

Co-Production of Public Space: Redefinition of Social Meaning Through Participative Laboratories

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Abstract:

This paper provides an outline of particular aspects of a research project evaluating the pilot development and trial of a new strategy using participative laboratories in an integrated process for the design of public space in France. The participative laboratory strategy was trialed in five projects realised with the support of the State and of the Region Nord – Pas de Calais.

The context of the present study was a series of pilot participative laboratories developed by the research team Habitat and Development (H&D), based at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL), Belgium. The projects related to the present study were at Avion, Haubourdin Centre, Haubourdin Petit Belgique, Saint Pol sur Mer, and Tourcoing. Other laboratories initiated at Bruay-la-Buissière and the Communauté de Communes du Val de Sambre were only partially completed, and are not included in the present study. A further laboratory, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode in Belgium, will offer comparisons with a laboratory in a different political and administrative system.

The pilot participative laboratories included in the present study involved politicians, bureaucrats, professional experts and lay citizens in multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary discussion-based design processes, and expanded the agenda of the design process beyond technical and logistics considerations to include local social, cultural and lifestyle issues. The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the impact of the new strategies on development of social meaning of public spaces and of the design process itself. This paper focuses on the innovative process of participative laboratories and its contribution to achievement of development of social meaning.

This paper focuses the proposed theme 2: research results concerning design and culture: architecture as a medium of cultural identity.

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

• Introduction

This paper provides an outline of particular aspects of a research project evaluating the pilot development and trial of a new strategy using participative laboratories in an integrated process for the design of public space in France. The participative laboratory strategy was trialed in five projects realised with the support of the State and of the Region Nord – Pas de Calais.

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• Nature of the problem

The participative laboratory strategy emerged from the Politique de la Ville, a broad strategic plan for the urban and social development of towns in France, that evolved gradually from a series of individual local initiatives commencing in the late 70's. The fundamental structures of the Politique de la Ville are instituted in the Decree 88-1015 of 28 Octobre 1988, which articulates national priorities for social and urban development.

From among the objectives of the Politique de la Ville stated in Article 1 of the Decree, the present study focused on two particular objectives in terms of *attributed social meaning*:

- *Promotion of programmes of social , economic and cultural development, aiming to improve life's conditions in cities and in urban agglomerations;*
- *Definition of new modes of association between the State, the territorial organizations, and the socio-economic partners.*

Adopting these policies as objectives represented one level of initiative: that of the State and the Region, who were responsible for effective organization at the local level to enact the Politique de la Ville. Establishing the Politique de la Ville as sustainable practice, however, required social initiatives at another level that would incorporate the intentions of the policies into everyday life (Anderson & Vieillard, 2000). For the 'chefs de projet' in charge of the Politique de la Ville in the local communities, this raised the question of *how could the 'chefs de projet' initiate and sustain involvement of the inhabitants in the thought and debate about the transformation of local public spaces?*

A multi-level research organization to address the question was established with the acronym FAR (*Formation – Action – Recherche pour la coproduction et la gestion de l'espace public*), supported by the Region and the State, financed under the Politique de la Ville, and organised, led and facilitated by H&D. FAR was developed as a multi-level organisation, providing laboratories at three levels:

- Participative laboratories for individual town projects (the cases studied)
- Inter-town (exchange) laboratories
- Follow-up research laboratories

- **The research question**

The research question for the present study was whether the first level participative laboratories, involving direct participation of residents in relation to planning of their own urban environment achieved the two focal political objectives. (This question also formed parts of the agenda of the other two levels of laboratories within FAR, but their performance and conclusions are outside the scope of the present paper).

The first of the two focal political objectives (*promotion of programmes of social , economic and cultural development, aiming to improve life's conditions in cities and in urban agglomerations*) was considered in relation to individual and group meanings attributed to the public space itself, and in relation to changes in meaning arising from proposed and realised redevelopment. In this respect, individuals and groups were expected to attribute various meanings and values to a public space or precinct, in terms of its use (eg, domestic, commercial, social interaction, symbolic) and its relationship to other spaces or precincts (inclusive, exclusive, adjoining, complementary), and in relation to time (eg, varying uses according to time of day, night), seasonal differences and changes over extended time scales (generations, social change, political change) (Maser et al, 1998; Lescieux-Macou, 2002).

