Beyond the rhetoric of participation: New challenges and prospects for inclusive urban regeneration

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A B S T R A C T

We carry out a critical analysis of current participation practices in urban regeneration processes. Many concrete examples suffer from major flaws in terms of instrumental or ineffective involvement of parts of the community, and especially of the weakest and most deprived constituencies, at the advantage of more affluent and experienced ones, which are familiar enough with institutionalized public decision making to surf and manipulate the deliberation dynamics at their own advantage. Below a superficial rhetoric of inclusion, cosmetic forms of participation are therefore at risk of perpetuating and even exacerbating existing inequalities. We then explore new possibilities for more effective and sustainable forms of participation, most notably social storytelling, community informatics, and relational public art and culture projects. A new, interesting frontier of future experimentation in participation practices can be found in innovative forms of coalescence among these three streams of activity, as testified by a few state of the art pilot projects and experiences.

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1. Participation in urban regeneration: A failed promise?

The furor for urban renewal and regeneration, which has globally taken over in the past three decades, started with very high expectations (Alden, 1996). In stated intentions, such processes should have ensured the combined pursuit of economic and social growth goals with objectives of social cohesion and integration of marginalized areas and communities (Couch, Sykes, & Börstinghaus, 2011), but as a matter of fact, most of the socially sustainable experiences have taken place in relatively wealthy and un-deprived contexts (Raco, 2003), and the key narratives have been mainly created and deployed by big private stakeholders rather than by the local communities (Peck, 2006). In the current historical juncture, there is a widespread feeling that decades of egalitarian urban and social policies have achieved less than hoped in practical terms as to curbing the capacity of the richest and most powerful global and local elites in shaping up urban environments and the corresponding planning discourse according to their own interests and needs — thereby raising a rich array of negative feelings and defensive attitudes in local communities, which are too often removed rather than positively tackled by planners (Forrester, 2012). And as a consequence, local communities are beginning to organize themselves to resist to unwanted interventions (Uysal, 2012) or more simply to engage in passive resistance survival strategies (Mathers, Parry, & Jones, 2008). The choice to contrast or simply to opt out of processes which, at least in principle, aim at giving space and relevance to weak, poor social constituencies at the decision-making and governance levels must, therefore, be read as a sign of skepticism and as a protest by the latter against a rhetoric of inclusion covering up the real decisional process, which takes place at a table where 'marginal' interests are simply neither represented nor considered as truly relevant.

In a long-term perspective, the shift in discourse from classic top-down, 'scientific' approaches to urban renewal and planning — most often closely related to huge vested interests — to inclusive, participative approaches where all kinds of social actors have a chance to speak and to be attentively listened to, is evident, and started well before the current urban renewal cycle (Camarinhas, 2011). But the graphic contradiction between intentions and results as far as actual involvement is concerned is no less than an elephant in the room, and is explicitly challenging the meaningfulness and defensibility of participatory practices, and of the very notion of urban regeneration in the first place (Lawless, 2010). There is a well-known backbone of classical contributions that have

shaped our conceptualization and perception of forms and modes of participation in planning and the corresponding issues, starting from Arnstein's (1969) famous 'ladder', to, among others, Sandercock's (2000) key argument on the role of civil society and diversity, as well as Fainstein's (2010) comprehensive analysis of social justice and inclusion issues in urban development. Sarkissian and Bunjamin-Mau (2009) have developed a comprehensive, hands-on approach to participatory public debate and deliberation that allows a fair representation of the existing positions, thus setting a new standard in the planners' toolbox. Some authors downplay the real dimension of the exclusion and marginalization issue on the basis of 'successful' case study narratives (e.g. Biddulph, 2011), but as a matter of fact it is always difficult, unless a truly in-depth socio-economic analysis is carried out, to counter such concerns on the basis of specific 'success stories', which at closer inspection may reveal unexpected criticalities (Wolman, Cook Ford, & Hill, 1994). In principle, it is almost inevitable to make a case for a well-balanced approach that mixes up harmoniously top-down and bottom-up elements in order to reconcile a coherent design principle with substantial inclusiveness both at the decision making and implementation phases, but as a matter of fact this balance seems often precarious, and in face of disappointing results even the part of the community that initially showed openness and goodwill could fold back to defensive positions (Henderson, Bowlby, & Raco, 2007). To establish credibility and build trust, the obliged path contemplates a real social negotiation that creates new, spendable social capital (Cornelius & Wallace, 2010), makes space for new subjects that are representative of the interests of the weaker constituents (Bailey, 2012), and leverages upon intrinsic rather than instrumental motivations of stakeholders, as in the highly context-sensitive field of culture-led regeneration processes (Pratt, 2010; Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2009). But as the interests of the local community are inevitably fragmented, diverse, and most often contradictory, the only way to make progress in this direction is to create the conditions for a real community empowerment in terms of a responsive, resilient and self-organized social representation that is able to define its own agenda through a process of internal deliberation — a step that is greatly facilitated by the recent advent of community informatics and by the engagement of civic hackers in the development, prototyping and testing of open governance platforms (Staffans & Horelli, 2014).

