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Just Architecture: Making, Participation and Empowerment.

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In the fifty years since the Skeffington Committee was formed to investigate how planning might respond to the broad trend towards community engagement in civic life, participation in the built environment has been stripped of its radicalism and left as little more than a tool for the manipulation of affected communities, serving to soften the blow of mediocre architecture by implicating laypeople in its development.

In contrast to earlier examples of participatory practice and theory, much contemporary praxis locates the value of participants in their ability to reflect upon lost glories and future dreams. Little engagement with the present beyond its relationship to this binary is undertaken, thereby situating the participant's experience within a framework of values which explicitly excludes their everyday experiences. At best, then, the participatory process is reduced to a game which serves little purpose beyond the harvesting of 'local flavour' for the benefit of institutional actors imposing pre-defined agendas. At worst, participation acts as another tool in an already exploitative toolkit designed to distance participants from the value of their own knowledge and day-to-day experience. In any case, participation has largely lost sight of its original intention of giving the city back to the people.

Situated within broader sociological discussions on agency and constructivism in the urban environment, in this paper we discuss how participatory practice can regain its transformative, radical and justice-orientated agenda through collaborative and disruptive acts of making. We discuss how acts of architectural making can locate both the community and institutional actors in 'the present' through their inherently discursive, negotiated, situated and bodily nature. Making as participatory technique, we suggest, reveals and embraces community and individual values, knowledges and transformation. As such, it operates as both a mechanism for empowerment and also an informative analytical and design tool towards better architectural environments.

Lee Ivett and Ambrose Gillick run Baxendale, an research-led architecture and art practice in Govan, Glasgow, which focuses on grassroots social, economic and building development projects with marginal communities. They lecture at the Glasgow School of Art.

Introduction

Participation has been on the books now for precisely fifty years, following the 1968 publication of *People and Planning*, otherwise known as the Skeffington Report. This followed the terrible mess postwar planners made with their Corbusian visions for modern city life and the emergence of community voices in opposition. Most of these voices have been lost, being as they were, just the ordinary resistance common to communities subjected to the power of the state. A few institutional activists, like Jane Jacobs, amplified the sentiment. Her book 1961 *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* was published to widespread acclaim (and horror) because it proposed an alternative, essentially anti-modernist vision of urban form based around an organic social complexity which could not be replicated by top-down processes common to modernist visions.

Context of Participation

These modernist visions of city change went hand-in-hand with post-industrial objectives of the corporate-state complex, advancing a shift from urban industry to suburbanised service labour. Ostensibly orientated towards clearing the fabric of poverty which blighted inner urban areas whilst also off-shoring industrial production to less unionized countries, updating transport infrastructure in response to car ownership and service-based economies and advancing ideas of social form which promoted a more leisured lifestyle, modernism was applied like a hammer to cities and countryside alike by state and institutional actors with apparently little reference to common values. Resistance was inevitable.

Underlying these strategic changes ran profound ideological ones, reflected in two policy documents: the 1967 Cullingworth Report which set in motion a new model for the provision of social housing which relied upon the third sector and private enterprise. This was followed in 1968 by the Skeffington Report which 'detailed the manner in which 'participation' could be included in the creation of development plans, and can therefore be read as a continuation of Cullingworth's process of sharing the load of urban renewal, this time with community

organisations. 'Participation' was defined as 'the act of sharing in the formulation of policies and proposals', though it is made clear that responsibility for development would continue to rest with the local authority. In addition, Skeffington was concerned with 'Education in planning', especially the use of media to promote development plans and inform the general public but was conscious of the risk active participation represented to the silent majority who tended not to get involved. Whilst Skeffington stopped short of explaining how participation might go beyond what Sherry Arnstein saw as 'Tokenism' and required no active role for citizens in the implementation of any development, it was this report perhaps more than any other which changed the way cities in the modern period had been planned. Skeffington enabled a new, small-scale, locally sanctioned approach to grow which both reflected the democratic urges of the day and the critique of diminished rights available in the modern city.

Problems of participation

We've come a long way from the vision, however limited, of 1968 for, whilst 'participation' has been incorporated into the language of planning and architecture, this new status has perhaps more than anything ensured its definition and role can now be described and controlled by institutional actors – that is, by those organisations which participation was meant to keep in check! As a consequence, we have participatory practice which operates through a narrow set of defined tools – charrette community design workshops, planning pilots and toolkits, place making initiatives – and produce a limited set of outputs – slick documentation and cheap public art, but which are all organised from an epistemological position which foregrounds professional and institutional knowledge, language and values, and which presupposes current deficiencies and absences in the 'recipient' community group. Thus the past is hallowed and the future yearned for.