The present study considered the different stakes of various stakeholders, about inevitable competition and conflict in relation to expectations about the present and future state of a public space or precinct, and about its contribution to quality of life. This paper looks particularly at the way changes in these various meanings varied by “negotiation” through the interactive laboratory process (Romice, 2001).

The second of the two objectives (*definition of new modes of association between the State, the territorial organizations, and the socio-economic partners*) was considered in relation to “political” meanings associated with perceived authority and responsibility for the space or precinct and the people and uses associated with it. In this respect, proposals for decentralization of the power and direct participation of citizens challenged the established orders of authority and responsibility (eg by tradition, by custom, by consensus or by appointment) (Lacaze, 1997; Radcliffe & Wingenbach, 2000).

This paper considers the way in which the participative process overcame various forms of inertia, reluctance and resistance, on the one hand to relinquishing of assumed authority and responsibility by some (eg by professional experts) and, on the other hand, to acceptance of some unfamiliar authority and responsibility by others (eg by lay residents), and how the process led to a redefinition of meanings of authority, responsibility, expertise and the planning process for the various participants (Declève, 1994; Madanipour, 2000).

- **Research method**

The study reviewed the pilot participative laboratory process in relation to the five projects realised with the support of the French State and of the Region Nord-Pas de Calais. Primary data on which this research was based were largely in the records accumulated by the research team Habitat and Development (H&D) as a consequence of their experiences in development of the pilot participative laboratories in relation to the five projects. Those records included statistics about participation, opinions and perceptions collected in the form of notes of meetings, pictures, plans and diagrams, and communication tools (discussed later in this paper). These data reflected the planning process and recorded sequences of outcomes.

The present study compared these outcomes with policies, directives and objectives reflected in formal public documents at the state, region and local levels. The comparisons were intended to indicate the extent to which outcomes had satisfied the formal agenda embodied in the policies.

The present study also compared elements of the process with the literature in the general domains of social science and philosophy. These comparisons were intended to indicate the extent to which the process, which itself was a social innovation, conformed with the general environment of social, cultural and political change.

Synthesis of the results of the two comparative studies then gave an indication of the extent to which the policies were “sustainable” in terms of the dynamic environment of social change.

- **The participative laboratories**

The participative laboratories approach to the design of the public space was a new strategy for an integrative process, intended as a multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary discussion process around planning issues and design proposals. The purpose was to facilitate opening-up of the planning agenda beyond strictly design issues of rational technical and logistics considerations, to include both general and local social, cultural and lifestyle issues, and to include consideration of the perceptions and expectations of the widest possible range of stakeholders in each particular location. The pilot participative laboratories developed by the H&D team took the form of a forum in which the design process was an outcome of meeting, communication, discussion, and confrontation, among participants with a diverse range of backgrounds, experience, social status and influence, and commitment to the locality and to changes that might impact on the locality.

The primary roles of the H&D team were facilitation of the events that constituted the process, and recording the process and progress. It was accepted, however, that the facilitator needed theoretical knowledge of mediation skills and familiarity with the technical languages in both the urban design and social science disciplines (Declève, 1994; Romice, 2001).

- **The laboratory process (démarche)**

The participative laboratories approach as conceived in the French experience was intended to be a manifestation of direct popular participation in decision making but inevitably retained some elements of the hierarchical rationalist social organization that created it. In this respect, the *Politique de la Ville* was acknowledged as the political power giving legitimacy to the right of the inhabitants, individually, or in groups or associations, to take an active part in the determination of the choices interesting them directly (Lescieux-Macou, 2001). Consequently, it is evident that some outcomes of the participative laboratories, run in the context of the *Politique de la Ville*, are obligatory applications of its (national) priorities in urban planning projects at the local level (Anderson & Vieillard-Baron, 2000).

Notwithstanding this intrusion of national policies into local considerations, it is apparent that the laboratories were genuinely participative. Each laboratory consisted of three general categories of

participants: technical experts, elected representatives and inhabitants: The participation of all categories was considered necessary to give social meaning and legitimacy to the process.

- **Inhibitions**

The study indicated that discussion and debate were initially inhibited by inertias that reflected several customary hierarchical “peck order” authority structures (Warren, 1996; Madanipour, 2000). Customary processes of consultation allowed lay citizens participation only at an advanced stage in a project’s development, inhibiting their opportunity to contribute to the definition of objectives or the characteristics of the outcomes, and thereby denying them recognition as stakeholders.

