

# 'Symmetry of Participation:' A Prerequisite for Sustainable Development

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## INTRODUCTION

The requirement for citizen participation in sustainable development through Agenda 21 demands a redefinition of the familiar hierarchic and oligarchic *geography of power*. However, for the past twenty five years or so, in some areas of architecture and planning, user participation has been acknowledged as essential to a socially just design and development process, and there are many architects well placed to play a significant role in this realignment of power by utilising their knowledge of participatory design procedures and their skill of holistic comprehension of complex systems. The paper illustrates, from the direct experience of the author in three *action networks* at the *local, national* and *European* levels, how architects are synthesising social and ecological criteria when engaging in sustainable development programs. Schools of architecture must also engage with this process so that architects of the future can continue the contributions already made by a few in the discipline and adjust to the changing local and global demands on the profession.

## THE VISION

The Declaration of Interdependence for a Sustainable Future from the UIA/AIA World Congress of Architects, Chicago, June 18/21 1993, recognised that:

We are ecologically interdependent with the whole of the natural environment; We are socially, culturally, and economically interdependent with all of humanity; Sustainability in the context of this interdependence, requires partnership, equity, and balance among all parties.

It went on to make the following commitment:

We commit ourselves, as members of the world's architectural and building-design professions, individually and through our professional organisations, to:

Place environmental and social sustainability at the core of our practices and professional responsibilities;

Develop and continually improve practices, procedures, products, curricula, services, and standards that will enable the implementation of sustainable design;

Educate our fellow professionals, the building industry, clients, students, and the general public about the critical importance and substantial opportunities of sustainable design;

Establish policies, regulations, and practices in government and business that ensure sustainable design becomes normal practice;

Bring all existing and future elements of the built environment - in their design, production, use, and eventual reuse - up to sustainable design standards.

In searching for equity and balance we, as experts and professionals, have to accept that the users of buildings have something of value to contribute to decision making in the design process. Once we acknowledge this we should then adopt procedures which allow effective participation.

## THE NEED FOR ACTION

The proceedings of an international workshop held in Barcelona, in which reports describing seven of the largest environmentally advanced new housing settlements in Europe were presented and analysed, noted that many of the housing developments incorporated elements of user participation which had a direct relationship with the emphasis on ecological design. The report concluded that:

The reality of the global environmental crisis is now widely understood. However, the step from understanding to action is not obvious or easy. At the personal level, many people feel blocked and unable to take action to shape their lives in a more satisfying way. At the professional level many have quality ambitions which are frustrated by the narrow criteria applied in conventional projects. Any initiative which can release these two sources of energy will tap a huge potential for action lying dormant in every village, town and city<sup>1</sup>.

Action should be built on wisdom, 'Eco-wisdom':

We need a vision of liveable cities. With this aim, all other topics fall into place. Well designed ecological environments are today seldom to be found in cities or new settlements. The process of developing and disseminating new knowledge needs to be inspired and guided by a new vision of the good city and the good life, as powerful as that of the mediaeval towns of Europe. A part of the process of re-visioning the city will be to test the meeting point of desirability and reality, and to rediscover the values of a well-designed environment. Holistic approaches to urban development are needed, rather than optimising individual aspects. We need to refound popular ecological wisdom to enable people to live poetically<sup>2</sup>.

### THE NECESSITY OF PARTICIPATION

In a conventional planning and building process the decision makers, politicians, financiers, professionals and developers often work in isolation from the people and communities they serve, to the ultimate detriment of all parties.

When participatory processes are initiated from the outset, with respect for contributions from all participants, frameworks for physical, social, economic and ecological change can be agreed by consensus. A common sense of ownership is established and action plans can be implemented in true partnership. Environmental change which is more than superficial depends upon such partnership, which taps the core values shared by all of us and releases energy and creativity at all levels<sup>3</sup>.

Successful realisation of any project will require social skills. We need new and improved ways to stimulate civic and statutory processes which enhance the quality of life, through informal democratic assemblies, and to do it in such a way that the contribution of each participant/party is respected and integrated. Management and social skills will be at the core of the new processes:

In order to bring together ideals and reality, to maximise the environmental benefits of change, the management and social skills of the initiators and practitioners need to be strengthened. It is no light task to juggle the complex interrelationships between laws and regulations, clients and administrators, budgets, users, and in-house staff. A major recommendation of the Barcelona Workshop, addressed primarily to the funders of development, is to support the establishment of training courses in management and social skills<sup>4</sup>.

### SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

Agenda 21 emphasises the importance of involving whole

populations in broad processes to achieve the necessary realignment of power. The reason is simple: in a community with no expressed values in common, only short-term decisions can be made. A non-participatory community is therefore inherently unsustainable. Definitions of sustainability increasingly refer to the interdependence of social and ecological criteria which in the most simplest way may be expressed as 'working with people in caring for the environment'. However we need to recognise a socio-political framework for decision making in a sustainable society, the keyword characteristics of which have been defined by the Swedish Institute for Social Inventions as: *Long-term decision making; Subsidiarity; Diversity; Community; Participation; and Solidarity*.

