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Mega trends: Creative participation - Combining education and social interaction for public space planning

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Abstract

The Public space planning should be accompanied by a thorough understanding of the contemporary social dynamics of the place and the implications it has for the people who inhabit these places. In this sense, participatory planning forms an integral part of future planning processes, especially when dealing with public spaces. This research aims to stress the importance of creative participation as part of spatial planning processes. It further investigate the role and added value of incorporating educational structures into participatory approaches, by capturing some best-practices where university students played an active role in community participation processes linked to public space planning. Creative participation methods, along with creative approaches to conduct participation as a direct result of student involvement, proofed to be a useful tool when dealing with public space planning.

Keywords: *Creative participation, public space planning, student involvement*

1. Introduction

The contemporary social dynamics of places, as well as the implications it has for the people who inhabit these places, are some of the issues that needs to be thoroughly understood when considering the planning of public spaces. Participatory planning, in this sense, forms an integral part of future planning processes, especially when dealing with public space planning. Recently the notion of participatory planning approaches were even more emphasized as part of broad sustainable development thinking, simultaneously questioning the traditional approach towards participatory planning and the effectiveness and success thereof. As such, creative participation approaches and methods are gaining importance (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014) especially when considering successful public space planning and place making. Educational structures,

such as the involvement of students in the participatory planning process, can play a central role within realising creative participatory planning, and such should not be underestimated. Engaging learners in the excitement of science, and teaching them to become creative problem solvers have long been goals of science education reformers. But the means to achieve these goals, especially methods to promote creative thinking in scientific problem solving, have not become widely known or used (DeHaan, 2009). Nor has the value and vice versa benefit be stressed, of including students in the participatory planning process. This paper illustrate that such approaches can also contribute to the broader planning process and be beneficial to local authority planning, when students form part of interactive workshops and structured community planning processes, addressing and planning of public spaces and answering actual problems within modern environments.

2. Methodology

This paper captured case studies where university students played an active role in community participation processes linked to public space planning. The identified spaces and participation processes formed part of the North West Europe (NWE) Interreg IVB project VALUE Added (Value+). Various authorities from three different countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany), as well as universities and civil society organizations conducted research and experiments to see how cities can best integrate the top-down approach of policy makers and the bottom-up approach of local stakeholders. The objective was to research and improve the social cohesion in selected areas, boost the local economy and character of an area, and set future developments in motion that meet the needs of local communities. Three case studies were captured, illustrating the practical approach to creative participation approaches within different contexts and cultural environments.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Participation as part of spatial planning

Conyers and Hills (1984) defined planning as a continuous process that involves making decisions or choices about alternative ways of using available resources, with the aim of achieving particular goals in the future and ensuring quality of life to all citizens. Planning thus entails decision-making and problem solving, and consensus building among the stakeholders (Cooksey & Kikula, 2005:3). Two basic approaches have emerged to assist in this regard, namely the top-down approach and the bottom-up planning-approach. Smith (2003:22) refers to these approaches as favouring “special interests” and “public interests” respectively. The extent of community involvement during planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a programme or a project, distinguishes the top-down from the bottom-up; commonly referred to as participatory planning (Cooksey & Kikula, 2005:3). Participation of multi-stakeholders in the urban and regional planning is an accepted phenomenon in current day practice, though the idea is not new (Roy and Ganguly, 2009:1; Cilliers et al., 2011).

The challenges regarding the level of stakeholder involvement is well documented in literature, referring to amongst others the participation ladder, illustrating the different levels of participation, without focussing on quality or applicability of the different levels as it is subject to each individual situation (Breman et al., 2008:26). The complexity of participation however, lies in the diversity of the members it tries to accommodate, a critical issue to consider when planning public spaces for public use. The more diverse the group, the more complex the participation process and input will be (Breman et al., 2008:17). The growing importance of public participation as part of spatial planning processes, stressed the need to ensure such approaches are meaningful, transparent, inclusive and successful. The era of basic questionnaires or short interviews has long gone. Comprehensive participatory planning now entails more creative, innovative and out-of-the-box approaches.

