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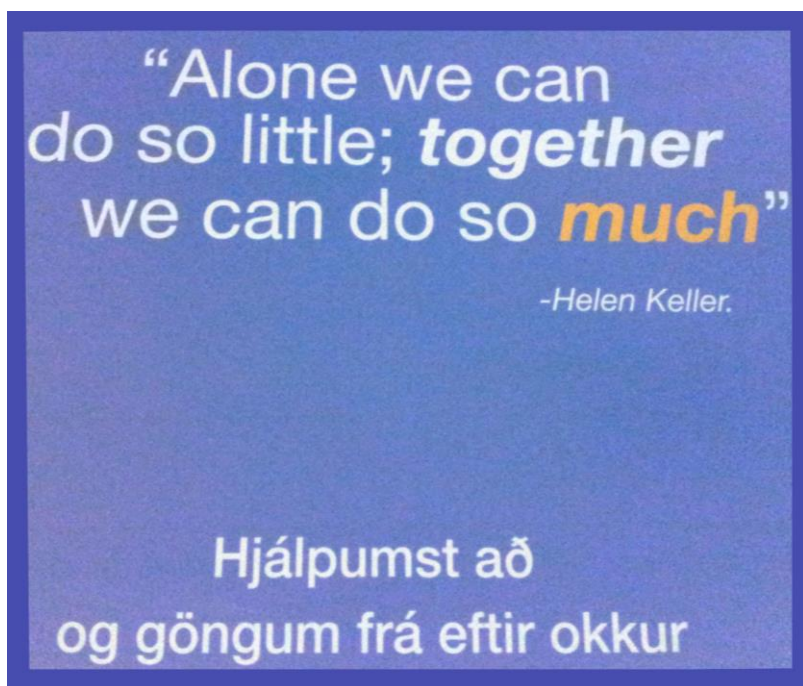
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REBRANDING A DISTRICT: THE BREIÐHOLT PROJECT IN REYKJAVIK

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ABSTRACT

Cities have gained increasing attention from government, researchers, and industry. The focus upon smarter and more efficient cities is important, but incomplete. Against this backdrop, COST Action builds on a European Science Foundation exploratory workshop on the emerging theme of smart and liveable cities. COST Action's framework for People Friendly Cities in a Data Rich World acknowledges that the city is largely the product of top-down expertise, and a process in which the citizen plays a marginal role. Despite this top-down approach, citizens have had to build personal and collective biographies from the infrastructure of the city. This paper explores how the community of Breiðholt, Reykjavik, is being transformed from a disadvantaged suburb, characterised as a 'ghetto', into a thriving community where citizens play a central role in decision-making. This paper presents the outcomes of a fieldwork experience, undertaken in Breiðholt as part of COST Action's Winter Training School, focused on the drivers behind, actions, and benefits of the Breiðholt Project and the Breiðholt Congress. In making recommendations for the Project and Congress, and other community-based initiatives, this paper encourages the sharing of best practices among different departments of the city, and to better utilise bridge makers (key stakeholders/community leaders) to build trust through face-to-face interactions with citizens.

KEYWORDS:

Breiðholt; people friendly cities; place-making; public participation; smart cities

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper arises from a research experience developed within the framework of COST Action TU1204 "People Friendly Cities in a Data Rich World", which started in 2013 and gathers researchers from across Europe (see COST 2012). The COST Action arose from the awareness that cities have gained increasing attention from government, researchers, and industry (see also Villanueva-Rosales et al., 2015). Many of the initiatives focus upon the efficient use of resources and carbon reduction in response to climate change, such as Europe 2020 and the European Covenant of Mayors commitment to energy efficiency. The "Smart City" concept offers a similar, if somewhat broader, vision of a more efficient city (Washburn et al., 2009). It is important for cities to be sustainable and pleasant to live in (Evans, 2002). The focus upon smarter and more efficient cities is important, but incomplete (Hollands, 2008). Against this background, COST Action builds on a European Science Foundation exploratory workshop on the emerging theme of smart and liveable cities. Supported by a European network of candidate cities, COST Action co-ordinates a transdisciplinary network of experts and non-experts that investigate the alignment of the hardware and software of a city with user needs to promote wellbeing, good health, and the sustainable use of resources, within an evolving people-centred consultation framework for economic, cultural, and political development (COST, 2012). People Friendly Cities in a Data Rich World acknowledges that the city is largely the product of top-down expertise, and a process in which the citizen plays a marginal role. Despite this top-down approach, citizens have had to build personal and collective biographies from the infrastructure of the city.