If you only ask people about the past and the future, you set aside the value of the present or the generally positive everyday experiences of those rather mundane, everyday activities which constitute much of life. This is not a recipe for contentment, and it strikes me as particularly bad psychology, indicating as it does that the present is problematic and in the main, bad (or at least

significantly deficient). This ties into expressions applied to urban realm, particularly areas about to be subjected to some form of renewal, such as ‘sustainable development’ – implying the non-sustainability of existing everyday lives, and ‘resilience’, which in turn implies that people’s lives are characterized by assault, violence and besiegement. These terms ignore the existence of sustainable, resilient participatory activity in neighbourhoods, but instead enforce a mode of participation, now in the form of charrettes, seemingly so as to enable institutional actors to engage with areas and asserts that they have taught them something. But certainly not to reveal anything, and not, it’s clear, to redistribute agency from the empowered to the marginalised; nor to effectively reveal the actual nature and content of the lives of resident populations. It’s all very bizarre and the more I think about it, the less sense it seems to make.

But all is not lost. Fruitful participation can occur when financially privileged, empowered and knowledgeable actors become involved in the lives of communities as they find them and use tools and mechanisms which work to generate a ‘present-ness’ in the communities in which they operate. This is not only a generous, supportive and graceful way to go, but also that in so being, it offers much clearer insights into the lives, desires, needs and opportunities of any given context. This can be effectively achieved through collaborative acts of making.

Making has an historically significant lineage in the literature, from the anti-industrialist processes of Victorian romantics through vernacular studies into Heidegger, Sennett, Bhabba and on, nuancing ideas of indigeneity, craft, post-colonialism, identity and the future of labour, even if they sometimes come from that rather awkward quasi-transcendental position common to people who don’t actually make anything but rather like the ‘concept’ of it anyway. It is gaining traction once again amongst designers in response to market forces (it sells) and a growing awareness of the way modern urban life has alienated people from the material reality of their own lives, particularly in terms of the ability to service their own basic needs, and particularly the capacity to make their architectural and urban realm according to their personal and collective socio-cultural values.

In the following, I'll describe some recent projects I've overseen which have attempted to do this.

Solutions

Hamilton Hill

At Hamilton Hill we were invited by a faith group to help challenge a council/housing association proposal to redevelop an area of public land to the north of Glasgow's city centre into 700 housing units. The land had previously been industry and housing but following deindustrialization, had become firstly waste land and then, over the years, a local park, complete with goals, swings, mature trees and decent planting. It wasn't pristine – nothing in the area is – but it served a series of complex and overlapping social needs which were not revealed via the council's expensive charette process, which played the usual game of discussing the long-lost and longed for assets of the past whilst promoting unrealisable fantasy futures which no one with any power was ever going to actually try and achieve. The community knew this and asked us to help them describe the nature of their place as they saw and used it. We began a build project, working alongside other groups and the community, erecting by hand a very small pavilion of largely pre-fabricated elements. This provided us with an opportunity to work alongside people, to be active and to speak, share and discuss. There is an immediacy and spontaneity to conversation carried out like this which cannot be replicated through desk-based oral consultation. Through this, we got a sense of the identity of the area and its inhabitants which immediately went way beyond the rhetoric of participatory *visioning* found in the housing association's consultation. In addition, through bodily making a thing in a space, with all the complexity and utility required to achieve the build – electricity, screws, transport, paint as well as refreshment, loo breaks, food – we began to understand how the area operated (or not) as a productive environment, what its assets and limitations were. Finally, acts such as this are directly disruptive for both institutional and community actors – they reshape urban space, providing small moments that challenge common narratives about value and capacity in a community, they can transform space by helping to embody existing uses of a site and they

provide a starting point to begin new discussions and activities on a site. Principally, though, they remind people that they can do stuff to change their own environment.

Govan Rope

At Govan and working with collaborating artist Ben Parry, Baxendale produced a structure on the old Graving Dock, using rope found on site, plywood and cable ties. A similar project was produced in very similar conditions on the dockside in Gdansk. The project was part art, part architecture and part challenge, to the site as a derelict space, the owners of the site who cannot agree on a way forward for what must be one of the best pieces of urban infrastructure in Scotland, to the locals who occupy and vandalize it. Built over a weekend and with a budget of £1500, the piece provided insight to both need and identity within the community, and the contested nature of the space became visible. The slow coiling of the rope onto an armature over the course of a day was a performance both of disruption and of craft and care, a demonstration that something could be done; the output of a human-scaled thing in an environment subject to such vast forces and narratives. Local youth burnt the Govan project within a couple of days of its completion, an outcome which acted as a very precise corrective to us as it indicated significant and genuine concerns about agency and meaning in such work as it relates to cultural value systems (The project was highly commended by the main architectural award the following week.) and the way work of our kind can appear to impose, the ownership of marginalization, what urban realm improvements and gentrification means to the gentrified and how, given another shot, a project of this kind might be done differently with and not to the community, but to the same analytical and exploratory ends.

