

Citizens as Knowledge Producers in Urban Change: Can Participation Change Procedures and Systems?

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Introduction

After a fairly long period of disinterest following the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of increased citizen participation in planning has now developed into a significant movement in Europe.¹ Reasons for this include the rapid global, social, and environmental changes taking place,² the reconsideration of power-relations,³ and issues related to justice and resilience.⁴ The role of civil society has been discussed extensively in Europe during recent years, yet because there is no consensus on why civil society should play a prominent role in planning –indeed scholars have presented contradictory logics about citizen involvement – no development concerning citizen participation in planning takes place.⁵ In Sweden, where the present author is based, the government established a commission in 1997 to combat the weakening legitimacy of democracy.⁶ This resulted in a major investigatory report suggesting that ‘deliberative qualities’ be included as a complement to representative democracy.⁷ Precisely how this should be put into practice was not made clear, therefore contradictory logics concerning the participatory turn are still prevalent in Sweden. This article presents a Swedish study that allows us to consider the topic empirically.

Case study in Sweden

The study was conducted as part of a research project entitled ‘The interplay between citizen initiatives and invited participation in urban planning’, funded by Formas, the Swedish Research Council, from 2011 to 2013. The project involved

a group of twelve participants, half of whom were PhD researchers, while the other half were public employees or entrepreneurs. The aim was to increase knowledge about the ‘interplace’; i.e., to learn how invitations from authorities to dialogue, and initiatives undertaken by inhabitants to satisfy their needs and demands, can meet in order to employ these activities in urban change.⁸ A further, partial aim was to apply this knowledge to ordinary planning systems and procedures.

The approach taken for the project was to participate in the various kinds of local interactive activities taking place.⁹ It also included case-based participant observation and key informant interviews.¹⁰ The project participants came from different disciplines and realms, and the project results were equally varied (see www.mellanplats.se). The two cases presented below – ‘The Meeting Place’ and ‘The Patio’ – represent only part of the project.¹¹

The case study area of Hammarkullen

Before describing the cases, a brief description of the study area is required. This article focuses on empowerment issues in a specific context: the stigmatised outskirts of metropolitan areas. Hammarkullen,¹² the case study area, has a population of 8,000 and is situated in Angered in the north of Gothenburg, Sweden’s second largest city. Nearly half of Angered’s (48,000) inhabitants were born abroad, compared with one-fifth of the population for the whole of Gothenburg, and the unemployment rate is high. Most of the area was built during

1968-70 as part of the 'million programme', when one million homes were constructed in ten years to overcome the housing shortage and deprivation in city centres. Over the years, many refugees have settled in the area, initially Latin American immigrants, who have had a strong cultural influence. Hammarkullen hosts Sweden's biggest carnival and is characterised by staunch political commitment and many vibrant associations. Since 2010 there has also been a university Urban Studies Centre in Hammarkullen, which combines higher education and research with community outreach activities.

Like most areas from this period, Hammarkullen's structural design includes high-rise buildings in the centre, surrounded by lower apartment buildings forming large courtyards, outside of which are semi-detached and detached houses. [fig. 1] Public transportation to the inner city is available by tram and takes about 15 minutes. Hammarkullen is often attributed a 'territorial stigma'.¹³ Today, Sweden is suffering from a severe educational problem related to housing segregation: a significantly larger proportion of lower-secondary school pupils in stigmatised suburban centres in Sweden (sometimes as high as 70%) fail to pass maths, English or Swedish, which means that they do not meet the requirements for entering upper secondary school.¹⁴ Moreover, the socioeconomic and educational gaps are increasing at an alarming rate. Connected to these difficulties, rapid changes in society have weakened the public sector, which now has problems dealing with the complex challenges posed by the current organisation and strained economic circumstances.

