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Minority voice in community design building processes

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Abstract

An old lady´s words during the building process of a participatory design with a community: "But this is what we thought might be ideal?" Versus her husband, a construction worker: "But this is the way it should be done!" When dealing with participatory design processes sometimes the opinion of the experts are the ones always honoured and the minorities, not in quantity but in voice, are underestimated. This paper is based on a case study of three different design processes taken place on the rural community of San Jose de Olaes- Ecuador, dealing with the importance of the voice of the minority, in this case represented by the women of a community, and the men's voice, usually the working force. We will illustrate this process and how it has both positive and negative consequences on the project and community relationships.

1. Introduction

"Minority; a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with, but is subordinate to a more dominant group. As the term is used in the social sciences, this subordinancy is the chief defining characteristic of a minority group." (MarcadorDePosición1) (Encyclopedia Britanica, Inc, 2016) (MarcadorDePosición1) (Encyclopedia Britanica, Inc, 2016)

How minorities act or are really involved on the decision making? Is it necessary to include minorities in the decision making process of the design and implementation of infrastructure on a community?

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This investigation is the result of a process of over a year's work in the community of San José de Olaes developing design-built projects on the basis of participatory design and construction. Based on three different projects we will illustrate the dissimilar ways or appropriation of this participatory design process and how this affects both positive and negative on communities. Our aim is not to categorize the effectiveness of participatory and inclusive methods but to raise awareness on how particular communities and processes need particular approaches; no recipes apply on this kind of projects.

We will first introduce some concepts about inclusion and different level of participation in community design processes, as a foundation, in order to analyze and compare three different design-build processes, the community kitchen, the church and the shadow. We think it is important to compare these three different cases in order to illustrate how, during this period of time, the participatory involvement evolved, leaving us with the question on how pertinent inclusion may be in these type of projects.

Historically, matriarchy and patriarchy have been two models of leading cultures, in which the leader takes action, based on his/her wisdom or their counselors. This has not changed for several communities and countries. And in the name of democracy we have "majorities" which paradoxically are minorities leading processes for the majorities and minorities.

Minorities are not a concept that applies only on matters of number, sometimes majorities in number are minorities in matter of taking decisions and responsibilities, "minority status does not necessarily correlate to population. In some cases one or more so-called minority groups may have a population many times the size of the dominating group, as was the case in South Africa under apartheid (c. 1950–91)" (Encyclopedia Britanica, Inc, 2016)

In Latin America, and the Andes specifically, usually a community is led by the older males that take decisions, frequently they are not majority by number in the community but are the ones that take the economic resources to their families, and because of this fact then they know, or think they know, what their families and communities need in terms of infrastructure. In the other hand, women in communities are mainly meant to take care of children, their homes and community activities.

It has become fashionable, on every level of the decision making process, from states to local government, to talk about participation, especially in communities when they are developing processes for their infrastructure. It is said that it is important to have participatory processes so every voice in the community will be heard and everyone will see their work reflected on the infrastructure, "citizens, individually and collectively, shall participate as leading players in decision making, planning and management of public affairs and in the people's monitoring of State institutions and society and their representatives in an ongoing process of building citizen power. Participation shall be governed by the principles of equality, autonomy, public deliberation, respect for differences, monitoring by the public, solidarity and interculturalism. The participation of citizens in all matters of public interest is a right, which shall be exercised by means of mechanisms of representative, direct and community democracy. (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008). By inclusion, we refer to take account of every member of a community or its representative, minority or majority.

Being socially included means that people have the resources, opportunities and capabilities they need to:
- Learn (participate in education and training) .
- Work (participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including family and career responsibilities).
- Engage (connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities).
- Have a voice (influence decisions that affect them). See Fig.1.

"Design processes that involve user participation concern issues of representation in the early stages of design, when users' needs and expectations are being expressed. A participatory approach is used to investigate the nature of design discussion during the early stages of design. It is shown that the ideology of inclusive design is similar to the ideology of participatory design. The ability of language-use to reveal user preference is explored through the analysis of architect–user conversations. Investigating architect and user interaction revealed that tacit knowledge can be made explicit and the difficulty of generalizing user-needs from user statements." (Luck, 2003)

Socialization, participation and personal leadership are concepts that exists in order to validate inclusion within the decision making process in communities. See Fig.2.
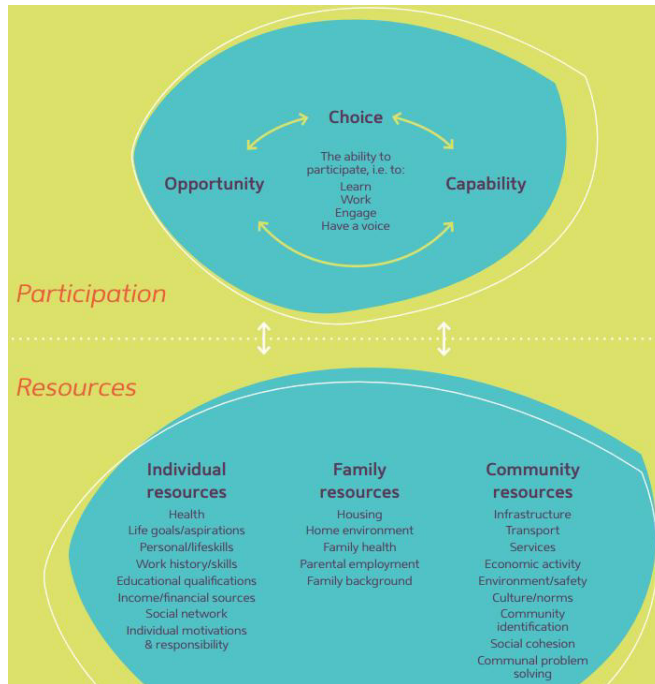
Fig.1. Social inclusion conceptual framework-Participation and resources (BOARD, 2010)