3.2 Creativity within participation

The importance of creativity and innovation in addressing the economic, environmental and social crises has been recognized in various policy discussions (Cachia, 2010:9). Creativity is perceived as the prime source for innovation, which in turn is acknowledged as the main driver of sustainable economic development (Council of the European Union, 2008, 2009). In terms of participatory planning processes, this is also true. The notion of partnerships between students, communities and authorities represents the possibility of an authentic and constructive dialogue which offers the opportunity for more reflective feedback (Alaniska et al., 2006:15) and innovative spatial planning. From a practical point of view, student involvement could considerably improve assessment practices as it encourages the identification of new quality criteria (Alaniska et al., 2006: 18). The notion of creative participation (refer to Figure 1) lies within the borders of expertise (driven by knowledge), creative thinking skills (underlined by flexibility and imagination) and motivation (linked to intrinsic values) (Adams, 2005:5), all attributes that students can bring to the “planning table” to enhance the creative participatory planning approach.

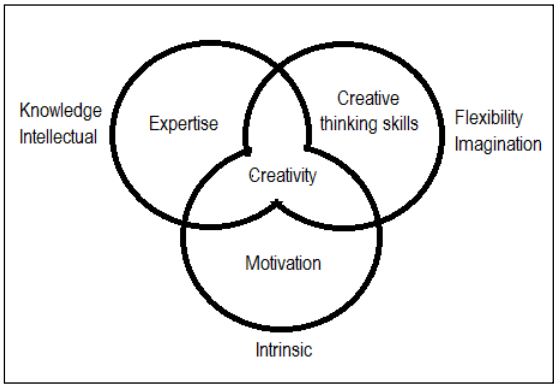

Figure 1: Three components of creativity
Source: Adams (2005:5).

This paper aimed to further evaluate the role that students can play as part of the participatory planning processes, as catalyst for creative involvement.

3.3 Practical investigations and case studies

3.3.1 Case study 1: Amersfoort (The Netherlands) do-it-yourself toolbox

The municipality of Amersfoort initiated a spatial planning project to improve the area east of the city of Amersfoort in the Netherlands. The area was primarily used for recreation and agricultural purposes, and residents were not in favour of the top-down redevelopment planning proposals made by authorities. The diversity of stakeholders created challenges in terms of participatory planning, especially in terms of complexity of finding mutual ground between stakeholders. Stakeholder had too many diverse needs and visions for the redevelopment of the area, ranging from recreational usages, to enhancing the natural character of the area, to improving water systems, to prohibiting any form of new developments (Brandenhorst & Timmermans, 2014:3). Most stakeholders agreed that the quietness of the area was one of its strength. The increase of accessibility to the area, as proposed by the local authority development plan (increasing through traffic, a bicycle tunnel and a local train station) (Brandenhorst & Timmermans, 2014:5) was not supported. In an attempt to find common ground, students were introduced to the planning process, acting as catalyst of creative participation. Six Garden and Landscape Architecture students of VHL University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands) collaborated with the municipality of Amersfoort, official provincial planning departments, farmers and community members in a participatory planning project from November 2013 till January 2014. The students partake in the participation planning process as “objective” outsiders. They listened to the viewpoint of all stakeholders and analysed the proposed authority plan. The students proposed to use agriculture as a means to improve the quality of the area and quality of life, as it was found that the nature is isolated and scattered across the area. The students made a master plan for the area and the details were captured in a do-it-yourself toolbox (book) for residents to use and implement themselves (Brandenhorst & Timmermans, 2014:8). It captured ideas for local residents and farmers to make groves, tree avenues and wood banks on the sand ridges, in order to enhance the agricultural character and strengthen the identity of the area.

The do-it-yourself toolbox was found not to be a blueprint that is being dictated to the area, but rather an invitation for the stakeholders to strengthen the story and the purpose of the landscape. (Brandenhorst & Timmermans, 2014:8). It was concluded that authority rules and regulations only arouse resistance amongst local residents and stakeholders, and that an approach, such as in this case study, created by an objective party, was more successful in meeting bottom-up and top-down approaches. Furthermore, the students were considered a neutral body and catalyst of creative participation, enabling and reinforcing conversations between the authorities and the residents to find the mutual ground.

3.3.2 Case study 2: Menen (Belgium) dare-to-dream-master plan

Menen, a densely built city with many small row houses and small back gardens in Belgium, seemed to be designed for cars, not people, resulting in a lack of character (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:4). The authorities of Menen aimed to use a bottom-up approach with the redevelopment of the city and as such, an international workshop was held in May 2014 to develop a new Master plan for the city of Menen. Menen aimed for the "designing the city together" approach, creating new plans in collaboration with citizens, companies and other stakeholders in the region (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:5). The broad objective was to focus on the redevelopment of the Geluwebeek, a stream running to the north and east of the city centre.