Through COST Action, a training school "Co-creating Urban spaces" was held in Reykjavik, Iceland, in March-April 2016. The school was structured with lectures from local and international experts, practitioners and academics, self-directed case study research with fieldwork in the Breiðholt district of Reykjavik (see Wilkinson, 2016 for an overview). The training school provided participants with the opportunity to explore why and how the community of Breiðholt is being transformed from a disadvantaged suburb into a thriving community. This paper presents the outcomes of one of the fieldwork experiences undertaken by the named authors, focused on the Breiðholt Project and the Breiðholt Congress. Specifically, the background and context for the development of the Breiðholt Project, the drivers behind the Project, the functionalities used and the specific outcomes are analysed herein. As regards the Breiðholt Congress, the public participation action of the Congress, its political context, and applicability are considered. Finally, recommendations are provided for further development of the Project and the Congress, both for Breiðholt and for these methods of public participation more generally.

First, to better understand the framework of the Breiðholt Project, an overview of the Icelandic socio-economic context is provided, with a focus on the economic crisis that led to political changes and to new bottom-up approaches in decision-making, and the context of immigration. Then the Breiðholt Project is presented, with a focus on the key questions that guided this research project: What were the drivers behind the decision to start the Breiðholt Project? What specific actions have been taken within the project? What are the benefits (both for citizens and the public actors involved)? Further, the Breiðholt Congress, as part of the Breiðholt Project, is analysed answering questions of: Why was the Congress initiated? What are the benefits of the Breiðholt Congress? What have been the main challenges of the Breiðholt Congress? To answer those question, both primary and secondary data collection methods were used. Primary data collection involved conducting informal interviews with key stakeholders involved in the Breiðholt Project and Congress.

Secondary data collection involved consulting a range of media and documents relating to the Project and Congress.

2 THE ICELANDIC SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT: AN OVERVIEW

The specific Icelandic socio-economic context gave a great input to the development of Breiðholt project, and therefore it is here briefly described. As a matter of fact, The Breiðholt Project was developed in response to immigration issues that characterised the Breiðholt district in Reykjavik and within a political context that arose after the 2008 financial crisis. In the last decade, the interest in public engagement tools and processes expanded rapidly in Iceland, as a response to the deep economic crisis. Currently, Iceland, and the Breiðholt district in Reykjavik in particular, is facing a revival centred on participatory working between the City Council and citizens. The scientific community will find this an interesting project as it exposes new knowledge about co-creation within a district, and the development of new toolsets for addressing technological, social, cultural and economic urban challenges in an interdisciplinary, people-centred manner. Such learning can be applied to other case studies in urban, suburban and rural contexts. Below is a brief history of how Iceland found itself in the current situation.

The Icelandic financial system collapsed in October 2008, when Iceland's three major private banks were taken into government administration (see Danielsson and Zoega, 2009). The failure of the banking sector, which was several times larger than the entire Icelandic economy, along with the rapid depreciation of Icelandic currency caused an unprecedented economic and financial crisis (Vaiman et al., 2010). Unemployment tripled, and subsequently citizens held distrust towards politics. On 20th January 2009, protests intensified into riots with the use of pots and pans, leading local press to label the event the 'Kitchenware Revolution' (Baruchello, 2014). Subsequently, in February 2009, the government resigned. The traditional political parties underwent a deep crisis, and in response public participation methods and processes started to gain value and power. A parliamentary election was held in Iceland on 25th April 2009, following strong pressure from the public. The Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green Movement gained overall majority of seats in the Althing (Iceland's parliament). Reykjavik municipal elections were held in May 2010, and the Best Party, led by comedian Jón Gnarr, won.

Immigration in Iceland is considered a major issue, even if it cannot be compared with immigration in other European contexts where immigration fluxes are more significant, cities are more complex, and social exclusion is more widespread and rooted in communities (Skaptadóttir, 2011). In terms of national background and religious affiliations, the population of Iceland remained relatively homogeneous until around the last decade of the 20th century. In 1996, the number of immigrants accounted for approximately 2% of Iceland's population and a large percentage of these immigrants came from other Nordic countries (Skaptadóttir, 2011). The percentage of immigrants increased markedly after May 2006, when people from the new member states of the European Union no longer needed to secure work permits to enter Iceland. In 2007, the number of Poles in Iceland rose from 3221 to 5996, and 73% of these Polish citizens were men. After 2006, immigrants became a more visible part of Icelandic society. Icelanders criticised the immigrants' apparent lack of desire to learn Icelandic, despite a deficit of language courses and material available to immigrants (Skaptadóttir, 2011). The collapse of Iceland's financial infrastructure and economy had negative implications for immigrants, as many were hired to work in fish factories or construction projects that were forced to make staffing cuts or to close (Skaptadóttir, 2011).