Fig.2. Types of decision making processes

Opinion leader, "- those whose opinions they value. Opinion leaders are found in all strata of society. A specific person can be an opinion leader in certain areas and an opinion follower in others. The more highly a person esteems the opinion leader, the more influential the opinion leader will be in shaping the person´s product and brand choices." (philip kotler, 1997) When a community is ruled by one person that, although not being the elected leader, effectively takes decisions based on his knowledge or his personal believes. "Elsewhere in the world, and even in smaller social units within the democracies, social decisions are sometimes made by single individuals or small groups and sometimes (more and more rarely in this modern world) by a widely encompassing set of traditional rules for making the social choice in any given situation, e.g., a religious code." (Arrow, 1978)

Participation, to have every member of the community involved in the design and or construction process of an infrastructure, "The ability to participate: i.e. to learn, work, engage, have a voice" (BOARD, 2010)

Socialization, to have a design solution already developed and make it accessible for evaluation by all the community in order to validate it. "A natural way of arriving at the collective preference scale would be to say that one alternative is preferred to another if a majority of the community prefer the first alternative to the second." (Arrow, 1978)

In the Andean contexts and specifically in the community of San Jose de Olaes located 25 minutes east of the city of Quito, a farmers community that has been self-isolated from the city, their way of life relies on the economic sustenance from the older men, and the women in the maintenance of the house and raising children. In this context all the community decisions are made by the men, and basically by the opinion leader, that usually is not the president of the community. Everyone in the community relies and trusts on the point of view of this person for its relevance even if he may be wrong or if his decisions are made based on prejudices. The participatory construction process in this community is based on the "minga"[2] in which after taking the decision of having a infrastructure build, all the community, including the minorities, work based on the guidance of the construction workers form the community, usually men 30 to 50 years old. The design of a particular infrastructure is not a concern, how it will be done is said by the men and usually minorities, woman and youngsters are just workforce. In this environment, there projects were designed and built during the same year and these examples will illustrate the way participation and inclusion of minorities was held within the community.

2. **The Church: Participation process.** See Fig.3.

Fig.3. Participation design process

1. We as a participatory design workshop with Con lo que hay, an academic workshop and Ensusitio Arq., a professional studio, where involved in this process.
2. The design took approximately two months of participation from the portion of the community that was interested in this process, mainly women and few men. See Fig.4
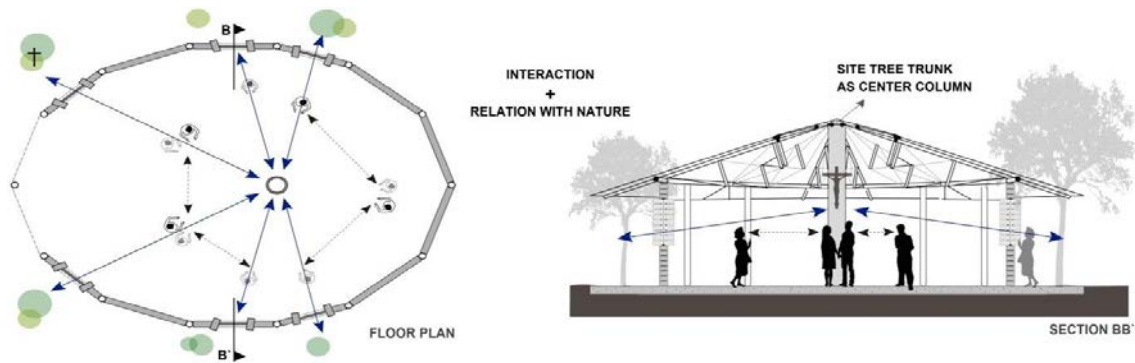

Fig.4. Chapel floor plan and section

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3. During the construction process the women of the community took active action in order to make their decision heard, sometimes strongly against the construction men.
4. The church still is under construction. See Fig.5.

Fig.5. Chapel exterior view, Chapel interior view

   Ideally the chapel represents all the concepts of participation and inclusion that a community must have when developing its infrastructure in order to generate best practices and strong links. All this in our eyes; architects, sociologists, anthropologists involved in the project. But in the eyes of the community, this process was a failure because it is not finished yet. The women of the community after this project reluctantly take part of new participatory design workshops because the construction men blame them for making a design that took too long to build.