(Gdansk remains)

Dundee

In Dundee Baxendale were approached by a third sector organisation which works to reengage people with the world of work by linking people with voluntary associations, They asked us to help the communities in Lochee become better able to exploit the natural and social assets that exist in the area. The project was to have a focus of healthy eating and urban food, in response to poor diet and a multi-ethnic population which was seen to require assistance in gelling. Working with various groups, we devised a community kitchen and eating facility which we built in an old Levi factory. This unit, which is quite large, is composed of quite simple elements which can be built and demounted easily and taken in a van between various existing community gardens to act as a facilitator of events. Our interest here, as elsewhere, has not been the development of a lowest common denominator community-led build so much as it has been to instigate activity in marginal and underutilised public resources through the use of something rather flash and grand. The activity of making here, does not promote the use of participation as a means of gaining craft skills – we're conscious that the nature and length of the schemes we're part of don't have that logic within them – but rather use the simple acts and negotiations common to construction work to precipitate collective conversation and action.

Venice

Under the curatorial (or anti-curatorial) guidance of Peter McCaughey/ Wave Particle, Baxendale were part of a team of artists, film-makers and designers who produced Scotland's collateral submission for this year's Venice Biennale. The work played on ideas and aesthetics common to our work and the event's over-arching theme – Freesoup – and the opportunity afforded by an externally-funded and curated project - was an opportunity to use our process in a more directly 'experimental' way. The design played on formal ideas of the block and vennel, with a timber frame dividing a large garden into three distinct rooms – for work, play and performance. The frame itself was conceived as being a space that could be manipulated over the six months of the festival, ostensibly to articulate a challenge to the increasingly curated, clean and anodyne

public realm in the city – where once the lanes and pavements of Venice were the location of civic life, they have now been reduced to a sort of promenade for Instagramming tourists and behaviour permitted in these spaces has been curtailed in response.

The armature was hand built by a few labourers to a precise engineering spec defined by the Biennale. Materials were left on site to enable further work by visitors. Artists undertook events which sought to reinvigorate a sense of the civic in the surrounding streets and squares and to capture public attention. The upshot of all this is still developing but, as one of the few parks in the city, it has developed a large and dedicated user group, particularly mothers, who are exploring ways of bringing the space into public ownership. It has grown physically, but of greater importance is the way social activity has developed around it. The continued making of interventions on and around the armature have become a means of instigating other city-based social activity, not least performance and outdoor cinema. This may seem small and insignificant but in an environment as closely curated as Venice this is no mean feat and represents fairly significant disruption.

Test Unit 2018

Test Unit is a summer school organised in Glasgow by a collective of design, architecture and urban development agencies, including Baxendale, with financial support from institutional stakeholders, including state, third sector and higher education bodies. Operating out of recommissioned industrial buildings, Test Unit runs short programmes that uses making as a way of exploring the social, material, logistical and spatial nature of small unused or derelict sites in inner-Glasgow, and their potential as sites of/ for creative practices as part of a wider discussion about the nature of urban renewal. Recognising the deficiencies of customary talking-based approaches to participation, Test Unit uses the rapid prototyping of built interventions as a means of testing the physical and social boundaries of discrete sites.

This year's programme saw the development of a derelict meanwhile space. Body-based and sensory analysis was conducted – literally gauging the site's identity using the body as a measuring tool – followed by a rapid design and building process using materials gained from

within about 200 metres of the site. This included some ideal resources, including Scottish Opera, the National Theatre and Jewsons. A project to frame a social condition and to challenge customary exclusionary processes of urban development in gentrifying areas produced a weird and wonderful set of steps. Here the participants were 'paying customers' but perhaps because of this, the project displayed the potential of this kind of bodily, physical process as both an educative tool but also as a way of exploring other ways of becoming acquainted with the immediacy of a site as a space and as a socio-cultural context. It also serves to indicate other ways of developing urban plans, based around temporary building and analysis.

Conclusion

The work of Baxendale is part of a broad movement within architecture away from the abstraction of much practice, towards a bodily, situated approach to design and urbanism. The projects described, I think, suggest one direction of travel – towards a concerted effort to locate both the community and institutional actors in 'the present' through projects which are centred on discursive, negotiated, situated and bodily action. It operates as both a mechanism for empowerment and also an informative analytical and design tool towards better architectural environments.