Eight students and two lecturers of the department of Garden and Landscape Design of the VHL University of Applied Sciences, together with a student of University College Ghent (Belgium), were asked to identify challenges and opportunities, develop a long-term strategy for new green infrastructure, and propose new designs for key public spaces (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:3). Students started with identifying and interviewing key stakeholders, which included organisations such as the local hospital and schools, local businesses and environmental organisations. A website was launched, along with a Facebook page, and a successful conversation café was organized where the citizens of Menen could discuss the main issues and concerns with the students, in an informal setting. This was followed by the international student workshop and design charrette (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:5), where students were divided in groups and assigned to different topics.

Attractive 3D drawings and images were created to illustrate that the Geluwebeek was a forgotten treasure of the city, waiting to be rediscovered (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:9) and students emphasized the ecological, recreational, and educational functions. Local stakeholders were at first sceptical about these proposal but students continuously reminded them of creative approaches to spatial planning and possibilities and opportunities to be unlocked within this area (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:11).

The proposed plans were found to be no blueprint for the future, but a challenge to the city of Menen to make clear development choices. The local authorities were pleased that the students had managed to disclose the potential of their city in only a few days and were able to think outside the box. Stakeholders agreed that this approach to participatory planning enabled shared vision and they stated "You are daring this city to dream!" With their ideas and images, the students have motivated more people to take an interest in designing the city together, both inside and outside the organisation. (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014:12). The role of students within the participatory process enabled a quick transformation from analysis to design. It was found that student workshops are ideal to get fresh input from young people who have different perspectives and feel free to draw their own conclusions, not constrained by opinions of the organisations or budget and legal constrains.

3.3.3 Case study 3: Stuttgart (Germany) creating-a-wider-view

The Fils valley is located to the southeast of Stuttgart and the landscape is dominated by infrastructure and factory buildings from different eras. Some of the older factory buildings have been demolished over the last decade and in order to retain and promote what is left of the industrial heritage, a project called "Industrie Kultur im Filstal" (industrial culture in the Fils valley) was initiated. The project further aimed to combine industrial heritage, nature and recreation in an attempt to strengthen the identity of the region, improve living conditions and enhance social capital (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014b:4). The participatory planning approach was complex due to the diversity of stakeholders, including 16 different authorities in the Fils valley, the county, companies that own the industrial heritage, local historians and other experts, and the residents of the region. Eight students and one lecturer of the department of Garden and Landscape Design of VHL University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands) developed design strategies for an industrial heritage route in the Fils valley in collaboration with local authorities and residents of the area (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014b:3), in July 2014. Studio work, brainstorming and group work, along with presentations and discussions (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014b:6) formed part of the participatory planning process. Students contained their ideas in two plans. The first plan focused on the larger scale of the landscape and the visual relationship between the industrial heritage sites. The second plan focused on a variation in recreational areas on the riverside (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014b:8) illustrated with photomontage images that visualised the students' ideas and viewpoints to the local authorities and residents.

The importance of visual communication methods were stressed in this case study. Smartphone apps, the internet and local media were found to be supportive infrastructure to creatively communicate proposals and plans to local residents and promote the industrial heritage route. It was found that the student workshop contributed to the participatory process and widened their (local authority and local residents) point of view (Van Gestel & Timmermans, 2014b:11). The involvement of students were seen as the catalyst for creative spatial planning.

4. Conclusions and Practical Implications

The VALUE Added case studies presented in this research proofed the importance of creative participatory planning process to enhance successful, meaningful and inclusive spatial planning. It was evident that student involvement had several positive contributions in this regard, ranging from being a catalyst for creative planning and conversation, to quick transformations from analysis stages to design stages, to widening view points and to finding mutual ground between top-down structures and bottom-up needs. The following table captures an analysis of case studies captured in this research, illustrating tools for an integrative approach, student contributions in participatory approaches, and the added value of including creative participation as part of spatial planning processes.

Table 4: Analysis of case studies of integrative approaches and creative participation

Case study	Tool for integrating bottom-up and top-down approaches	Student contribution in participatory process	Added value of creative participation
Amersfoort case study (The Netherlands)	Do-it-yourself toolbox enabling local residents to be part of the planning process and take ownership for the environment	Acting as catalyst when conversation between authorities and local communities came to deadlock	Continuous communication between stakeholders captured actual community needs to be translated into development plans.
Menen case study (Belgium)	Dare to dream master plan disclosing potential of the city, not constrained by budget or legal constrains	Quick transformation from analysis to design. Students motivated people to take interest in designing the city together	Out-of-the-box thinking and creative designs contributing to the identity and quality of the environment and place.
Stuttgart case study (Germany)	Creating a wider view and including visual communication methods	Student contribution widened the local authority and local residents point of view	Introduction of innovative approaches to planning transformed way of thinking and planning.