### SHARING CONTROL THROUGH PARTICIPATION

In Europe, the foundation of experience of user participation, both in housing and other building types, created by such architects as Hertzberger in the Netherlands, Kroll in Belgium, Segal and Erskine in England, and Hübner and Sulzer in Germany, is well documented<sup>5,6</sup>. The approach to large scale participation by whole communities through Planning-for-Real is now established, particularly through the work in the UK of John Thompson and Tony Gibson.

In the USA, where community participation in urban development preceded that in Europe, the move towards defining a geography of power based on participation was helped by Sherry Arnstein in her 'Ladder of Participation' published in 1969<sup>7</sup>. Derived from her knowledge of the planning processes in deprived urban areas of the USA, her message that "Citizen Participation is Citizen Power" has broad application today. "It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future".

The following is the most useful *scale of participation* described in the literature for architects to relate to, as it is based on the *architectural* design process. The author is Fredrik Wulz<sup>8</sup>. Seven stages of participation are placed between the poles of *expert autonomous* architecture and *user autonomous* architecture. They are:

*Representation*: the most passive form in which the architects 'have consideration' for the wishes and personal needs of the user-client. The user-client's influence depends on the ability of the architects to put themselves in the place of other people.

*Questionary*: statistical gathering of the population's requirements. A passive form of participation of the anonymous user with emphasis placed on the requirements which people have in common.

*Regionalism*: sensitive to the specific and cultural heritage within a geographically limited area.

*Dialogue*: often based on informal conversations between architect and local residents, with the architect reserving the right to make the final decisions.

*Alternative:* local residents are presented with alternative solutions from which to choose.

*Co-decision:* in previous forms, the architect has had the final decision. Here the user-client or citizen is in balance with the architect with regard to the degree of influence. It requires: that the persons involved are known as individuals; that these individuals are interested in, and motivated for, participation; that these individuals have time to be involved in all phases of the project; and that the extra costs of the participatory process can be paid for.

*Self-decision:* people are seen as creative entities. People's independence from all forms of authoritative intervention is seen as the purest form of democracy. It supports the basic belief that people have a fundamental need and desire to express their own individuality and uniqueness as human beings. Self-decision may be maximised by extending self-design into self-build.

At the level of co-decision we see the recognition that professionals may work together with citizens, users, client groups and communities. The author refers to this concept as a "symmetry of participation"<sup>9</sup>.

## SYMMETRY OF PARTICIPATION

For the design process to be truly participatory, we need to work for a redistribution of power from the designer (the expert, the politician, the landowner, the developer, the financier) towards the user. However, *knowledge is power*: i.e. the notion of power is ensuring that people have the information and the opportunity to use it. This concept of a *symmetry of participation*, is adapted from Horst Rittel's concept of "symmetry of ignorance: that expertise does not reside solely in the professional, but in all those whose interests are affected by a design or planning problem"<sup>10</sup>.

The concept of *symmetry of participation* accepts that, within any group, there will be a range of skills and levels of requisite knowledge, and builds upon this. It is founded on equality of opportunity to contribute, and equal recognition of the significance of individual contributions. Redefining the geography of power, to incorporate participation, releases for the common good our greatest resource, i.e. the creativity of people.

Many hold the fear that in a participatory approach the architect will abdicate. But an increasing number are realising that so much is to be gained. Here is one such expression of confidence, from Peter Blundell Jones when referring to the work of Peter Hübner with members of the Youth Club at Stuttgart-Wangen who built their own building:

We need have no fear that the architect's role will be lost in such a participative process - in some ways it becomes more vital. For without Hübner nothing would have happened at Wangen, and his is the most obvious shaping hand behind the project. Nonetheless he has taken the role of interpreter and co-ordinator rather than dictatorial designer, and has allowed the whole process to express itself without imposing too

many of his own prejudices. It has been as much a voyage of discovery for him as for the other participants<sup>11</sup>.

Ultimately participation should be a synthesis between - what is seen as possible by the outside agency (the enabler) and what is already emerging (as a need) from within the community.

## FROM NETWORKS TO 'ACTION NETWORKING'

Communication via networks has become a characteristic of late 20thC life, and can take a number of forms. For example: inexpensive access to Internet, the global *electronic* information and communication network, has the potential for changing the geography of power. Freely sharing one's knowledge and experience should help the process of change towards a more equitable (and participatory) society. Secondly, there are *physical* networks, e.g. conferences, through which people directly exchange information and experience on common issues. The 1994 European Conference on Sustainable Towns and Cities, held in Denmark, brought together over 650 representatives from 30 European countries, with EC officials, to focus on practical ways in which towns and cities might work towards a more sustainable future.

