Rethinking Participatory Design: Tools for Modelling Community Potentials

Adam Liu

Stephen Marinelli

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“What we need instead is an area of freedom to help creativity. What we have been doing for years in our office is to go to the place and ask the people to help us in organising their landscape. We are the architects, and I don’t want to escape from that responsibility of being or deciding etc., but I do not want to decide alone.”

- LUCIEN KROLL
I

PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURE

ARGUMENTS
PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURE DEFINITION
Lucien Kroll

One of the first architects to start the participation movement in the 1970s was Lucien Kroll. His most famous project, known as La Meme, became an alternative method to approach the design process. Successful in its campaign. The students came to Kroll seeking a new alternative to approach the monotonous design proposed by the university. The evolving physical model became a record of the work and design methodology. This process became part of the final product.

The work of La Meme became a symbol for a new type of architecture that influenced others to adopt participatory methods into their own designs. This eventually developed into a new category of self-build design. In which the users are the ones who develop and design their own projects, and the architect provides the tools, means, and methods as guidance to achieve their own vision. We looked at this project because of its outcome on the discipline of Architecture, as well as how successful it became to set out its goals. The collaborative model becomes a catalyst for our own framework of design.
PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURE

THE MEDICAL FACULTY AT WOLUWE-SAINT LAMBERT, ‘LA MÉMÉ’

COLLECTIVE MODEL
PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURE

Giancarlo de Carlo

A real metamorphosis is necessary to develop new characteristics in the practice of architecture and new behaviour pattes in its authors; therefore all barriers between builders and users must be abolished, so that building and using become two different parts of the same planning process.

To discover the real needs of the users therefore means exposing and acknowledging their rights to have things and their rights to express themselves; it means provoking a direct participation and measuring oneself with all the subversive consequences that this implies; it means questioning all the traditional value systems which, since they were built on non-participation, must be revised or replaced when participation becomes part of the process, unleashing energies that have not yet been explored. The phase of formulating the hypothesis corresponds technically to what is called in authoritarian planning as 'the project'. But in authoritarian planning this means translating into organisational and morphological structures, functional and expressive objectives that have been defined once and for all - or which are easily frozen because they follow an institutional, and therefore predictable logic of behavior and representation.

"Architecture needs to be understood within a broader framework than the surface of the image, both in terms of engaging with context and in terms of engaging with all the senses, through time and experience of use."

Unlike authoritarian planning, which imposes final solutions from the start, process planning formulates a sequence of hypotheses aiming at participation. Each hypothesis enlarges the field of forces already created by the preceding hypothesis, and therefore brings about its own replacement by a successive and yet more appropriate hypothesis. Afterwards it starts up again.

Process planning promotes growth and flexibility.

If an authoritarian plan were really flexible and open to growth, it would become possible for everyone to manipulate and understand it; thus it would lose those characteristics of ineffableness and immaculateness which sustain and hide it's classist purpose.

"The phase of formulating the hypothesis corresponds technically to what is called in authoritarian planning as 'the project'. But in authoritarian planning this means translating into organisational and morphological structures, functional and expressive objectives that have been defined once and for all - or which are easily frozen because they follow an institutional, and therefore predictable logic of behavior and representation."

- GIANCARLO DE CARLO
MUF

Founded in London in 1994, muf names their work as “a collaborative practice of art and architecture committed to public realm projects.” Their work consists of urban designs where the processes of planning are left open to include the voices of others. In their projects, spatial arrangements and material resolutions are often negotiated through meetings between the public and private. Muf often creates frameworks for further action rather than specific outcomes. This methodology to their approach in designs allows the support of small claims to space, through small interjections rather than large overarching “solutions.”
Cedric Price

Whilst most of Price’s work is unbuilt, he left a large impact on contemporary architecture. Through his ideas and unique projects, he aimed to challenge the concept of time and use of buildings within architecture. Through a series of interventions that were both adaptable and impermanent. His legacy still leaves influence to today.