This customary process promoted several inhibitory structures. A political hierarchy was dominant and was tacitly acknowledged in the form of a shared expectation that the most politically-senior person present would provide leadership by controlling the agenda and by controlling the contributions from those present. This expectation resulted in reluctance of participants to comment until invited to do so, and initial stalemating of discussion (Touraine, 1988).

A second inhibitory structure was a “professional” hierarchical structure that imposed itself in the form of a shared expectation that professional expert specialists would provide leadership in all technical issues, and would be subject to limited questioning or challenge only by politically-senior participants. In this case, the expert specialists were also reluctant to comment outside their respective specialisations, and lay people or those with lower political status were reluctant to question or challenge the experts directly. Questions and comments would be “filtered” through participants of higher status (ie, indirectly) and would have no legitimacy until they were “endorsed” and presented by higher authority.

A third (and perhaps the most crucial) inhibitory structure was a “parochial” structure (in some respects an anti-hierarchical structure) manifested in an expectation among the local community that, firstly, “outsiders” had no right to participate in discussion about local issues (particularly local social and cultural issues) and, secondly, that only the most senior resident (eg, the mayor) had the right to speak publicly on local issues. Thus, this structure imposed an expectation that local issues would not be discussed in the presents of outsiders, including politicians, bureaucrats and experts who were not immediate residents, resulting in strong tendency to discuss local issues “in camera” and to have only “resolutions” presented formally on behalf of the lay citizens.

Ad-hoc strategies were not sufficiently powerful to overcome the entrenched inertia against open discussion and debate. Various tentative models of “collaborative organisation” were applied, but all failed to achieve adequate participation.

- **Facilitating effective participation**

The three inhibitory structures were apparently mutually-reinforcing, and initially provided a powerful inertia that challenged the key policies of the Politique de la Ville (Healey, 2000). Anticipation of this inertia had been the basis for establishment of FAR’s multi-level structure.

A “research laboratory” organisational model was adopted to neutralise the hierarchical structures and overcome the inertias. A laboratory would allow free discussion and debate, but as a legitimate process, under the auspices and supervision of the State and Region. Inter-town exchange laboratories were also introduced, to stimulate dialogue and debate about local urban and social issues, and “Follow-up” research laboratories were introduced to stimulate discussion

and comparative review of the effectiveness of “local” participative laboratories in contributing to local urban and social development.

- **Sub-strategies (tools)**

Several sub-strategies (communication tools) were adopted in each laboratory to overcome, or at least minimise, the impact of the inhibitory structures. The communication tools included a connection bulletin, exhibition panels, and a guide aiming to explain the purpose and method of the participative laboratory strategy. The several tools were co-produced with the participants in the various laboratories of FAR and finalised by the “independent” facilitators of H&D (who were outsiders but with official status). The tools presented development of the “experience” of the laboratory, including theoretical and practical aspects, official policy and professional views of the process, and proposals intended for discussion.

The intent of the tools, particularly the graphic tools (including exhibition panels, plans, diagrams and other pictorial media) was as a primary medium for communication of information (Maser et al, 1998). Plans, maps, diagrams and other graphic media, however, are essentially collections of ciphers representing abstract ideas, and often not understood (or mis-understood) by people who are not used to reading them or who are not familiar with the particular symbolisms used. They are subject to multiple interpretations and mis-interpretations according to what is “read into” them by various individuals. In this respect, even architects, engineers and surveyors are unlikely to reach a common interpretation of each others plans. This suggests that the graphic media were of limited value in direct contribution to the communication, particularly two-way discussion between people of various backgrounds (Reed, 2000).

The present study indicates, however, that perhaps the most important contributions made by the graphic tools was that they provided a focus for discussion and debate. In this respect the graphic and print media were accessible to all participants in each laboratory and served as a catalyst that stimulated discussion at all levels in each of the hierarchical structures and facilitated true interactive participation (Tang, 1989; Emery, 1993).

The graphic media therefore appear to have provided a primary mechanism for circumventing the three inhibitory structures by acting as neutral ground for discussion between various participants, regardless of custom. It is also possible (but less clear) that the print media tools (bulletin, guide, etc) also contributed more as catalysts to discussion and debate than as direct information channels, and that they, also, served to circumvent the inhibitory structures (Emery, 1993; Reed, 2000).