Student involvement was found to be an effective tool to ensure creative participation in the case studies presented. The objective nature of the student contribution within the development process enabled all stakeholders (authorities and local residents) to consider the challenges and potential of the specific area from a new perspective, focusing on mutual gain and not on private gain and private interest. Stakeholders were more open to discuss their views and development visions with a neutral body, and in return students were more open to integrative approaches, thinking out of the box and addressing the challenges in a creative manner.

The student involvement was the catalyst for bridging top-down approaches and bottom-up approaches in a flexible manner, as illustrated in the following figure.

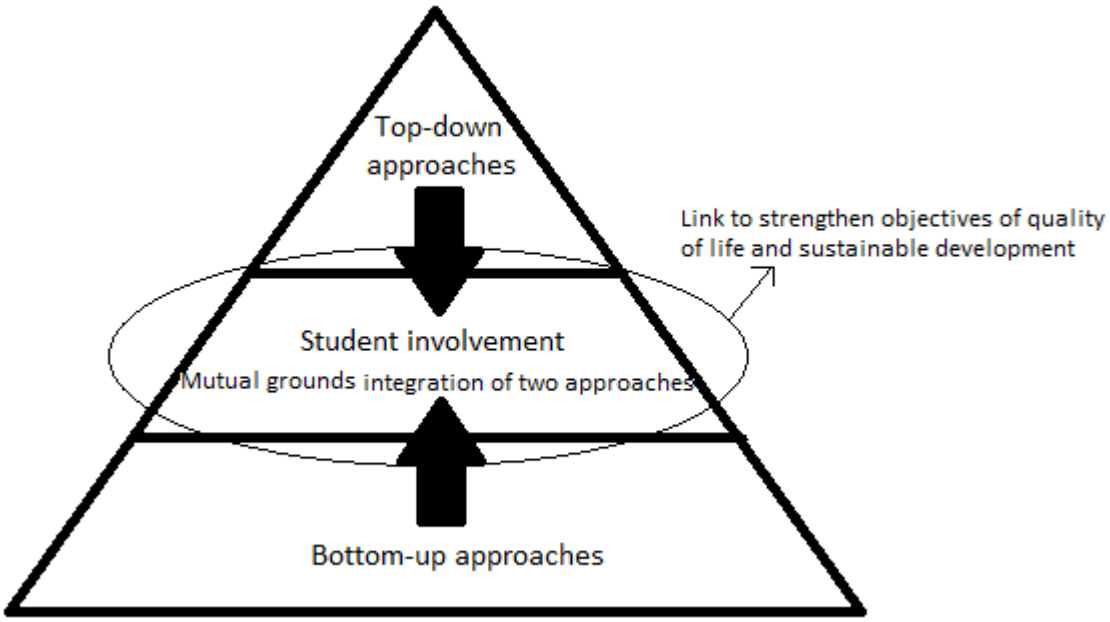

Figure 2: Student involvement as catalyst to link bottom-up and top-down structures.

4.1 Vice versa benefits

The student involvement enabled creative participation, but a vice versa benefit were also evident as the local authorities and students all benefited from this collaboration. Local authorities benefited in terms of a fresh viewpoint and development focus, which they interpreted as a source of inspiration. The ideas and scenarios were perceived as realistic and well-grounded with theory, initiating possibilities. Students benefitted as they were introduced to alternative methods of planning, focussing on social aspects and methods of developing scenarios. Students approached the planning problem in a creative and flexible manner, not constrained by practicalities or restrictions in terms of financing models or political agendas. Authority members were more open to the ideas and thoughts presented by the students, students could say certain things that local authority members would not have dared to say towards one another. Simultaneously students benefited from the interactive approach and experienced the planning and participatory processes first hand. Creativity was promoted by this approach of integrative participatory planning between students and professional authorities.

Participatory planning forms an integral part of future planning processes, especially when considering the social dynamics of places and the unique needs of people inhabiting such spaces. Creative participation is a crucial part of modern spatial planning processes. Incorporating student involvement as part of participatory approaches are evident to enhance creative participation approaches, and the benefit and contribution of student interaction, should not be underestimated. Rather, it should be promoted to include students in planning

practice, considering the open-minded, creative and flexible approach they thrive on. As such, creative participation methods, along with creative approaches to conduct participation as a direct result of student involvement, proofed to be a useful tool when dealing with public space planning.

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