In *action networking* we are looking to maximise the potential of both electronic and physical networking by bringing together appropriate knowledge and expertise to work in conjunction with local people on specific problems. What is to be the essential characteristic of this new networking procedure? A new way of organising and looking [structuring and perceiving] things? Personal contact and relationships are essential because everything else is changing. The core needs of personal networks are to share experience, knowledge and skills for specific projects and through this to share the enjoyment of personal transformation. What is different is the outcome: *action networking* is a focused learning process leading to a solution to the problem engaged with.

The author's experience of *action networking* at three different levels: *local, national and European*, provide a framework of opportunities for architectural practices and architectural education to engage with sustainability.

## 'ACTION NETWORKING' AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN CARDIFF AND OTHER LOCATIONS THROUGHOUT WALES

A network comprising the Welsh School of Architecture, technical aid centres, social architecture practices, and user-client and community groups, has generated a ten year programme of live student-community participation projects for a wide variety of building types. Some projects take the form of feasibility studies whilst others explore and develop a range of potential ideas. Building types have included a number of community halls, workshops for a group of

business co-operatives, a Scout and Guide activity centres, a miner's cultural and educational centre, a multi-cultural arts performance building, a hospice, a temple, a city farm and an environment centre.

Originally conceived to engage student architects with social issues in design and development the program has now broadened to embrace the concept of *Eco-participation* "in which building users and communities participate, with professionals, in the design of their buildings according to ecological principles"<sup>12,13</sup>.

A paper describing the procedures and techniques of the author's program of live student-community participation projects was presented to the ACSA London 1994 conference *The Urban Scene and the History of the Future* under the issue heading of 'Design and Context'<sup>14</sup>. The title was developed to emphasise that design is a process and that the needs and lives of people are central to the process. So much so that people, i.e. building users, user-clients and communities, should be viewed as partners with professional architects, planners, city managers, etc., in the design of buildings and the environment. Designing, and where desired, the making and managing of buildings should be a participatory process. In the projects participants play complementary roles in a mutually beneficial process. The learning-by-doing approach results in an educative experience for all parties who each contribute their knowledge and skills.

The paper describes the participants and their roles and then outlines some points to enable the process, under the following headings: *Setting up the programme & project preparation time; Students and community interaction; Travelling participation tool box; Participation - who with whom?; Seating patterns; Participation techniques; Presentation to user-client or community group; Public meetings; The research potential of student group and the university as a resource; Keeping a record.*

#### **'ACTION NETWORKING' AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL IN THE UK**

The well-established network in Wales described above has been the basis of an RIBA Community Architecture Group (CAG) initiative known as 'PEOPLE - Practice and Education Organising Participation in the Local Environment' which is now encouraging user-client and community participation to be included on the curriculum of other schools of architecture by supporting a series of local area networks of practitioners and educationists<sup>15</sup>. Networks based on the major cities of Bath, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Plymouth and London, relate to the approach established by the author at Cardiff.

**The aims of CAG are:** *to promote community participation in the design of the built environment; to enable and encourage architects and others to assist in the process; to demonstrate that the overall quality of the built environment is improved when local people are involved in the design and management of the buildings and spaces they use; to*

*popularise community architecture at all levels, including education; and to develop networks, establish resources, administer the Community Projects Fund.*

In setting up the initiative CAG contacted schools of architecture in the UK and discovered that live project work in which students met or worked with client groups was much more in evidence than had first been believed, and that the mutual benefits to be gained were widely acknowledged. A survey of architectural practices and technical aid centres revealed considerable interest in a range of proposals to bring together socially oriented practices with Schools of Architecture. Respondents in the survey made a commitment by identifying how they would like to link with a School, either through live community architecture projects, lectures, seminars, or by inviting students to shadow a live project in preparation for a written dissertation. Students would be introduced to: participation techniques; roles of related professionals; benefits to client group and community; finance and management; the role of the architect as enabler; etc. and be in a position to facilitate participation as demanded by Agenda 21.

The Community Architecture Resource Centre, at the RIBA, extended the research and made contact with a range of community based, participatory, educational activity in planning and other environmental design courses. Individuals in these have been included in the index together with Groundwork Trusts, local authorities and voluntary organisations. This broad interest will strengthen the multi-disciplinary approach of community based design, and it is hoped that the initiative as a whole will not only help raise the profile of social issues in architectural education, but help prepare architects of the future to take up the important role in sustainable development which combines design skills with those of enabling and management.

CAG is now supporting the local network meetings which are identifying local needs and setting up programmes. Network co-ordinators have reported positive responses, and within the next twelve months a national forum will be convened for participants to share their experiences, evaluate the contributions to the profession, to architectural education and to the community, and to decide on the next stage of the initiative.