2.1 THE BREIÐHOLT DISTRICT IN REYKJAVÍK

The city of Reykjavík is divided into six service districts and ten neighbourhoods. Breiðholt is one of the districts: it is located in the southern suburbs of the city and is coordinated by a local council. Breiðholt was originally a small village; from the end of World War II to 1960, the population of Reykjavik grew from 46,578 to 72,270, and in 1965 Breiðholt was mostly an outer boundary to the inhabited areas of Reykjavik.



Fig. 1 Map of the city of Reykjavik with the location of the Breiðholt district insert

During the 1960s, Reykjavik underwent an unprecedented boom, and in 1962 the city began to implement zoning plans. Due to population pressure, development plans were published for Breiðholt in 1966 in the hills east of the city, with the idea of building single-family houses and low-priced apartments mixed together (Conolly and Whelan, 2012). Breiðholt was divided into three smaller neighbourhoods. The first part (lower-Breiðholt), was established between 1966-1973, the second in 1980, and the third in 1985. In 1999, Breiðholt was the highest populated area in Reykjavik with 22,030 inhabitants, but as of 2012 the population had fallen to 20,546 (Statistics Iceland, nd).

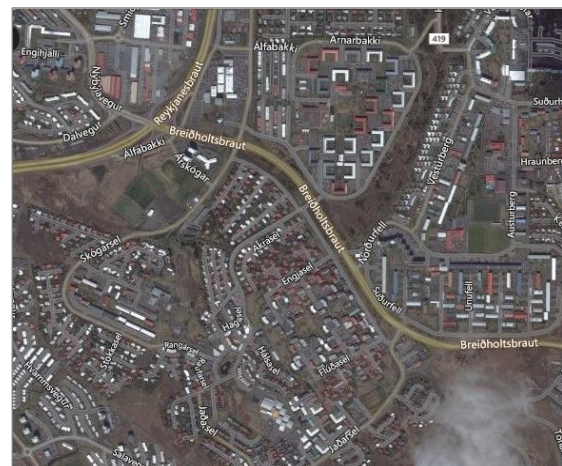
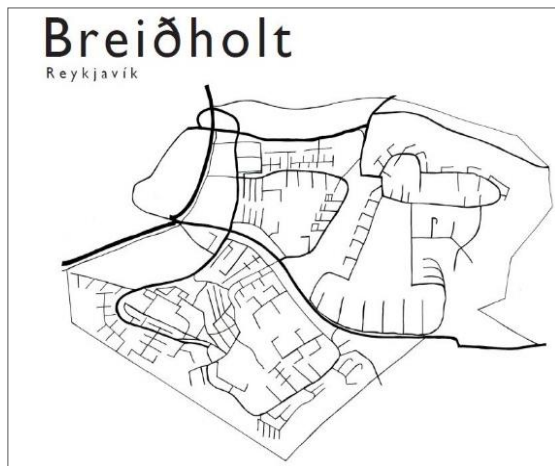


Fig. 2-3 The structure of the Breiðholt district (on the left) and arial view of the Breiðholt district (on the right)

Breiðholt is a multicultural district, and is uniquely diverse within the national context, both with regards to income dispersion and nationalities of its inhabitants. The neighbourhood has over 21,000 inhabitants (approximately 17% of Reykjavik inhabitants), of which 3,700 are immigrants (Iceland Review, 2015). Breiðholt has the highest proportion of low income households and immigrants in Reykjavik. For instance, 5% of its population emigrated from Poland; 80% of children in Ösp kindergarten do not speak Icelandic as a first language; 25% of families in one neighbourhood are immigrants, and long-term residence of families is characteristic. The age pyramid is even, and there is a mixed social and educational standing. Issues of language and social exclusion have been prevalent since the establishment of the neighbourhood in the late

70s. Unemployment in Breiðholt is higher than in the other districts and media discussions concerning Breiðholt have been predominantly negative.

