitution recognizes eleven official languages under its founding chapter; tribal, European, and even sign languages form part of this diversity. This idea of our country’s linguistic multiplicity is supported by the national motto: *iskwerekwe* (exclusively used common speak of South Africans for African foreign national persons), *muntu* (exclusively used common speak of white South Africans’ for black persons) *kula* (exclusively used common speak of black South Africans’ for Indian persons) or *mlungu* (exclusively used common speak of black South Africans for white persons). These word choices, used publically and without a thought, betray an underlying and largely negative construct of ‘those’ who are and are not ‘us’ in post-apartheid South Africa.

While this ‘othering’ is not endemically South African, and is arguably a legacy of South Africa’s history of legalised racial segregation, it is seen most tangibly in the current spatial allocation practice of the South African built environment and manifests most insidiously in our description of the places ‘they’ and ‘we’ are from; *ejaldini* (exclusively used common speak for suburbs), *township*/*ikasi* (exclusively used common speak for former Apartheid black African residential area) to *emkhukhweni*/*skwata kamp* (informal settlement). Being born in, and having worked as a spatial design practitioner across South Africa and specifically in Johannesburg, I have personal experience with this ‘othering’ and the word choices around its description, as it prevails in the dialect of not only the South African media at large, but in the spatial design education institutions – and most worryingly, it exists in the rhetoric of the country’s public officials and government institutions.

Through the facilitation of participatory analysis, design and construction projects that critically expose students of architecture and residents of these so called ‘other spaces’ to each other, I have begun to understand that 

this condition in South Africa appears to not only exist in the physical spatial barriers left behind from the previous regime, but more crucially in the complex social barriers that both students of spatial design and residents of these ‘other places’ express in their oral and visual vocabulary.

While there are arguably many reasons or opportunities to engage with this condition, I have found that the foundational tools of participatory engagement, specifically those that bring various groupings of people together to work co-productively on tangible outputs, allow for not only appropriate and meaningful spatial design practice towards better built environment products, but offer a means to truly engage with the underlying social barriers that continue to plague South Africa as a nation.

SPECIAL PRODUCTION OF TERRITORY

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The need to develop skills and strategies that support the efforts of communities in the amelioration of their living environments has stimulated the development of a number of community-based tools and methods of urban planning. These are meant to complement the key role that the State ought to play as the main responsible for providing access to habitat and decent housing for citizens, regardless of their socio-economic conditions.

One such method is known as the ‘social production of habitat’. This recognizes participatory design as an alternative means to produce organized and systemic knowledge about a territory, and to capture the positive aspects present within that territory with the aim to define and articulate various spaces and functions – integrating economic activities with key places of social interaction, while helping to overcome negative aspects such as the inappropriate localization of settlements and the lack of urban services and resources.

In this context, participation is understood as a possibility to redistribute power in order for communities to be able to achieve their objectives. It implies the necessity to collectively define and negotiate paths to achieve those objectives; and it requires that two different forms of knowledge engage in dialogue: the knowledge of professionals/technicians, and the knowledge of citizens/users. Professionals contribute to the process with information regarding technology, spatial design, economy and planning regulations; citizens contribute with information concerning existing needs, aspirations and local potentials. Here, participation is understood as the acceptance and recognition of the ‘other’. Likewise, it is a way of integrating in the planning and design processes citizens’ understanding of reality, their priorities, and their own definition of how their objectives should be met.

On the left, critical participatory design in practice: a 1:1 Student League Intern working with an informal settlement community leader in Johannesburg, South Africa; 1:1 – Agency of Engagement at work.
COLLECTIVE PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE

Doina Petrescu
atelier d'architecture autogérée (www.urbantactics.org)

atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) is a collective practice initiated by Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu, including architects, artists, urban planners, landscape designers, sociologists, students and residents living in Paris. Our practice promotes the re-appropriation and reinvention of collective space in the city through everyday life activities (gardening, cooking, chatting, DIY making, reading, debating, etc.), understood as creative urban practices. The aim is to create a network of self-managed places by encouraging residents to gain access to their neighbourhood and to appropriate and transform temporary available and underused spaces. The starting point was the realisation in 2001 of a temporary garden, made out of reclaimed materials on a derelict site located in La Chapelle area in the North of Paris, where we where living. This garden, called ECObox, has been supplemented with other mobile facilities (kitchen, library, media lab, DIY workshop) and has progressively extended into a platform for urban creativity that catalysed activities in the whole neighbourhood. The platform has moved several times in the area, using the same principles but taking different forms in different locations and involving new users. This approach continued in the Passage 56 project, which started in 2006 on a 200m2 empty plot located on St. Blaise Street, in a high-density residential area in the 20th arrondissement in Paris. This former passageway was considered non-constructible and therefore abandoned for many years. aaa designed and initiated uses for this space and developed ecological practices with the participation of residents. Passage 56 is a prototype of ‘open source’ architecture which experiments with forms of collectively produced space and pioneers unusual partnerships between institutions, professionals, local organisations and residents, that challenge the current stereotypical models of urban management. The project is socially and ecologically sustainable, being currently self-managed by residents of the area.

In our projects, we understand spatial production as a collective process which empowers architects and users alike. More than the spaces themselves, we are interested in the processes they generate, in how they work and who they involve in their making and using. Rather than buildings, we design agencies.

BEYOND PARTICIPATORY DESIGN: A COLLECTIVE DESIGN METHOD

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More than participatory, we defend that design should be collective. Participation in architecture and urban planning is usually understood as an opportunity for communities to take part in a process defined in advance by an external technical team. This means that the process is not to be discussed and eventually modified by participants, but is implicitly structured according to criteria and habitus of the technicians, overvaluing the kind of information, knowledge and tools they are familiar with. Therefore, the process will always be hierarchical and unequal, even if considered successful.

The collective design method developed by the research group is an attempt to overcome such inequity. Architects and other external agents involved in the design work as “catalysts”, responsible for keeping people motivated by providing appropriate information and really interactive tools. The community, on the other hand, comes into the process with their historical knowledge to be systematised and mobilised in the design process.

Despite having different responsibilities and technical knowledge, anyone has equal power, even to change the very structure of the process.

We have already tried out such a collective design method in different poor communities in urban favelas and outskirts, indigenous villages and quilombos (rural settlements founded in the colonial period by runaway slaves as a form of resistance, which had their right to collective landownership recognised by the Brazilian Constitution of 1988). A complete application of the method happened in 2013 in a quilombo called Sapé, near the city of Belo Horizonte in the southwest of Brazil. This people were about to receive a — standard and quite unsuitable — building facility as compensation for the impact of a power company’s enterprise in the surroundings. Since we were already doing field research there, almost naturally the association of dwellers discussed with us a possible project for a collective facility really fitting their needs, traditions and the existing space. We presented for discussion the steps of a possible collective design process considering their site-specificities. An action plan was finally agreed between the community and us, including a timetable so that anyone would know which and when decisions were to be made.

Most people in the quilombo Sapé are illiterate, receive almost no external information other than from television and are not used to any kind of abstract thinking. This meant that the method needed to be visually based and truly interactive. People were to be engaged in discussions by means of concrete action and not by means of abstract contemplation. We developed specific interfaces to achieve such interaction: a physical model of the existing space in which the community placed the recurrent and relevant events and those they wished happened there; graphical, symbolic, physical and digital tools to express and clarify spatial options and to allow each member of the community to formulate his or her own spatial ideas; a process of discussion and review of the demands in face of the spatial possibilities arisen out of the group; a kind of puzzle of wishes in fragmented pieces representing different spaces, etc. From this process a final design emerged whose author is the collectivity itself.

The interfaces and tactics used in Sapé were specific for the site and the group, but the premises of the method would be the same in any other urban or rural community with little or no access to the institutions that usually conceive the production of space — capital, politics, bureaucracy, and technical codes. The most important feature of the collective design method is the shared power amongst people involved, including the power of the community to change the very structure set up by catalysts.

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