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Romice, Ombretta and Porta, Sergio and Shah, Mahnaz (2010) *The psychology of engagement: communities in action.* Conservation Bulletin, 63. pp. 15-17.

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The Psychology of Engagement

People relate to places for all sorts of different reasons. If we want to capture their interest we need to understand the nature of those bonds.

The search for sustainable urban development engages politicians, professionals, investors and not least citizens in very complex tasks. The revitalisation of entire deprived communities is one of these challenges, and requires major changes at the social and political level, which will in turn determine the kinds of physical transformation that are brought about. Those directly affected by such change are increasingly asserting their right to have a say in the transformation process in order to prevent the mistakes of the past (Towers 1997), to identify, reinforce and stabilise new roles, and to become doers rather than those done-to (Forester 1999).

These pressures for engagement make involving clients in the design process a fundamental requirement for designers, architects and planners. Many different forms of such involvement have been discussed, implemented and sometimes discarded. Public engagement nevertheless remains a key requirement of our political agendas and needs to be understood and practised in a satisfactory manner for all. Urban regeneration ought to be planned, designed and implemented in partnership with communities if it is to deliver robust, cared-for and lasting places.

While there is general agreement that a community's direct experience and knowledge of an urban area can play a constructive role in its regeneration – not least by developing a sense of collective satisfaction and ownership – the explanations of how this comes about are less clear or known. In fact, users engage with the environment in a much more complex manner than the design profession is generally willing to acknowledge. The effects of this engagement can also have lasting and strong repercussions on its users. For example, the following attitudes and/or activities have been shown to be highly dependent on the qualities of the physical environment: people's choice, frequency and modality of using places; their reactions to places; their habits. But environmental impact can be even more pervasive, affecting also our psychological and physiological states: senses of well-being or fatigue associated with certain places; preferences for some places rather than others; self-esteem; an interest in or understanding of space; a positive association of place with community or a negative association with crime (Romice 2001).

The good news – based on strong empirical

Communities in action

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The Urban Design Studies Unit (UDSU) at the University of Strathclyde has concentrated for a long time on understanding and developing fulfilling ways of conducting community involvement. Its work is based not only on design and the traditional pool of participatory practices, but also on psychology and 'environment-behaviour studies' – in other words, those subjects that examine the relationships between people and space. Design has a strong effect on people, hence it ought to be based on a clear understanding of the way in which people engage with the environment around them.

Design has a strong effect on people, hence it ought to be based on a clear understanding of the way they engage with the environment around them.
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research evidence – is that there is a widespread consensus on the way in which the environment is evaluated and appreciated, and in particular that perception of the environment is less qualitative and subjective than many people think it is. This means that it is amenable to being formally studied and that some answers can be drawn from it, especially in terms of identifying the environmental factors that people consider to be significant to them. However, this does not mean that we all share the same values. Education and professional development are the factors that set us apart the most in this respect: for example, the responses of architects and planners can differ greatly from those of lay people.

This provides unconditional evidence that the environmental experience of users needs to be taken into consideration during the design process if the end product is to achieve desirable forms of engagement, reactions and long-term attitudes. This consideration must in turn be based on a clear understanding of what it is that the users are saying.

To us at UDSU, this was the starting point for the development of a new tool for community engagement. At its core is the belief that engagement is crucial for the long-term development and performance of a place; that engagement needs to be based upon issues developed within the place by its own community with the support of professionals; that it needs to be a long-term process developed at the heart of the community; that it should extend beyond design and delivery to on-going maintenance, management and ownership.

After studying current participatory practices (and there are volumes available!), we observed the way people used them. One of our most important observations was that people were often engaged in a number of actions only weakly related to one other. This lack of narrative, of a clear framework to underpin their engagement effort, often leads to a time-consuming and distracting dispersal of energy and commitment. Even more worryingly, disjoined exercises in engagement result in a fragmented learning experience and end up having very limited impacts. When resources are limited and pressures are great, this is certainly not an efficient way to operate.