3 THE BREIÐHOLT PROJECT

Reykjavik has, in recent years, placed emphasis on various projects and programs to counter stigmatisation in Breiðholt caused by negative associations, and to mitigate local challenges. One such program is the Breiðholt Project, which was decided upon by Reykjavik City Council in 2011, with the Project commencing early 2012.

Iceland is one of the most digitally connected countries (almost 98% of people have access to Internet in their homes), and various options of interaction between public bodies and citizens' groups are offered in Reykjavik to connect people together to participate in democracy, politics and civic life (e.g. the online forum Better Reykjavik and the e-deliberation platform/consultation forum Better Neighborhoods, described in Boijc et al., 2016). Within this framework, the Breiðholt Project gathers different initiatives adopted by the Breiðholt district council to improve its citizens' quality of life and to increase civic life. The Breiðholt Project widely used classic public participation and collaborative design methods (for the state of art on those topics, see the wide literature and the many case studies available, i.a., Sanoff, 2000; Slocum, 2005). But, in Breiðholt, those public engagement tools were applied in a very holistic way, involving also new media and giving a great emphasis on the social aspects.

The Breiðholt Project involved broad and interdisciplinary cooperation between different city agencies in Breiðholt, and had an annual budget of approximately €70,000 (approximately €3 per inhabitant per year). The objective of the Project was to make city services within Breiðholt more holistic, focused and coordinated for added benefit to neighbourhood citizens, and to find ways to use city resources more efficiently. A local manager of Breiðholt district, Mr. Óskar D. Olafson, was appointed in 2012, and led the Breiðholt Project. The Breiðholt Project makes an interesting case study as it reveals a novel approach to public engagement in urban development, and for increasing social cohesion. It stands apart from other such case studies because it has measurable outcomes in terms of community engagement and resultant political participation. As such, much can be learnt from this case study within the scientific community.

3.1 DRIVERS BEHIND THE BREIÐHOLT PROJECT

Why go further for Breiðholt and develop a rebranding project? Breiðholt has high levels of poverty, social exclusion and immigration, and low levels of education. A change was needed because education provision was in great need of improvement. Health and social wellbeing glues society together, adapting to post-modern plurality. Furthermore, the general condition of the neighbourhood was in need of revitalisation. It was hoped that this would lead to increased shops, and therefore the creation of more jobs. In addition to this, this proposed change in Breiðholt was reflective of a dynamic shift in society towards constant place-making (see Sampson and Gifford, 2010; Pierce et al., 2011). Complementing this, it is a policy of the country to get people to work together more, in a democratic way. Three key values were at the core of the Project: Empowerment; Integration; and Innovation. Importantly, these were not only for, but also with the citizens. Within the National context of economic crisis (as described earlier, Iceland was affected by a deep economic collapse in 2008), a new democratic and bottom-up political approach arose in Iceland, and Breiðholt citizens felt: "now it's our turn to get a makeover". The plan to develop the Breiðholt Project was led by the Mayor, top officials and members of the local committee. A position was advertised for a local manager, and Mr. Óskar D. Olafson was hired to implement the plan. The city government had an open forum where they consulted people – but only in certain areas. From the meeting they took forward many ideas from citizens.

3.2 THE BREIÐHOLT PROJECT: ACTIONS

The main actions for the Breiðholt Project were to make a plan, and to ask people what image they had of their community. Focus groups were held, which were concerned with what people 'thought of' Breiðholt, and revealed that people did not hold a strong positive image of the district. Breiðholt was "rough" and was not represented positively in the media. Re-branding Breiðholt was a PR plan, where a company was hired to advise on, and to measure, the Breiðholt image. Ideas were gathered from different projects internationally. Meetings were held where city officials attempted to encourage people to "buy into" the re-branding. Although such strategies were used, many people were already motivated, as they thought it would be a positive experience to work together more. A seminar was held by Reykjavik University on System Leadership, where a project was created about children. Interviews were conducted with the aim of fostering various ideas for community projects in order to overcome different social issues.