The Meeting Place

The Meeting Place was a grassroots initiative that existed between 2010 and 2012 and was situated in the local square in Hammarkullen. [fig. 2] It was a non-profit organisation, religiously and politically independent, with about one hundred members from different cultural backgrounds. The Meeting

Place originated from a network formed to protest against heavy cutbacks in schools and youth care. After a period of quite successful demonstrations, some members of the network formed the Meeting Place to contribute to local development through constructive dialogue. Meeting Place members reached out to a large number of the residents with their many different activities, their aim being to increase confidence in the future of Hammarkullen, combat prejudice, exchange knowledge and skills between groups, and create meaningful opportunities for employment. Their activities took place during afternoons, evenings and weekends throughout the year and included courses in computer use, sewing, cooking, aerobics and gardening. Many of the visitors were women and children, but there were also men, as well as a mixture of cultural backgrounds. Members hosted many different kinds of meetings where residents could talk with public representatives. They also acted as a voice for residents at meetings held by the city district administration: such meetings were generally not attended by residents participating in the courses mentioned above – partly because of language problems but also due to social exclusion mechanisms. The Meeting Place initiative was financed mainly through support from employment services, but they also received minor contributions from local housing associations and other sources. However, lack of adequate funding was a constant major problem.

Our role as researchers in the Meeting Place project involved supporting its development without interfering in the formulation of its mission. We discussed with the participants how the work was proceeding, made suggestions about the kind of actions they might take, took part in meetings when public authorities were present, and interacted in various ways on topics of interest to the residents, such as mini-lectures on democracy, entrepreneurship and urban gardening. Activities were documented and a number of participants were also



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: The structural design of Hammarkullen, built as part of the 'million programme', can be described as including high-rise buildings in the centre, surrounded by lower apartment buildings forming large courtyards, outside of which semi-detached and detached houses are located. © Albert Holmgren.
Fig. 2: The premises of the Meeting Place seen from Hammarpark. © author.

interviewed afterwards.

The Meeting Place initiative initially experienced a 'boom' and the red cottage on the square was often filled with people. The members also had a good relationship with the higher education centre in the area and with some local and municipal politicians. In general, however, their relationship with the city district administration was strained from the start, and, in the long run, the authorities did not adequately support the Meeting Place. On the contrary, the residents felt the authorities had worked against it. There were obvious signs of this. It was unclear for a long time whether they had really been given the premises despite having a key, the rental periods were short, the written contract did not arrive until the rental periods ended, and, perhaps the most serious problem, some civil servants spread negative rumours. One claimed that the association had religious affiliations, even though the statutes stated the opposite, and these purported affiliations were used as an argument for not supporting the initiative because it did not 'represent all residents'. For an initial support period, the employment services provided a salary for two of the residents involved; when this period came to an end and the two members asked for salary support from the city district administration in exchange for agreed-upon services, they did not receive a response. When they turned in frustration to local politicians, referring to the written policy document on urban empowerment, civil servants accused them of not following the policy line. They waited for a long period and were ultimately denied any salary.

Nonetheless, the Meeting Place did receive a great deal of support from other local authorities. One of the residents eventually received a 25% salary from the authorities for a limited period, and some civil servants actively supported the group. However, the above-mentioned problems resulted in sick leave due to burnout for two of the residents involved, and when the situation did not improve

in any permanent way, the association decided to close down the Meeting Place. After December 2012, the enthusiasts dispersed. The cottage has since been used sporadically by the district administration and lent to other associations. Some civil servants argue that the cottage should be demolished, while others feel it should once again be used for local activities to populate the square.

The Patio

The Patio was a participation project. It had a total budget of 220,000 euros and took place in 2012 and 2013. Its scope was to design a stage or a similar structure in the central park next to the square as an outdoor counterpart of the Meeting Place. The project was carried out as part of an extensive municipal initiative called 'Development Northeast', funded by the European Union. A project leader who specialised in both architecture and social work was appointed. She collaborated closely with residents from the Meeting Place and often used the red cottage for citizen dialogue. Her task was not only to implement the stage project, but also to inform city district staff about what had been learnt about citizen participation in earlier research (see note 12). Her goal was therefore twofold: she was to carry out the Patio project by 'co-designing' it with residents, and she was to learn from it, not only in terms of her own involvement, but also on behalf of her colleagues in the city district administration.