#### **'ACTION NETWORKING' AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL**

The goal of the Berlin based European Academy of the Urban Environment (EA.UE) is to encourage the transfer of ideas, experiences and skills and examples of good practice for the improvement of our urban environment, among European practitioners, politicians, experts and citizens concerned with cities.

The activities within the EA.UE project "New Sustainable Settlements" are aimed to transfer experience and inter communal co-operation linked in the European Commission's programmes on the urban environment. Special emphasis is

placed on bringing together people and institutions working in the south and north of Europe.

In December 1994, with the city authorities in Torino, Italy, it facilitated an international multidisciplinary workshop which brought together 80 experts in ecological design and participatory architecture and planning, from 21 European countries to work on the project SPINA 3, an abandoned industrial area of 140 hectares in the city. Working in groups, nine scenarios were generated for future consideration, embracing a broad spectrum of approaches to sustainability.

Torino was one of the first European cities to have created a Department of Sustainable Development. It set up programs to improve water quality, the design of urban spaces, an energy conservation plan and measures to reduce pollution. This workshop project was to explore and test ideas on sustainability through practice. Similar future actions could incorporate the participation of the local school of architecture to result in a range of mutual benefits to students and the city. Proposals to integrate university research based activities in the form of monitoring and studying the sustainable development process should also be considered.

### SYMMETRY OF PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABILITY: SOME PRINCIPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION

The report on the Workshop<sup>16</sup> concluded with *The Torino Declaration* which summarised the approach of the participants in the workshop and set out the following general *Principles of Implementation* which can be applied within any community seeking to use sustainability as a guide to the architectural or urban redevelopment process.

- **CREATE THE VISION:** Sustainability doesn't just happen. It comes from a community's conscious choice to make sustainability a key factor in decisions on urban redevelopment. The entire community must be given the opportunity to participate in deciding upon the future of the place they have chosen to live. Through the creation of a compelling vision a community can redefine success and intentionally develop a future they would prefer.
- **UNITE FORCES:** Make maximum effective use of all your community's natural and human resources. Every part of the community has something of value to add to the discussion. Focus upon collective interests, insist upon benefits for all parties and nurture a culture of co-operation rather than a culture of special interests. Through people working together at the local level solutions can be tailored to fit your unique circumstances.
- **PLAN TOGETHER:** People are more likely to support change when they have had a role in shaping it. Create a space for participation and dialogue among all interests. Identify the groups which need to be involved up front to reduce the negative conflict when proposals are brought forward. Open the decision making process to public review, support bottom up approaches to planning, and seek to develop and improve leadership skills at the neighbourhood level.

- **TAKE ONE STEP AT A TIME:** Sustainable communities evolve rather than undergo dramatic change. Take small steps within the overall vision and celebrate success along the way. We cannot wait until we know everything before starting down the road toward more sustainable cities.

### PARTICIPATORY AND POLITICAL PROCESSES

Some major questions also emerged from the workshop which would seem to be relevant for all actors in any broad process of change:

- "Who are 'we'? - Who is potentially affected by the development process, what are our assets and skills, what are our values?
- Where would we prefer to be? - What are our visions and dreams for the future?
- What does success look like? - What criteria can we use to judge the rightness of a particular, small step from the perspective of our preferred future? How can these criteria be kept fresh and relevant?
- What can we do 'now'? - to begin the journey from here to there?"<sup>17</sup>.

"A participatory approach introduces a new element into the political process without affecting its essential structure. Democracy through individual representation is still the basis for political decisions. Most decisions are implemented through expert processes, either as normal line tasks or in specific projects. Special-interest groups in the community - for example, business - continue to work both to influence decision processes and to implement solutions.

A major difference is that many more people who are not normally organised in special-interest groups are offered participation and thus an opportunity to experience themselves as actors in, or 'owners' of, the change process. This enablement often needs to be initiated from a political level, and the means supplied to sustain it during the first period.

A second major difference is the necessity to involve all actors in both the expert and the participatory processes in an ongoing dialogue in order to achieve the necessary political and practical basis for holding a sustainable vision and working in many small, incremental steps"<sup>18</sup>.

### PROSPECT

The three examples illustrate how architects are able to work with other experts from diverse disciplines, together with people having a direct interest in development proposals, resulting in a realignment of the geography of power.

The report of the Barcelona Workshop laid the foundation for a proposal to establish a European network of architects, planners and city managers, together with individuals in academic institutions and voluntary organisations, who are working in the area of sustainable urban development. This is now being progressed from the Welsh School of Architecture.

In the context of future developments in education for the environment a vacuum has to be filled. There is an urgent need in Europe for a course which synthesises ecological

design with participation in order to produce practitioners and managers of sustainable architecture and development, but much can be achieved with current student populations by increasing their ecological sensitivity and instil participatory skills through learning-by-doing.

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