Seminars were also held for managers, who were trained to send positive news to the media. This was then 'pushed out' onto social media. Furthermore, the Police of Reykjavik were consulted, and have since been internationally awarded for their use of Facebook (see Iceland Review, 2012), in part because they reply to every comment. Although Óskar was advised by lawyers not to use Facebook (because one 'bad' comment could lead to them being sued) he followed the advice of the Mayor and the police, and began to use a Facebook page. Facebook is now used in Breiðholt to broadcast news and represent an active media for constructive comments and information flow on various neighborhood topics. There are two pages; one is a 'like' only page. The other Facebook page is a page created by a citizen organization where people can comment and post material. That page started a couple of years ago with a few hundred members. Today it represents a communication pathway between the public bodies and their citizens with more than 5000 members, and where Breiðholt citizens can bring practical and fun ideas or suggestions that potentially can improve the quality of the neighborhood (see Bojica et al, 2016).

These pages were initially consumed with negativity, and began to regurgitate the negative image of Breiðholt at that time (e.g. negative remarks about neighborhood shortcomings). However, by not overly controlling content, and by assuming a stance of asking people to talk nicely, the Facebook page is one of the most positive engagement mediums that the Project has used. The media monitor the Facebook page and take positive (and occasionally negative) news from the page.



Fig. 4-5 The Breiðholt (on the left) and the Breiðholt Facebook Page (on the right)

A key focus of the Breiðholt Project is Gerðuberg, and the use of existing facilities and people to provide new services. Integral to this was the Culture Centre: a multifunctional facility for citizens, which hosts a library, activities for elderly people, sewing and carpentry laboratories and spaces for numerous activities organised by citizens. Through an initiative called Education Now, Icelandic courses were created, held at this building. This comprised of Icelandic and Leadership training for women. A further example is how the Kindergarten is used after hours for information-sharing surrounding bank loans and housing. The Elementary School is also used by parents to teach their children their mother tongue. An environment was created that could be

accessed independently. The courses are free, and there is an attitude of “here’s the key, you can use it”, which is helping people in the community to learn.



Fig. 6-7 The Culture Centre of Gerðuberg in Breiðholt (on the left) and activities to engage the immigrants in Breiðholt (on the right)

3.3 THE BREIÐHOLT PROJECT: ACTIONS

There are a number of benefits to actors. First, people have been asked ‘how do you feel?’, thus giving them voice. Feedback from citizens is that they have opportunities to do things that they cannot do at home, and these activities are mostly free. Óskar communicated with capitalists in the neighbourhood, and they are happy because they have been investing money into property and prices are now rising more than anticipated. Citizens are positive about the services being provided. Overall, the benefits include: empowerment; integration; and innovation – both for, and importantly with, the citizens. Staff have noticed different attitudes, both displayed in the media and in daily engagement with citizens using the different services. There is a reported increased sense of community amongst Breiðholt residents. This has been evidenced through the pleasure that people have gained through participating in the various projects; the third sector is more active within the community; and, for the first time, the local committee has created a policy for the district. Further positive outcomes include that fewer people are in need of financial support; reading skills have increased; small centres are being revived; and citizens of Breiðholt are amongst the most active in voting on neighbourhood projects. However, there is a problem: how can we better integrate immigrants into Breiðholt?

4 THE BREIÐHOLT CONGRESS

Since an initial meeting in 2011, there have been efforts to hold a bi-annual Congress in Breiðholt. The Congress is interesting to focus on, as it is an open platform for the citizens of Breiðholt to influence the development of their neighbourhood. Participants are comprised of citizens and representatives of the city policy and planning departments. The Congress has the form of an open meeting, with presentations and workshop sessions focussing on specific issues and challenges. Citizens and city officials work together in workshop groups, giving citizens first-hand access to communication with the decision-making actors of the city, as well as direct impact on strategies and action plans for their neighbourhood. Discussions between delegates focus on a number of themes, including: parents and schools; planning; environmental issues and services; and preventative grassroots work.

Breiðholt officials wanted to turn this meeting around to involve citizens – this is an old-fashioned City Council meeting, but using innovative public participation approaches, like the the world café method. The world café is a collaborative design process in which a café ambiance is created and participants discuss a question or

issue in small groups around the café tables (for further information on the world café method see, i.a., Prewitt, 2011 and The World Café Community Foundation, 2015). Furthermore, in the Breiðholt Congress exhibitions are displayed showcasing examples of good practice, and people are encouraged to attend and participate. The level of attendance at the Congress fluctuates, but higher turnout is typical when the Mayor/politicians are due to attend, as opposed to just managers and citizens. The outcome/results of the Congress are posted on social media, and surveys are used to test ideas and to seek input. Annually, new residents in Breiðholt receive a posted letter in English and Icelandic telling them about the services they are entitled to, and how they can get involved in the Congress.