The Fun Palace was designed for the theatre director, Joan Littlewood. His goal for the theatre was to set up the audience themselves as the players in the design scheme. This constantly changing learning environment put the occupants in control. This later became a heavy influence for the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The Fun Palace aimed to showcase the young minds at the time through their work and designs to present the ideas of the future and youth to become the next generation.
Potteries Thinkbelt

Price’s Thinkbelt aimed to harness the potential of the emerging economy and new knowledge of the time to rejuvenate the crippling and unused manufacturing land in Britain. As a critique of many universities that were being built at the time, Price’s Thinkbelt proposed a traveling university, one that would revive the redundant and unused railway and manufacturing sites within the area to create a system of prefabricated units or pods to hold the programs of the university. This suggested a flexible system, one not bound to a site, or specific program, but could adapt and change depending on the users needs. Price focused on an architecture that was more anticipatory rather than reactionary. He empowered the users as collaborators to encourage a participatory design methodology.
PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURE

DEFINITION
Definition

During the 1970’s, many architects challenged the balance of power in the relationship between the architect and end user. This meant a rethinking of the design methodology, and a new role of the architect within society.

In Vitruvius’s Ten Books on Architecture, Vitruvius states in the first book that the role of the architect in society is one who can do all. A person who has complete control over all aspects of a design integrated into society, with no other influences to change or manipulate the architect’s vision. Today, this is to be challenged, not that this has been proven to be inadequate or uneffective, but it simply does not work well in today’s society. As a result, we formulate a new definition of the Architect. One that relinquishes complete control over a design scheme but incorporates the ideas from the community. This gives power to the people. In Arnstien’s Ladder we can see the different degrees of citizen participation. From Citizen Control to Manipulation, we must find a new place within the ladder to situate the role of the architect away from complete top-down manipulation, and bottom up grass roots design, that is complete void of the architect.

From this, there is a negotiation of control and power. Who controls who in the dominance of designing the social constructs we see today. The loss of this control causes discomfort to most architects. However, this loss of control should not be seen as a threat to the profession, but as an inevitable condition that must be worked with in a positive manner. Anticipated, and projected.

“If agents are indeed to allow themselves to act otherwise, then the knowledge that they bring to the table must be negotiable, flexible and, above all, shared with others. Agents act not alone but as part of a mutual enterprise.”

- Anthony Giddens

In Henri Lefebvre’s 1974 book, The Production of Space, he redefines social space as a social product, that production is a shared enterprise. He argues that social space is a dynamic space; its production continues over time and is not fixed to a single moment of completion. From this, we shift the focus on the static objects to construct the foreground of architectural production to a more dynamic continuous cycle. Lastly, he argues that social space is an intractably political space. People live so much of their lives in this space, and so an architect has to be continuously alert of the effects of the space on those who will inhabit it.
I

PARTICIPATION IN ARCHITECTURE

CONTENTION
Thesis Statement:

The role of the architect in urban design has been constantly redefined. From top-down masterplans, to bottom-up planning, the architect has constantly been trying to fit in with or stand out from their peers within the conversations of designing for the urban public. At this moment, Syracuse, New York, is approaching a considerable urban transformation. After many years of proposals, the city is closing in on a design for tearing down the viaduct of Interstate 81 and creating a commercially-developed central boulevard. Additionally, Syracuse University is overhauling a large majority of its properties under the direction of a 20 year-long campus masterplan, developed by the architecture firm Sasaki, and much of the Southside neighborhood of Syracuse is facing the possibility of gentrification.

This thesis aims to provide an alternative method of community engagement through the process of participatory model-making. Rather than only seeking out community voices for surveys and data collection, this project’s goal is to empower a community’s sense of ownership through collective design. To quote Lucien Kroll, a notable architect known for his focus on participatory design, said “What we need instead is an area of freedom to help creativity...and ask the people to help us in organizing their landscape. We are the architects, and I don’t want to escape from that responsibility, but I do not want to decide alone.”

The methods of this project will be tested and examined in collaboration with students from Dr. King Elementary School in Syracuse, New York. By designing a participatory method for model-making, the project will involve students in the early stages of urban design and make it more educationally and socially accessible.

Historically, top-down approaches have distanced architects and urban planners from the communities and neighborhoods they are directly impacting with their designs. Alternatively, bottom-up methods are passive at times and dissolve the role of the architect. By engaging the community and facilitating more open communication, we strive for this thesis project to serve as a model for the necessary levels of research and first-hand experience by architects that should be present in urban design.
II

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

PROCESS
This thesis project examined Mumbai’s formal and informal components. The interdependence of each was measured through the lens of matter and how it is hacked, recycled, and repurposed. By documenting the city’s trash systems, religious practices, social practices, etc., a need for proper education, security, and sanitation was identified. The thesis contended for a new hybrid typology that brought together the layers of program that are embedded in the flows of the informal economies.