As the project had already been funded when the outreach activities began in spring 2012, it had considerable limitations, and these circumstances turned out to be detrimental. The square had been chosen as the designated place when the funding was sought in 2011, and it was said that a 'covered meeting place' would be designed in the form of a removable, open tent. When this idea was discussed locally in 2012, the common response was 'it will burn – don't do it!'. This was a reaction to the recent heavy cutbacks in the local elementary schools, and many inhabitants were frustrated and furious. The

design process therefore needed to reconsider the actual structure to be built. This was done in collaboration with local stakeholders and included a shared discussion as to whether something should be built at all at that moment, or whether the funding should perhaps be returned. Finally, the funding agency approved a change of plan: building a permanent structure was to be permitted. The location also had to be changed to the park due to property ownership issues in the square. At that point in time, a stage was already being discussed as a possible outcome of the design process, but the project was named 'the Patio' so as not to limit the imagination of the participants at the beginning of the process.

Next, the project leader commissioned two part-time architects skilled in co-design to lead the Patio design process [fig. 3], which began in May and ended in October 2012. The aim was to co-design the Patio, thus the whole process was to be capacity building, to empower the actors involved and improve the urban space of the park. The design process consisted of a number of selected tools. In open meetings held outdoors, several hundred residents were involved to some extent, while the four design workshops attracted around 15 residents on each occasion.¹⁵

Our role in the research project was to simultaneously support the design process and learn from it. We therefore documented the activities and interviewed participants afterwards. The process of building the stage took place during the summer of 2013, and the inauguration was held in September; in other words, after the research project had been completed, which meant the research team was unable to document and analyse that part of the process. However, since we are still active in the area as part of the higher-education centre, we have paid it some attention. In contrast, the entire co-design phase has been analysed. It was largely considered a positive experience in terms of its democratic aspects and results. Nevertheless,

some people, mainly civil servants, felt it was quite time-consuming. The two architects in charge spent approximately 700 hours on the project, the major part spent in communication with the residents. Another criticism, mainly voiced by scholars and residents, was whether society should engage local residents in the design of such a limited structure when there are other problems, presumably larger in scale and more serious, that they can and wish to engage in.

Developing planning procedures and professions

To a large extent, the conclusions drawn from research on citizen participation in planning, in which citizens are involved in a new role in democracy, have been negative.¹⁶ Many researchers stress the danger of uncritical attitudes towards institutional responsibility and accountability and argue that there is a risk that citizen participation will lead to social exclusion.¹⁷ There are three types of literature that present more positive outcomes or conclusions: firstly, handbooks and instructions; secondly, methodological considerations also focusing on the role of researchers, and thirdly, forward-looking learning processes intended to find new ways of developing professions and planning procedures.

The third type of literature offers critical reflection on citizen participation, based on research that focuses to a great extent on institutional changes and roles.¹⁸ In this kind of literature, citizen participation processes are considered 'arenas of hope' that have the potential to create new power relations and influence institutional procedures and systems.¹⁹ The pros and cons of citizen participation will be considered here by comparing the two cases described above, and discussing how the dialogue was carried out.

This reasoning brings us back to the discussion of results, and the question of whether and how to involve citizens in small-scale design projects. Quite