The Breiðholt Congress does not make demands, but asks how officials can work better with residents. Initially people contributed with statements such as “we want better paths”, and “we want better swimming pools”. But gradually, more considered ideas were proposed. One idea was a building exclusively for the elderly. Óskar worked with people to convince them that it would be better to get people more involved – people were taught how to use Facebook, and slowly people started to see the benefits of working together. When asked what the demographic of those in attendance at the Congress is, Óskar stated that it is predominantly older males. City officials are trying to engage more people by using creative methods including: words, imagination, hands – this is in a bid to engage people with disabilities, immigrants, and young people. The Planning for Real project is an example of how children can have a say about their neighbourhood through use of this model.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the quality of life in our cities, nowadays it is more than ever necessary a focus on the individuals and a re-affirmation of a people-centred planning vision (e.g. in the “People Friendly City” concept developed by Busi - see, i.a., Busi, 2009; Tiboni and Rossetti, 2012), to create smart strategies for sustainable and inclusive urban environments: the Breiðholt Project is an example of a very people-focused approach.

Overall, the Breiðholt Project was successful. Integral to this success is the importance of ‘people’ in the process, and utilising bridge makers (key stakeholders/community leaders) to build trust through face-to-face interactions with citizens. A lesson learned is that formal and impersonal interactions between officials and citizens are unfavourably received. Further, with regards to promotion of the Congress, reaching out to people through mass marketing is impersonal and therefore unsuccessful. There is a need to more heavily utilise the invaluable resource of bridge makers and, indeed, to identify a bridge maker within each community subgroup in order to lower the barriers for participation. These designated bridge makers would self-promote within their own community. A member of the community could be trained up to be an ambassador for the Congress. The Breiðholt Congress works relatively well. However, at present it fails to engage more than ‘the usual suspects’. When immigrants are in attendance at the Congress (which is seldom) and translators are used, this delays proceedings, and can cause frustration as it interrupts the natural flow of the meeting. There is a need to look at ways to better accommodate immigrants, people with disabilities, and to attract young people to the meeting. When referring to people with disabilities, it is also important to be aware of the heterogeneity of disability, i.e. not to think narrow-mindedly about the ‘accessibility’ of the meeting venue (e.g. wheelchair access) but also to think carefully about the atmosphere, environment and space that the meeting is held in, and how this may need to be altered for a range of different psychosocial needs. Following the observations and the case study analysed in Breiðholt, and also considering the interactions with different stakeholders, we propose the following recommendations for the further development of both the Breiðholt Project and the Breiðholt Congress initiatives.

Breiðholt project Recommendations:

- more shared knowledge among different departments of the city (sharing best practices);

- work on the physical structure of Breiðholt (e.g. improve walkability; the family centre is not central, so create paths to increase accessibility and clearly mark pathways) - neighborhoods plans are being drafted for Breiðholt, so now is the time to act;
- attract people to Breiðholt (e.g. creating new services/art/attractions). This will help to eradicate the image of Breiðholt as a 'ghetto';
- recruit more immigrants onto the staff team.

Breiðholt Congress Recommendations:

- seek feedback from citizens on the way that the Congress is currently run (e.g. format, location, timing), and also how citizens would like to be involved (be as participatory as possible);
- survey those that do not currently attend: what are their reasons for non-participation?;
- drawing on this feedback, alter the format of the Congress so that more people can get involved e.g. immigrants, people with disabilities, and young people (e.g. the Congress could be video-streamed online);
- circulate a summary of the Congress in a number of languages (although Icelandic, English and Polish translations have been used before, this fails to include a large proportion of Breiðholt residents), and also in Braille (for those visually impaired);
- better utilise bridge makers (encourage more participation within individual groups).

Furthermore, we recommend that other scholars working in a range of disciplines, including planning and urban design, should review the recommendations we make here for Breiðholt, and consider how they can be applied to other developments/regenerations/territorial contexts.

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IMAGE SOURCES

Fig. 1: Map from the city of Reykjavik website www.reykjavik.is

Fig. 2: Map taken from the www.icelandicartmaps.com website

Fig. 3: Aerial view taken from Google Map

Fig. 4: Logo from the city of Reykjavik website www.reykjavik.is

Fig. 5: Picture taken from the Facebook page of the Breiðholt community

Fig. 6: Authors' own

Fig. 7: Picture taken from a presentation by Dr. Oskar Olafson