Invoking participation as a way to legitimize a specific process of urban regeneration is therefore twofold: it can be a rhetoric expedient to simulate a social consultation when decisions have already been taken in advance and are implemented accordingly, or it can be a sincere attempt at harnessing the complexity of community engagement and deliberation, to achieve a socially sustainable, widely shared, co-designed outcome. Telling the two possibilities apart, and exploring the conditions for the latter to take place, is the key issue, and is the main topic of the present paper.

A first basic problem lies in the very idea of participation, or better in the implicit assumption that participation is unanimously regarded as a good thing by local residents and constituencies. This is in fact far from being true, and the way in which residents regard participation depends on a complex set of factors, and primarily on their personal level of identification with, and commitment to, their neighborhood (Nienhuis, van Dijk, & De Roo, 2011). Unsurprisingly, such commitment is more likely to be strong for those endowed with the economic and social assets needed to build a sense of belonging to the place, and to ensure stable conditions of good or at least decent living, than for those who see their presence as precarious and uncertain (Lawless, 2007). Thus, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the most deprived and fragmented constituencies of the local community are often the less favorably inclined to participate, whereas better endowed residents, both in terms of material resources and education and skills, are much more proactive, and are able to surf and exploit the social codes and rituals of public discussion and deliberation to defend their interests, and impose their views and priorities as fair representations of the collective interest (Dillon & Fanning, 2011). As a consequence, actual participation tends to suffer from strong adverse selection biases, and its very measurement poses serious methodological problems for which no easy solutions exist (Gilbertson & Wilson, 2009).

A second problem has to do with the local community's capacity to self-determine and govern the process, even where there are the best conditions and intentions to make this happen. For example, Dicks (2014) presents an example of a 'non-prescriptive' regeneration initiative in Wales that gets captured by an upper-level policy agenda, which overturns its original aim and scope. What field experiences seem to suggest is that, in a sense, the season of participative regeneration, despite the long, already cited tradition of discussion and experimentation of participatory practices is — at least in its fully mature, consistent form — still too short-lived to have developed even a properly stabilized, well digested vocabulary and toolkit, and that, on the other hand, there is a strong pressure to coerce participative debate and exchange into a consensus-building format, or at least to conceal the power dimension of planning (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002), whereas conflict is a natural and even physiological consequence of participation itself (Pollock & Sharp, 2012). The actual capacity of the participation process to resist external pressures and to accommodate open dissent and conflict without disbanding seems to depend to a large extent on the community's preexisting social and cultural capital assets (Parés, Bonet-Martí, & Martí-Costa, 2012), and therefore, once again, it is more likely to acknowledge effectively self-governed participation in presence of socio-economic conditions that make participation itself less urgent, and in particular less related to instances of real marginalization — with the potential risk of reproducing or even consolidating existing inequalities at a larger scale (Jones, 2003).

A third problem is related to the nature of the institutional mediation and of the partnership structures that are put in place to make participation both possible and relevant in the context of the regeneration process. In particular, turning community interaction into an institutionalized practice creates hegemonic mechanisms in ways that are heavily affected by local socio-cultural conditions, and that should be explicitly taken into account in the early phases of the participation design process (Muir, 2004). The capacity of the local government to resist the temptation to 'pilot' the process according to the needs of the day-to-day political agenda, which in turn rests upon a well-developed and long-standing, open practice of dialog with the local civil community, becomes a crucial aspect to safeguard actual participation and to meet community expectations; Cento Bull and Jones (2006) provide an interesting comparative analysis of regeneration projects in Bristol and Naples which clearly illustrates this point, and where a considerable differential impact is obtained as, like in the Bristol case, such favorable conditions are better represented in the local context. Moreover, the actual governance of the process in partnership boards is in turn heavily affected by the representatives' capacity to adapt to the specific characteristics of a strategic and bureaucratized organizational setting, which obviously works once more against delegates whose main background is in grassroots organizations (Dargan, 2009). If the involved stakeholders are not willing to consider participatory planning as a way to question and to redesign the very architecture of representation of interests at the local level, then, it is unlikely that less warranted constituencies will find a way