- **Interaction, education, empowerment and participation**

There is considerable evidence that the customary inhibitions were not eliminated, but that they were sufficiently diminished to allow effective discussion and debate that extended well beyond technical and logistic agenda into local social, cultural and lifestyle issues related to the respective project. The graphic media in particular provided a “neutral ground” on which residents (in particular) could ask for explanation, raise challenges and objections, and suggest alternatives.

Further, it is evident that successive generations of graphics, incorporating suggestions and indicating their implications and consequences, stimulated further involvement in discussion and debate, and encouraged more comprehensive engagement of all participants with each other and with the process as a whole (Emery, 1993).

There is also considerable evidence that the enhanced discussion and engagement on a broader agenda was both informative and educational to all participants (Lescieux-Macou, 2001). In this

respect, there was a clear shift, from entrenched individual and group *disinterest* in other people's agenda, to increased *awareness* of the implications of one person's agenda on another, and on to general *understanding* of the whole framework of agenda. This shift from disinterest through awareness to understanding is clearly recognisable as bona fide educational advancement (Radcliff & Wingenbach, 2000).

This educational advancement can be seen to have empowered all participants to contribute to discussion and debate beyond their customary (inhibited) agenda, and to make more complex suggestions and more comprehensive contributions to discussion and debate (Emery, 1993). The professional experts can be seen to have extended their contributions beyond technical issues to informed engagement in debate on both local social and cultural issues and broader policy issues. Similarly, lay residents can be seen to have been empowered to make informed contributions into technical and policy issues outside their traditional local focus (Declève & Forray-Claps, 1994-1995).

There was also a reciprocal effect of progressively increased recognition and acceptance of contributions on all issues from all participants in each laboratory. This increased recognition of others' perceptions and agenda reinforced the empowerment of individual participants. This reciprocal education and empowerment process can be seen to have enhanced the individuals' communication skills, but also to have enhanced the planning and design abilities of the professional experts, and the political skills of the politicians and bureaucrats (Reed, 2000). It can also be seen to have achieved meta-objectives, in education in citizenship, political and strategic decision-making of all participants, and social development and integration of the respective community (Lescieux-Macou, 2001).

It is evident that this empowerment of individuals and groups was progressively transferred to the respective laboratory as a whole. Consequently, the laboratory itself was empowered to address a widened field of technical and social issues, and to recognise and resolve a wider range of opportunities and consequences, challenging the so-called "civil pact" aiming at finding a minimal solution that would achieve a reciprocal tolerance (Declève, 1994)

• **Conclusions**

This study indicated that the participative laboratory strategy extends the boundaries of the design process and challenges conventional (eg, authoritarian, paternalistic) models of public consultation (Emery, 1993). The study also showed that the participative laboratory model developed by H&D within the FAR framework is very effective in contributing to the two targeted policy objectives, that is, to:

- *Promotion of programmes of social , economic and cultural development, aiming to improve life's conditions in cities and in urban agglomerations;*
- *Definition of new modes of association between the State, the territorial organizations, and the socio-economic partners;*

The strategy makes a significant contribution to the first objective by facilitating expansion of the planning agenda to include social and cultural issues, including quality of life issues, at the general and local levels, and by allowing all agenda to be debated and resolved by consensus (Reed, 2000). This strategy can, therefore, also be seen to contribute significantly to the second objective by providing a viable alternative mode of association between the State, the territorial organizations, and the socio-economic partners for the purpose of urban management, planning and development (Touraine, 1988; Lacaze, 1997).

The process also provides an educational outcome in the form of increased *and shared* awareness of all participants of the extent and complexity of the planning and logistics framework surrounding urban management, planning and redevelopment, and (reciprocally) of the extent and complexity of the impact of management, planning and redevelopment decisions on the social and cultural fabric. This increased shared awareness empowers all participants (including politicians, bureaucrats, professional experts and lay citizens) to re-define their individual positions and contributions to progress in both material development and in advancement of quality of urban life (Healey, 2000).

These extensive re-definitions are consistent with general trends that characterise postmodern society by “fractalising” former “factual” institutional and organisational structures, structuralist processes and rationalist, hierarchical states of mind. The subsequent redistribution of authority and responsibility is consistent with the general direction of change in Europe from representative democracy towards participative democratic frameworks (Ricoeur, 1985; Emery, 1993). and can therefore be expected to be increasingly viable and sustainable in the climate of social reform pervading Europe.

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