3. **The Community kitchen: Opinion leader process**. See Fig.6.

Fig.6. Personal leadership design process

The community on its own faced this project.

1. The design process was on site and took one meeting in which the men of the community show their design based on their construction skills, knowledge and resources.
2. The design was focused on the constructions skills rather than in the women's requirement for cooking, this is a room with one window that has no ventilation or any facility for its main purpose. See Fig.7.
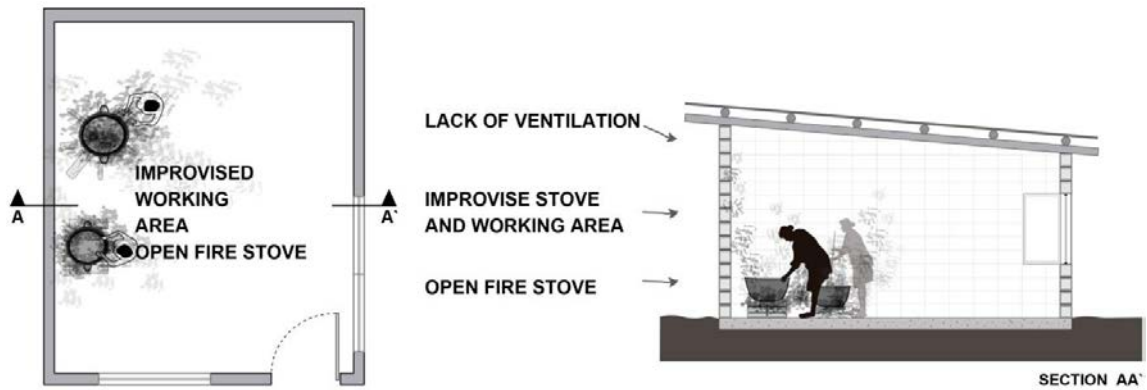
Fig.7. Kitchen floor plan and section

3. The construction was fast and did not require any technological improvement or transfer of technology for the community. See Fig.8.
4. During the construction the men lead the process and the women where mere workforce.
5. The infrastructure was built in three months.

Fig.8. Kitchen external view, Kitchen internal view

4. The shadow: Socialization process. See Fig. 9.

After these two experiences a new infrastructure necessity emerges for the community. In this case, with a smaller group of participants, a few ladies and almost no men it is decided to make a cover, as grandstand to the soccer field, and a playground for the kids.

Fig.9. Socialization design process

1. A group of the minority from the community and the technical team faced this project.

2. The design process was made by the technical team based on these minority requirements and validated by the community via socialization.
3. The design was focused on the requirements of the people who will actually use this infrastructure; lady's and kids rather in the construction system. See Fig.10.
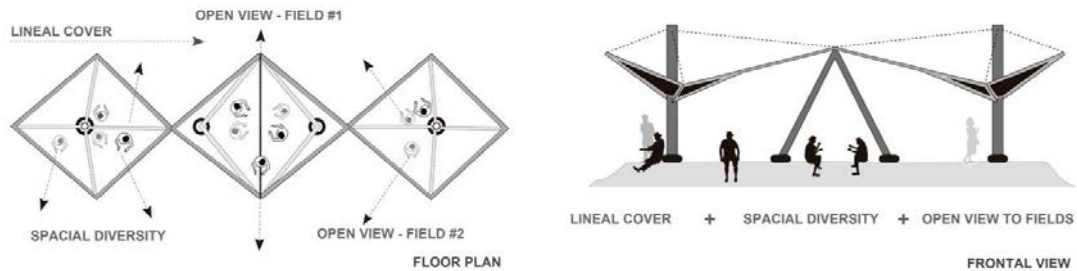

Fig.10. Cover floor plan and elevation

4. The construction was mainly a responsibility of the technical team with the support of a small part from the community including not only the small group of lady's that took part of the design process but most of the lady's form the community.
5. During the construction the technical team led the process and the women shared the responsibility.
6. The infrastructure was design and built in four months. See Fig.11.

Fig.11. Built cover and Cover used by community

5. Conclusion:

Effectiveness in this kind of projects is very difficult to measure since qualitative variables are very subjective. For example the Community Kitchen is a completed project but its non-inclusive design process affects directly the health to the users of the building. In the other hand a participatory design process for the Church created friction within the community, and this power conflict lead to the infrastructure to still be under construction because of less participation in mingas, hopefully it will be finished within the next couple of months. Based on the conflict between the minority (women) and construction force (men) produced by the two previous projects the participation the Shadow had was mainly minorities, women, both in design and construction, and leading to a full community used building. Although the Shadow might be seen as a very successful process under the social perspective the balance of the decision making process on that community was affected. Minorities now are aware of their importance on these projects rather that just accept what the majority dictates but somehow the family structure was in conflict.

The minority's role in every case and in every society is different and must be different and might evolve differently based on its needs and believes. Sometimes, architects, sociologists, cultural producers, tend to think that inclusion should be a must, forgetting that for some environments inclusion might be a conflict producer.

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