Our response was to create a framework of steps for building a comprehensive 'neighbourhood vision' – one in which all information and decisions can be easily understood, in which the goals of the various participants are clear, and in which every step contributes to a picture which is progressively refined. The framework's structure is based upon the understanding that people's evaluative image of the city is hierarchical (Nasar 1998): they have distinct images of their region, city, neighbourhoods, roads and individual houses; to each of these images they attach a corresponding level of detail, which expands in direct relation to their familiarity with the place. Time and movement also play a role in these evaluative images: changes within the day, seasons, the age of the perceivers and their purposes can all have significant repercussions on the images constructed.

The framework we have established uses

Communities in Action – a structured handbook for encouraging people to become involved in discussions about local planning.
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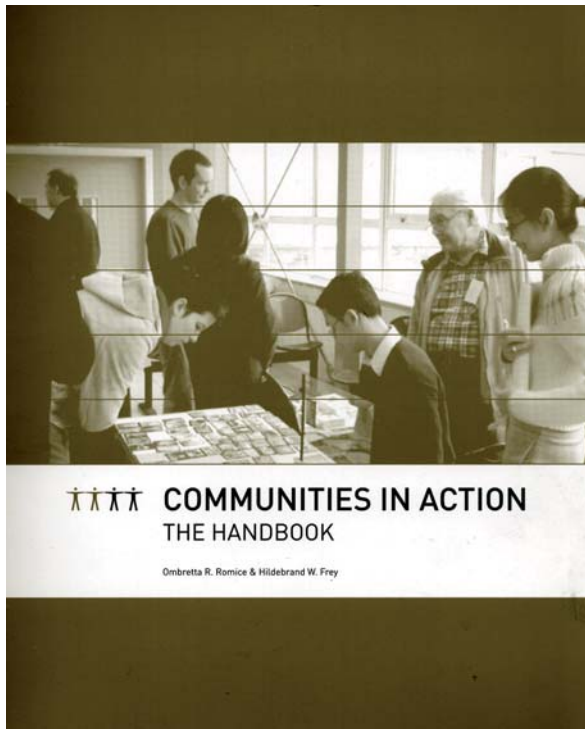
several evaluative methods to study the process of environmental experience, ranging from immediate perception via the formation of very personal, symbolic, functional and spatial hierarchies to the factors that observers consider more important in a space and their preferences for design alternatives. While none of these methods on its own will generate a complete assessment of an area's qualities and deficiencies, their combination within a structured sequence can assist in generating a comprehensive improvement plan for urban areas.

This work is summarised within the *Communities in Action* handbook*,* a structured approach to the gradual elaboration of criteria, values and judgements to use for the formulation of area-regeneration briefs. It studies actions in relation to places, establishes roles in specific contexts, it is dynamic, and it recognises and adapts itself and its procedures to changes in patterns and meanings of places and activities.

Two basic – but seemingly contradictory – ideas are at the core of the *Communities in Action* handbook. In the first place, everybody has their own way of seeing, interpreting and assessing the environment which is relevant for its development (Kelly's 'theory of personal constructs', 1955). Secondly, as much as participation is desirable, very few people are willing to be actively engaged in such activities. Problems arise if the loop does not close between those who take part and those who do not. We have resolved this problem by structuring the consultative process in two phases. The first

involves, in a rather intense commitment, a small team of representatives of a local community and designers. This phase is 'issue specific': the team collects, confronts, analyses and organises information about an area and identifies the major issues of concern regarding its urban features; then, it identifies criteria, parameters and priorities for their evaluation. The outcome is a range of factors and scales for the assessment of the issues identified. In the second 'contextual' phase these criteria, parameters and priorities are used to capture the view of larger portions of the community. Design parameters are developed from these results. This handbook seeks to encourage extensive involvement in a way which is sensitive to what people are actually prepared to do. ■

The handbook will soon be available via **www.strath.ac.uk/architecture/research/udsu-urbandesignstudiesunit**

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