a few researchers have focused on the outcome of citizen participation, asking what society can gain from dialogue and citizen participation in the periods between elections. Supporters claim that participation may not only be a vehicle of empowerment,²⁰ but may also enhance the quality of our cities and make them more human,²¹ develop new aesthetic ideals,²² reduce housing prices,²³ and lead to actual future building development initiatives in which 'the market' shows disinterest.²⁴ As we have seen clearly in our case studies, if handled well, we agree with research emphasising that participation may help to develop democracy and work as a vehicle for equity and efficiency in promoting the representative system.²⁵ Moreover, such participation may result in municipal bodies being influenced by real community needs and neighbourhood demands.²⁶ The Meeting Place not only organised highly appreciated activities that populated the square (which had a positive security and safety outcome for residents in the area), but its initiators also brought to the table ideas and demands concerning the schools, youth care and the physical environment when they met with civil servants, politicians, researchers, teachers and students in different types of discussions. Hence, they functioned as knowledge bearers and spokespersons for other residents they saw regularly at the various organised activities – people who for various reasons (language difficulties or feelings of exclusion) never attended the participatory meetings they had been invited to. In this way, initiatives such as the Meeting Place may be considered a complement to the representative system, because in stigmatised areas such as Hammarkullen, voter participation is low, as is the voicing of complaints in formal planning processes.

In the Patio project, however, it was not common for inhabitants to explicitly, and on their own initiative, function as spokespersons for others. It is interesting to note that the success of such a process was instead *dependent* on the Meeting Place initiators, who served as links and knowledge

bearers. Could it be that for top-down invitations to work well, they must have access to these kinds of bottom-up citizen initiatives? If this is the case, then the authorities need to reconsider how this initiative was received. Clearly, because the Meeting Place no longer exists, the approaches cannot be considered fruitful. We will look more closely at this question below.

Conflicts often give rise to stalled processes, although many researchers and local activists agree on a reversed logic, according to which opposition and disagreements should be considered relevant indications of what the community needs and wants,²⁷ and used as triggers for learning.²⁸ This perspective has been prevalent in quite a few studies on community engagement. The following set of guidelines for planning and implementing local development work is one such example.²⁹ Indeed, the following four guidelines could easily have been used when the Meeting Place was set up, as a way for the authorities to prepare for institutional change by asking themselves:

1. How can we find new ways to support citizen initiatives with monetary, personnel and technical resources?
2. How can we promote more demand-driven local development work that grows out of grassroots organisation and is not initiated by civil servants?
3. How can we enable grassroots leaders to build and preserve external ties with other community organisations and with public authorities at higher levels (technical, legal, economical experts)?
4. When collaborating, how can we help grassroots organisations and civil servants maintain a 'creative tension' between one another – one that is neither too friendly nor too hostile?

Perhaps the Meeting Place would still exist had such an attitude towards the exercising of public authority taken place. Naturally, cooperation implies teamwork, and both parties would have required



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 3: Full-scale model of the codesigned stage in Hammarpark, to be further discussed with involved inhabitants. © author.

Fig 4: The builder who got the contract employed two youths from Hammarkullen full-time for 3.5 months, giving them a union salary based on their ages: 17 and 22 years. © José Romero.

shared values, especially with regard to the fourth guideline. Nonetheless, judging from the outcome, we may well claim that the successful development of the Patio project benefitted from the Meeting Place, but the benefits were not sufficiently reciprocal for the latter to survive.

Let us return to the Patio project. Once the collaborative design process employed in the Patio had been completed, the park and nature administration was made responsible for public procurement for building the stage. The person in charge had followed the design process on site, collaborating closely with the project leader. In this way, she was both informed and influenced, which resulted in an extension of the project in order to make major improvements to the neglected park. Local residents had been demanding improvements for several years, and achieving their goal constitutes another example of how citizen participation in small-scale design projects may inadvertently influence a larger context. The major challenge for the person in charge was to succeed with a form of 'socially responsible public procurement' that would meet the demands the residents had expressed³⁰ – a procurement that allowed several youths from the area, 'the good guys', to be involved in building the stage and the park, a requirement that had been stressed by the youth and youth workers involved in the design process. Such involvement was considered crucial if the younger residents were to make it *their* place, rather than have it fall into the hands of drug dealers and other criminal elements that threaten any residents who report crimes. Other local stakeholders, among them a group of artists, also stressed the need for social tenure to occur in a new and innovative way. Otherwise, they claimed, building the stage would not contribute to positive social development.

The procurement went well. The builder who won the contract employed two youths from Hammarkullen full-time for 3.5 months, paying them

a union salary based on their ages: seventeen and twenty-two [fig. 4, 5 and 6]. Five other younger youths from Hammarkullen were also involved and received some payment for their work, which was to design, under the supervision of an artist, a mosaic border for the stage. One of them, who does not attend school, was also given the chance to observe and learn from the professional tiler who laid the mosaic tiles.

Although based on limited empirical material, the two case studies outlined above clearly show that citizen participation in design and planning *can* influence systems and procedures. The key difference between the Meeting Place and the Patio was that one was a bottom-up citizen initiative and the other a top-down invitation to participate from the authorities. Had only one approach been adopted, then the effect on procedures and systems would presumably not have occurred, since neither approach alone had access to everything that was needed. The Meeting Place initiative, well rooted in civil society, and the Patio invitation, well connected to the public authorities, seem to have merged into something that is potentially able to change the municipal system of social procurement. Although the process could have been better handled, the combined strategies imply that politicians and civil servants at higher levels were informed about what citizens wanted and about their ideas for further developing the community. Moreover, the strategies used imply that *knowledge* from the residents was used to change procedures and systems. They believed their knowledge informed the authorities about *how* the social tenure of building projects needs to be carried out in order to meet local needs and develop the community, instead of worsening an already difficult situation. Hence, as a result of invitations for citizen participation in a design project, invitations that led from an earlier citizen initiative, knowledge was developed that has the potential to improve the entire municipal procurement system. Nevertheless, although the above-mentioned



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig 5: The stage has almost taken shape. Five youths from Hammarkullen were paid for three weeks during the summer to design the mosaic that will cover the edge of the stage. © José Romero.

Fig. 6: This photograph, taken after the completion of the article, shows the opening party of the stage. © author.

process has indeed taken place, there is as yet no proof of *systematic* change: the process has not resulted in revised written documents or instructions for how social tenure should be conducted within the municipality. Moreover, sufficient time has not elapsed to determine whether more informal procedures in the municipality or city district have been affected by a learning process that involved both civil servants and residents.

Conclusions

What can these two cases teach us about the 'inter-place' between top-down invitations and bottom-up initiatives in planning?³⁰ Probably the most interesting result of this research is the indication that an institutional and systematic change (of tenure) can take place as a result of citizen participation in planning. It is institutional change that makes a difference in the long run – because change of this kind does not depend on enthusiasts whose commitment may only be temporary. Yet neither can planning be understood merely as a technical process that anyone with access to a checklist can undertake – it is clearly a social process requiring skilled staff. A great risk occurs when citizen initiatives such as the Meeting Place receive the kind of treatment it did, because the frustration and fatigue of the residents involved may well create a ripple effect locally, thus undermining future opportunities for collaboration. Planners active in communities need specific knowledge and skills to guide them. In suburbs like Hammarkullen, where many people have limited confidence in official government representatives, the trust capital is scarce – and there is little room for mistakes. This brings us to a discussion of the role of the planner. Several researchers have maintained that a new role for planners is evolving, designating titles such as *action planner*,³¹ *advocacy planner*,³² or *reverse planner*.³³ What these perspectives on planning all have in common, apart from being based in neighbourhoods or communities, is an awareness of the need to work at all levels: 'The rationality of action planning, the

workshop, street work and plan-making, lies in the proposition that once sufficient work is done at the neighbourhood level, pressure begins to build up to act at city level and emergence to take place'.³⁴ If we wish to promote the kind of social responsibility that has been discussed here, some kind of extra support for planning is needed in the socially exposed and stigmatised neighbourhoods of the million programme suburbs of Sweden today.

Notes

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Biography

Jenny Stenberg is Associate Professor in urban design and planning at the Department of Architecture, Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden. Her action-oriented research deals with social aspects of sustainable development, and particularly with citizen participation in planning the physical urban environment – especially stigmatised areas of the 'million programme' built in the 1960s and 1970s.