The project also took direct feedback from the community it was serving. By bringing a series of simple masses and allowing residents to rearrange them within a block scheme, the students were able to experience how community members viewed the different types of city buildings. The students also held workshops involving younger residents to take part in imagining designs. The community designs, however, do not seem to be well integrated into the final design, as the architectural language and formal moves seem to follow the designer’s logic and not the community’s.
What if? A Narrative Process for Re-Imaging the City

This project was based in North Sheffield in South Yorkshire, United Kingdom. It was experimental in the way it aimed to fill the gaps that were present in community engagement. The project aimed to create what it calls a “soft utopia.” This combines the visionary statement of the architect with the methods of grounded knowledge based on political, historical, and local information from the community. The contributors used this information and directed residents to comment on a series of collaged perspectives.

The primary goals of the project were to connect the natural environment with the built environment. This was done through joining green spaces with key routes to community centers, reflecting the identity of each particular neighborhood, and using the green web to support local facilities and enterprises. After winning the commission to develop the community vision for Parkwood Springs Steering Group, a clear participatory process with a specific plan emerged and gave the designers a framework to underpin the development of the community’s ideas.

This project serves as an important precedent for the larger processes that are involved in community design, however, it falls short in imagining new ways of engaging community input.
CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

NORTH SHEFFIELD RESIDENTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

PROJECTIVE COLLAGE OF NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN
**Love Letter to The Crump**

This project showcases a collective “love letter” to the Crump Theater in Columbus, Indiana. Borderless Studio first gained interest in the Crump Theater when there were conversations over what should be done with the building, whether it be preserving it as a historical site, or tearing it down. As a way to show its impact on the community, residents of Columbus were asked to write down all the things they remember and love about the Crump in a letter. Then, the words were transformed into images through a simple graphic language. The combined characters and images were then printed on a large vinyl curtain and hung outside the theater.

This project successfully engages a community and gives them the tools necessary to create a meaningful design. While the letters and inputs ranged widely from people’s different experiences, the consistency of color and form provided a cohesive product in the end. The refinement of the color palette and limited variability of two-dimensional form pushes community members to think outside of the box and use the pieces to reimagine their design.
A Gateway to the Campus - B.Arch Thesis 1987

This thesis proposed a new master plan for Syracuse University. It used the Syracuse University campus as a model to research the American college campus, not only as a type of architecture planning, but also as a reflection of the american educational system. Through a series of comparative analyses to other college campuses, Syracuse was given a new framework to develop by.

Like many other thesis projects of this time period, there is little to no consideration of the larger urban and social implications that a masterplan at such a large scale has. Syracuse University has developed through time, failing to acknowledge its surrounding communities, as seen by the considerations of this project.
This thesis project was concerned with the idea of walkability at the scale of the city, neighborhood, block, street, space, building, and detail. The project aimed at combining planned civic conditions with fine-grained, bottom-up developments. The primary design components were physically walkable infrastructure and dense mixed-use development. It claimed to focus on socioeconomic equity, and building upon extant local identity.

No matter the claims of the project, there was an absence of community engagement, let alone feedback. For a large scale development scheme, especially in one of Syracuse’s most historically significant districts, the lack of acknowledgement of existing community life is troubling. The vision of the architect lacks the inclusion of certain social and cultural that are essential to creating strong community developments.
CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

OUTCOME
Corporeal Meeting Place - B.arch Thesis 2012

This thesis project aimed to stitch together many different conditions in the suburban landscape. The importance of privacy in the suburban home was challenged through a large series of public spaces that shared the front and back yards of adjacent suburban homes. The connective spine passed through many different types of suburban conditions varying in class, race, and density. The new suburban community would be predicated on exchange with one another and built through a sharing of visual knowledge, staged through spatial layering.

While the architecture aimed to bring together many different communities and suburban conditions, such a large infrastructure is highly disruptive in suburban America. The design for building community takes no community input into its formal and scalar considerations.
Ecobox Garden

This project encouraged residents to access and critically transform temporary, misused, or underused spaces. Ecobox Garden was part of a series of projects launched in 2001 that reimagined spaces as a way to preserve urban “biodiversity” by encouraging the co-existence of a wide range of lifestyles and living practices.

The project began with a construction of temporary gardens using recycled materials. From there the project has been extended into a platform for urban criticism and creativity, which is curated by residents and external collaborators.

