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Using local knowledge in urban design practice

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Nowadays community participation has become an ubiquitous element within urban design practice. Several scholars argue that collaborative or co-productive processes contribute to a more immediate form of democracy and an increasing level of support - hence leading to a smoother process (Healey 2006, Innes and Booher 2010). A less well-known argument is that it also provides a source of specific knowledge, in this case referred to as *local knowledge* (Geertz 1983, Corburn 2005, Fischer 2005). This paper investigates the advantage of this local knowledge in relation to the expertise of planners or urban designers. While experts dispose of a rather aggregated and abstract form of knowledge, the lay knowledge of inhabitants and users of an area is contextual and specific. It is bound to a local context, informal and based on common sense and experience. Due to an increasingly diversified society, the cultivation and implementation of this site-specific knowledge gains momentum in design practice. After all each (sub)culture has its own proper values, standards, needs and wishes that are projected upon one shared space.

This paper investigates the advantages of local knowledge within the planning and design of spatial projects. The research is conducted through the development of an urban renewal plan for a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Antwerp, Belgium. This neighbourhood was chosen because of its high level of ethnic and cultural diversity. Furthermore, it is a simple fact that the majority of the inhabitants in these neighbourhoods - poor, low-skilled and of foreign origins - seldom take part in organised participation processes. Citizens, especially the marginalized, are not apt to think in terms of goals but rather of daily life. This research examines whether focus group interviews succeed in reaching these so-called "hard to reach groups" and what kind of knowledge emerges from these interviews. The interviews were organised in collaboration with a community centre that maintains close contacts with the residents.

The interviews bear witness to the assets of local knowledge on different levels within the design of an urban renewal plan. To begin with, it provides specific and additional knowledge about certain places in the neighbourhood. Secondly, it exposes the relationships between the various cultures and how the cohabitation of that many different nationalities puts additional pressure on the dense morphological fabric. In the third place, these conversations discern and approve the top-down GIS-analysis of the area. They also improve the procedural democracy; including new and previously silenced voices, especially those of marginalized people who seldom have an impact on the decisions that affect their lives, is a matter of justice and authentic democracy. Finally, these focus group conversations have an informative value to the participants. Talking about their neighbourhood has led to ideas for a more active participation in the improvement of the neighbourhood.

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