This project engages community without taking away space. Designers at the Atelier d’Architecture Autogeree give space back to the community by envisioning a platform and giving them the tools and materials necessary to have it be part of their culture.
III. PROJECT DELIVERY

SITE
Syracuse University is constantly expanding, stretching to its geographic limits, and giving little back to the city; it is currently encroaching on impoverished communities that are strictly bound by the works of public infrastructure. To remedy this, a master plan has been implemented from the architecture firm Sasaki and proposals to bring down I-81 are underway. However, a new frontier for the university is imminent. With careful consideration of these conditions, there is potential to improve the relationship that the university has with the surrounding communities.

The university started from a gated campus on a hill, and it has developed simultaneously but separate from the industrial boom of the city. This separation has been emphasized through the rapid expansion of the university and the decline of the post-industrial downtown. The west side of campus has developed through time, neglecting adjacent communities and reinforcing its edge. All of the campus master plans that have been implemented in the past have failed to make clear connections to the larger urban fabric, thus turning its back on the larger community.

The westernmost, university-owned building is the Syracuse University steam plant. The university currently draws most of its power supply from this facility, and it acts as one of the many infrastructural monuments downtown. Sasaki’s plan calls for a renovation of the existing steam plant and the addition of a new university building on the same block. With consideration of both an updated university building and a considerable infrastructural transformation of I-81 into a boulevard, we foresee this area as a future site of possible gentrification.

By involving ourselves with the community of the Southside district and listening to their needs, our goal is to reveal how participatory model-making engages a community and better informs urban design. Participation in community-based design is a system of empowerment that gives more control back to the people, which we believe should be a crucial part of university development in this specific neighborhood.

Through this process we aim to question the methods of architecture and urban planning. Historically, top-down approaches have distanced architects and urban planners from the communities and neighborhoods they are directly impacting with their designs. By engaging the community and facilitating more open communication, we strive for this thesis project to serve as a model for the necessary levels of research and first-hand experience that should be present in architecture and urban planning.
COMMUNITY GRID ALTERNATIVE, NYS DOT

SYRACUSE STEAM PLANT, ROGERS PARTNERS
SITE PLAN

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE HOUSING

SCHOOLS AND COMMERCIAL CENTERS

PARKS AND GREEN SPACE

CHURCHES AND COMMUNITY CENTERS
SITE SECTION LOOKING NORTH

SITE SECTION LOOKING EAST
III

PROJECT DELIVERY

COMMUNITY
Participant Group

STEAM at Dr. King Elementary School is part of the Syracuse City School District. It emphasizes learning through doing and places particular importance on the fields of science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics. It has recently implemented a new curriculum under the direction of Principal Kuricheses Alexander. Currently, the school is conducting mostly remote learning via Microsoft Teams, however, they are also conducting in-person classes twice a week. The Participant group for this thesis project will be students from Steven Vincent’s fourth-grade robotics class.

Schedule

I. Process Design (Month of January)
   The components and design of the participatory kits will be completed and fabricated by mid February. A website will also be developed for students to upload their work remotely.

II. Community Engagement (February - Mid March)
   The workshops will be conducted with the students for three to four weeks, ending by mid March.

III. Final Scheme (Mid March - May)
   The inputs of the community workshops will be filtered and implemented in a final urban design scheme.
III

PROJECT DELIVERY

METHOD
SOUTHERNMOST SITE OF INTEREST NEAR DR. KING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
KIT PACKAGES
PART 1
PROGRAM AND AREA STUDY
PART 2

MASSING STUDY
IV
SPECULATION
POTENTIAL OUTCOMES
With a community’s potentials harnessed, a new type of urban form can arise. Whether it be an entire multi-block scheme, or a simple reconfiguring of an abandoned parking lot, there is a method for engaging and empowering community members. Our speculations for what this method can produce are limitless in scale but consistent with its community considerations and architectural syntax.

Throughout the process of working with students and community members, there will undoubtedly be opportunities to improve upon our designed participation tools. Different students will gravitate towards different aspects of participation, and we are hoping we will learn from that.

It is important to note that this process and method for engaging community members is not exclusive to elementary school students. This method can and should be adapted for audiences of different age groups. However, it is to be noted that the creativity and inventiveness of children is sometimes more inspiring and impactful. In different circumstances, this method would be tested with community members of all age groups in order to diversify the outcomes and enrich the participatory tools.

Whomever we work with, we, as architects, will be in direct communication and design directly with and for the community members we are engaging. Our final urban scheme might be speculative, but our impact will be evident.
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Site Specific: