FALLING ON DEAF EARS

It is a winter night in 2003. I am attending a consultation session in a church hall in a blighted neighbourhood that has been designated as an NDC area. NDC – New Deal for Communities – is the Labour Government's latest attempt at urban regeneration. It is a term that signals both past political failure and future hope. New. An acknowledgment that the old systems have not worked. Deal. A transaction; we give you money, you give us back improvements. Communities. A wishful and wistful hope that fractured territories can be reconsolidated into some semblance of community, without ever specifying what that word may actually mean.

The title NDC also designates that the deal must be struck with the community; consultation and public participation in the process are required. Hence the meeting that I am attending. One year into this particular NDC programme, and the community are showing all the signs that the newness has rubbed off and consultation fatigue has set in. The NDC officer is doing a remarkable job in motivating some response out of the slumped bodies, the dropped shoulders, out of people numbed by years of failed promises.

There is an architect's scheme for a new community centre pinned up at the back, scrawny drawings that no one can really see. A cursory discussion has taken place about the merits of the scheme, and now the community is being asked to vote on it, a procedure statutorily required in this participation process. All but two hands go up. Quite on what grounds approval is being given is hard to tell. Maybe it is late and people want to go home. Maybe they believe that a community hall will actually create a community. Maybe it is the promise of church-hall tea after the vote. Maybe they love the architecture. Maybe the NDC officer has swayed them. Maybe it is like a Mexican wave. Who knows? But this is the very stuff of participation.

The NDC officer is concerned about the hands that have not gone up at and gently coaxes a response out of two old ladies sat at the back of the echoey hall. 'Couldn't hear a word you said,' they shout. 'But it is a lovely building,' the NDC person says. 'Can't hear you, we left our hearing aids at home.' 'IT IS A LOVELY BUILDING'. And so the two hands go up. The deal is done.

Why, you may ask, am I being so sour in my tone? Surely any participation is better than none? Surely the very sensation of feeling ownership is a step towards actually having ownership? Surely, in the time-honoured Olympic platitude, the taking part is as important as the winning? But those Olympic platitudes are normally exhaled through the gritted teeth of the disappointed athlete ('…. the crowd were great

…. I did what I could …. I'll be back….). Or else they are applied by patronizing Western journalists to, for example, the doggy-paddling efforts of a swimmer from the developing world ('….didn't he do well, his training to date was in the local park's fishpond.'). Olympic participation here signals either defeat or distance, and so did the experience in the Church Hall, hence my sour tone. Under the guise of inclusion, the same old patterns of power repeat themselves, defeating the expectations of the participant citizens in actually gaining themselves anything better, and distancing them from the real processes of spatial production.

In this case the NDC officer was certainly not a traditional figure of power. She did not impose a particular vote; through a mixture of charm and cajoling she dragged a response from a stultified audience. The triumph was not what the response was, but that there was a response at all. The triumph was necessary because participation could now be deemed to have happened and the political process of regeneration could move on. Of course all the power lay outside this church hall; it resided in the centre, and was inscribed in the targets and procedures that the NDC officer had to meet. The system generated lots of participative noise[1] but it all fell on deaf ears. In effect, everyone had left their hearing aids behind.

We should not be so surprised about this apparent gap between the ideals and reality of participation. The story of participation runs parallel to that of democracy, and one does not have to be a great political theorist to detect that the soothing Hellenic etymology of democracy – *the people's rule* – is disturbed by undercurrents of power, manipulation and disenfranchisement. These undercurrents are equally true in participation. We should be surprised, therefore, that the term participation is so willingly, and uncritically, accepted as being for the common good. It is the unequivocal acceptance of participation as a better way of doing things that is both its strength and its weakness. The strength in so much as it encourages all parties to engage in it, its weakness in so much as this engagement can be uncritical, and thus oblivious as to how to act in the face of the dangerous undercurrents.

---

1 For sources of participative noise see Ben Wisner, "Participatory and Action Research," in *Advances in Environment, Behaviour and Design* (New York: Plenum, 1991), 280.

The issues inherent in participation have been traced in other disciplines, notably planning,[2] but not often in the field of architecture. The supporters of participation are generally fervent – it is all good. That goodness is often contrasted to the evils of non-participative architecture, forming a simplistic dialectic: inclusive/exclusive, democratic/authoritarian, bottom up/top down.[3] But this is too easy, leaving as it does the original terms unscathed and the new terms unanalysed. Critics of participation are few and far between; it is seen as politically unpalatable to be seen to challenge something so eminently sensible. Instead, as will become clear, mainstream architectural culture is in a state of denial about participation, a denial that is tantamount to rejection but without the need to be explicit about it.

My aim in this essay is to unravel some of the causes of this denial. My argument is that participation presents a threat to normative architectural values. Once this threat is identified, it is possible to overcome it and see participation not as a challenge to architecture, but as an opportunity to reformulate, and thus resuscitate, architectural practice. However, before doing this it is necessary to ask what may be meant by the term participation.

PLACATORY PARTICIPATION

Participation as an unchallenged generic term disguises the fact that in all participatory processes there are degrees of involvement ranging from token participation to full control of the process by citizen participants. These degrees are identified in Sherry Arnstein's oft-quoted 'ladder of participation' in which she sets out a hierarchy of participatory control.[4] At the bottom of the ladder is 'manipulation' and at the top is 'citizen control'. Interestingly the word 'placation' sits just over halfway up the ladder. This is strange: that placation should be awarded an above average rating in this ladder of expectation – that placation is effectively deemed as an acceptable outcome of participation. To understand this apparent problem one has to understand that Arnstein's simple diagram is embedded in a much more complex politics of participation, as set out in Carole Pateman's classic work *Participation and Democratic Theory*.[5] Pateman contrasts the position of 'classical' democratic theory, most notably Rousseau's, with that of contemporary democratic theory. The participation of the individual citizen in political decision-making is a central tenet of Rousseau's political theory. Participation serves as a part of an educative process through which 'the individual will eventually come to feel little or no conflict between the demands of the public and private spheres'.[6] As a result of participation the decision of the collective is more readily accepted by the individual and (importantly) it 'increases the feeling among individual citizens that they belong in their community'.[7] Pateman contrasts this essentially transformative model of participation with the democratic theories of the 1960s. These suggest that wider public participation may present a threat to the stability of the political system. As Pateman notes (but does not approve): 'We arrive at the argument that the amount of participation that actually obtains is just the amount that is required for stable systems of democracy.'[8] A power relationship is clearly established here, with the stable authority of the state paramount. If participation acts as a palliative to ensure that stability, then that is acceptable. If participation acts as an agent in the transformation of the values of the state, then it is not acceptable. In this light, Pateman argues that

---

2 The literature on planning and participation is very extensive, far more so than on architecture. Some of the key texts are: John Friedmann, *Retracking America; a Theory of Transactive Planning* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1973); John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).; Patsy Healey, *Collaborative Planning : Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997). For a full bibliography on planning and participation, see Richardson and Connelly in this book.

3 Taken from a longer table in Wisner, "Participatory and Action Research," 277.

4 Sherry Arnstein, "The Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the Institute of American Planners* 34, no. 4 (1969): 216–24. The ladder is, from the bottom: manipulation-therapy-informing-consultation-placation-partnership-delegated power-citizen control

5 Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

6 Ibid., 25.

7 Ibid., 27.

8 Ibid., 7.

'participation, as far as the majority is concerned, is participation in the choice of the decision makers. Thus the function of participation is solely a protective one.' Protecting, placating, participation is really no more than a placebo.

Whilst much of the rhetoric of architectural participation resonates with the Rousseau model of transformative action, the reality is actually closer to the later model, in which architectural participation can be seen as a means to get the presumed support of the citizen user for actions that have already been determined by professional agents. One of the main advocates of architectural participation, Henry Sanoff, argues that: 'participants *have a sense* of influencing the design process….it is not so much the degree to which the individual needs have been met, but the *feeling* of having influenced the decisions'.[9] This is an explicit example of placation, with the authority of the state replaced by the authority of the expert, and the citizen beguiled by the term participation into a sense of feeling good whilst in fact being passive in the face of decisions already made by experts.

Still worse is when this soothing gesture becomes downright manipulation – when the act of participation is in fact one of imposition under the false guise of inclusion. Take this sentiment from another US community designer: 'Community Designers should steer the decision making process towards desired goals....designers must function in communities both as interpreters and as agents of change who challenge anti-urban values.'[10] Whilst this kind of attitude may appear extreme, one suspects that it may in fact be quite mainstream; the only difference is that Lozano has been honest (or stupid) enough to come clean. Normally the action is more covert, a hidden persuasion. For example, in research as to what was most useful in a participatory process, some architects stated that the 'problem' (sic) of a participative meeting was worth confronting because of the 'increased acceptability of the

designer', and that the final usefulness lay in 'educating users'.[11] These architects were prepared to engage in a participatory process simply to increase their acceptability by a sceptical public; this then allowed the architects to sneak their expert values through the back door. The whole process thus left a predetermined outcome unscathed by public opinion.

Carole Pateman labels such types of participation as 'pseudo-participation …(this) covers techniques used to persuade employees to accept decisions that have already been made'.[12] Whilst her analysis is based on participation in the workplace, it is equally relevant to the architectural field, particularly when she describes pseudo-participation as creating a 'feeling' of participation. It may be argued that much of what passes for participation in architecture fits well into the category of pseudo-participation; certainly the evening meeting in the Church Hall did.

Pateman contrasts pseudo-participation with full and partial participation. Full participation is described as 'where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of the decisions'. Partial participation is when there is not equal power in how the decision is made: 'the final power to decide rests with one party only'.[13] Full participation is an ideal, but an impossible one to achieve in architecture. It depends on each party being in possession of the requisite knowledge *and* in there being transparent channels of communication. Neither of these pertains in architecture where the expert knowledge of the architect and the tacit knowledge of the participant user remain on different levels, and where the lines of communication are compromised by codes, conventions and authority. Whilst partial participation acknowledges this differential in power, it still assumes that the final power resides with the person with the most knowledge, in this case the architect. This may be a realistic analysis of architectural participation, but not one to aspire to if one believes that the goal of participation is the empowerment of the citizen user and not of the expert. What is needed therefore is another form of participation that is

---

9 Henry Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (New York: Wiley, 2000). My italics.

10 Eduardo E. Lozano, *Community Design and the Culture of Cities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

11 Julian Watts and Morven Hirst, "User Participation in the Early Stages of Building Design," *Design Studies* 3, no. 1 (1982): 17.

12 Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 68.

13 Ibid., 71.

realistic enough to acknowledge the imbalances of power and knowledge, but at the same time works with these imbalances in a way that transforms the expectations and futures of the participants. Let us call this type of participation *transformative participation[14]* as an active signal of its opposition to the passive nature of placatory participation.

TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATION

How then may transformative participation be achieved in architecture? One of the problems identified in participation is that the channels of communication between the expert and the non-expert are not transparent, and so participation remains dominated by the experts who initiate the communication on their own terms, circumscribing the process through professionally coded drawings and language. This problem was addressed in the early 1970s with the design methods movement, in which a strange alliance was formed between systems theory, computer programmes and participatory rhetoric.[15] The proponents agreed that one of the barriers to participation in architecture is the obscurity of the design process. They argued that by explicating the process through rational means, and through the use of computers, design will become transparent and the non-expert will be able to engage more fully in the design process. As Nigel Cross notes, 'by making the design process more open and explicit, computers also open the way for a wider range of participants to contribute to the process…. in particular the users of the building, who have traditionally been allowed no participation in the design process, could become involved in a computer-aided process'.[16] Key to this was the rise of the computer and numerical modeling which would, in Bill Mitchell's hope, 'result in an opening up of

architectural and urban design processes to a wider and truer participation by making it possible for non-specialists to comprehend and directly manipulate quite powerful models of the environment'.[17] In the most extreme version, Nicholas Negroponte's Architecture Machine Group, the architect is supposedly dispensed with altogether as users develop their own building designs by direct interaction with the computer.[18]

In 1970 a group including Nigel Cross, Bill Mitchell and Nicholas Negroponte came together at a conference entitled *Design Participation*. Looking through the papers it is difficult to identify much of what is now perceived of as participation within the slew of diagrams and technical data. What the diagrams reveal is a clarity of intent on the designers' part, and whilst the stated reason is that such clarity allows others to engage with the process, the engagement is explicitly on the experts' terms and therefore in thrall to them. The strong feeling is that participation, or rather pseudo-participation, is being used as a socially acceptable shield behind which the authors can develop their technically determined ideologies. Reyner Banham, in his introduction to the conference, suggests as much when he writes: 'When one looks down the list of speakers at this conference and the titles of their papers, one wonders whether we have not got the same old Design Conference, but with the new wonder ingredient, "participation"…. some of us are putting our social consciences at work'.[19] Banham, in identifying the expediency of using participation as a screen, also notes the impossibility of keeping politics out of the participative mix. As organiser of the conference, Nigel Cross' original aim was to look 'for examples of new technologies

14 This term draws on the notion of transformative theory developed by the planning theorist, John Friedmann. See John Friedmann, *Planning in the Public Domain : from Knowledge to Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

15 Apart from the Design Conference grouping which includes Nigel Cross, Bill Mitchell and Nicholas Negroponte, it is also interesting to note that many participation advocates such as Henry Sanoff came out of a design methods background.

16 see Nigel Cross, *The Automated Architect* (London: Pion, 1977), 23.

17 Reyner Banham, "Opening Remarks," in Nigel Cross, *Design Participation* (London: Academy Editions, 1972), 15–16.

18 See Cross, *The Automated Architect*, 124. It might appear that this grouping were dazzled by the white heat of technology of their 8-bit computers, but these sentiments still pervade. In a recent book on the subject opens with:'(Our) new perspective is that technical optimization and social optimization should not be carried out separately, but be integrated into one design process'. The essential skills of urban designers and architects should include skills in numerical computer modeling. However, the real aim of this approach is revealed when the authors refer to 'persuasion by numerical and geometrical modeling'. See Lex van Gunsteren and Peter-Paul van Loon, *Open Design: A Collaborative Approach to Architecture* (Delft: Eburon, 2000), v.

19 Banham, "Opening Remarks."

and new techniques which might be sidestepping conventional political controls. That the conference seemingly *had* to come round to discussing politics, suggests this may have been a fallacy.'[20] By the end of the conference political issues had entered into the debate; they could not have been kept out. Participation is inherently political, not in the party political sense of the word, but in the sense that it affects people's lives.

The experience of the Design Conference is indicative of the relationship between architecture and participation; one cannot suppress what needs to be there and yet architectural culture is in a state of denial about many aspects of participation. The reason, as we shall see, is that participation presents a threat to many of the central tenets of architecture and the profession does what it can (either knowingly or by default) to resist that threat. The denial of the political realm is one such mechanism by which that threat is suppressed.

The threat may be explained by the tension that exists between the ideals and the reality of architectural practice. Architects cling to a perfected model of practice, neatly and simplistically summarised in an idealised version of the Vitruvian triad – commodity, firmness and delight. Idealised commodity (solve the 'problem' of function in as efficient a manner as possible). Idealised firmness (advance on technical fronts as a sign of progress). Idealised delight (a polishing of forms in accordance with prevailing aesthetic sensibilities). The problem is when these ideals meet the reality of the contingent world; a threefold undermining of the values of the ideals takes place. Contingent reality first upsets the carefully laid plans of utility (users can be so annoyingly unpredictable). Secondly it ignores many of the values held high by architectural culture (for example the public hardly share architects' obsession with the refined detail). Thirdly it brings into play issues that are overlooked by the Vitruvian triad (most notably issues of the social and political world). Disappointment, as Rem Koolhaas resignedly notes[21], is inevitable in the face of this undermining. And so the architect will do everything possible to delay the fateful moment when reality bites. Suspension of disbelief is a condition of design practice. One knows in one's heart of hearts that the suspension cannot last, but the state is hypnotic whilst it does – those clean diagrams, those neatly scheduled packages of work that defy all construction practice, those empty photographs taken before the great unwashed (users, dirt, weather, change) move in. And when it all goes wrong afterwards, when reality truly does upset the ideals, one can always resort to the publication of a monograph to resuscitate and perpetuate the mythology of a perfected state of architectural production.

Participation brings forward the moment of reality and in so doing inevitably challenges that suspension of disbelief. The participative process, as a signal of the reality to come, confronts architects with issues that they may otherwise have preferred to either hide from, or else delay dealing with, for as long as possible. Most obviously this happens by bringing forward and prioritising the desires of the users. Where clients are generally concerned with economy, efficiency and longevity - all issues which elide with the Vitruvian triad and thus ones that the architect is comfortable with - users bring other concerns to the table.[22] It is in this way that participation presents a threat to normative architectural values, and so it is not surprising that most architectural participation tends towards the pseudo corner of Pateman's construct, because only there are the values left unscathed behind a veneer of social engagement. The challenge, therefore, is how to move architectural participation from the pseudo to the transformative. To achieve this one has to overcome any notions of participation as a threat and to see it as a process that is transformative for all parties – the architect included. The issues that transformative participation brings forward actually present an opportunity not a threat; an opportunity to reconsider what is often taken for granted in architectural practice. It is to these issues that we shall now turn in order to see how they individually and

---

20 Nigel Cross, *Design Participation* (London: Academy Editions, 1972), 14.
21 Koolhaas defines the three stages of practice as elation, suspense, disappointment.

22 Lefebvre is clear in identifying the problem of the word 'user', which tends to denote the user as some kind of functional object, subject to architectural manipulation. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). However, user is probably the most commonly employed term in architectural participation and identifies a different category from the client. Real participation must engage the user over and above the client, whose priorities are so often similar to those of the architect.

collectively suggest a positive transformation of architectural production that benefits architects and users alike.

THE EXPERT CITIZEN / CITIZEN EXPERT

It is through the agency of the user that participation brings forward issues that the architect has to face up to at an early stage. In normal circumstances there is an immediate imbalance in the initial exchanges. The architect, as possessor of expert knowledge, sets the terms of reference for the participatory engagement. A problem is posited, plans are drawn and a solution negotiated – all framed by the architect's knowledge system and specialised modes of communication. Clearly this establishes a power structure, in which the expert architect assumes authority over the inexpert layperson, and clearly this imbalance is unacceptable if one aspires to a participatory process that empowers the user. In an attempt to reverse this power relationship, the community activists of the late 1960s and 1970s resolved to strip experts of their authority and reduce them to being technical facilitators, there to deliver the desires of the community without imposing on them.[23] In this model the architect remained an outsider but one acting on the users' behalf. The problem, as Lars Lerup clearly identifies, is that participation becomes largely a 'managerial solution …. there is a "symmetry of ignorance" between the dweller and professional – neither knows the dweller's needs'.[24] On the one hand, in the enforced relinquishment of power, the expert professionals also relinquish their knowledge (because in the well-worn formulation reduced from Foucault, knowledge is power). As mere facilitators the architects are unable to re-imagine their knowledge from the perspective of the user; their knowledge is not used transformatively, rather their skills are used

instrumentally. On the other hand, the technical know-how of the expert is not enough to help the users to develop new spatial visions; the user is given nothing to enable them to expand on the their nascent but unarticulated desires, and so these remain at the level of the lowest common denominator, In Gillian Rose's memorable phrase, 'the architect is demoted; the people do not accede to power'.[25]

This indicates that transformative participation cannot be achieved through the disavowal of expert knowledge. Nor is the solution to make the architect's knowledge more accountable by making it more transparent. This is what the design methods movement proposed through open explication of the design process, but as we have seen this left the framing of the expert knowledge base unaltered. The non-expert is granted easier access to the expert's domain, the gate to the 'black box'[26] is opened wider, but the contents remain untouched. Instead a move towards transformative participation demands a reformulation of expert knowledge and the way it may be enacted.

One of the defining features of any profession is that it has its own knowledge base, and the more specialist the knowledge base the 'stronger' – and more exclusive, better remunerated – the profession. In an attempt to establish the inviolate credentials of the profession, the architectural knowledge base, and its inscription in language and drawn codes, becomes more remote from the needs and comprehension of the users. The participatory process brings the limits of architectural knowledge into sharp focus; in its specialist pursuit of techniques and aesthetics, architectural discourse detaches itself from the everyday desires and needs of the social lifeworld. A gap opens up between the special and the normal. In medicine this gap is actually necessary in defining the profession, because in treating the special (say a hole-in-the-

---

23 For a critique of this approach, see: Margaret Crawford, "Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?," in *Out of Site : a Social Criticism of Architecture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991). For justification of it: Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt, *Community Architecture : How People Are Creating Their Own Environment* (London: Penguin, 1987).

24 Lars Lerup, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), 136.

25 Gillian Rose, "Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Two Cities," *Social and Legal Studies* 3 (1994): 337. For a development of this argument see Jeremy Till, "Architecture of the Impure Community," in *Occupying Architecture : Between the Architect and the User*, ed. Jonathan Hill (London: Routledge, 1998), 61–75.

26 This is Reyner Banham's term to describe the container that houses the self-referential world of architecture. Reyner Banham, "A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture," in *A Critic Writes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 292–299.

heart) the expert doctor can return the patient to the world of the normal. Indeed, the wider the gap, the more specialist the knowledge required, the stronger that aspect of the profession, the greater the remuneration; hence the perceived status of the heart surgeon over the general practitioner. In architecture, the participatory process reveals the gap between the special and the normal to be unacceptable, and yet architects will be wary of relinquishing their specialist areas of expertise because they believe this would threaten what sets them apart. There is the nagging doubt that in dealing with the normal, using normal language, one might be seen as normal. Participation thus presents architects with a double bind – the need to reassess what constitutes their knowledge but also the worry that in so doing one may no longer be seen as an architect. Best therefore to avoid the problem altogether, or at least to put it off for as long as possible. Architects thus tend to cling to the certainty of what they know rather than expose themselves to the uncertainty of what others may know.

The only way to get out of this bind is to reconsider what constitutes the expert. This does not mean the relinquishment of knowledge but the redeployment of it in another mode. Experts feel most comfortable when the object of their scrutiny is abstracted, because then their specialist knowledge can be applied without disturbance. However, this state of sharp but distanced focus is hard to reconcile with the reality of the spatial, social, world. In another context, the psychologist Roger Barker notes that 'if we want to understand the fullness of baseball, we should not stare ourselves blind at the batter, but blot him out and look at his context'.[27] For architectural participation, this suggests that instead of fixating on the building and user as objects, we transfer our attention to their context. As Lerup says: 'Our old exercise of staring at objects…fixing them in our professional gaze, may be challenged by simply taking the position of the object and seeing how people react to it'.

This suggests that in order to enable transformative participation, architectural knowledge should not be applied as an abstraction from the outside, but developed from within the context of the given situation. This in turn calls for a new type of

knowing. The profession is traditionally predicated on a knowing 'how' or a knowing 'that', but at John Shotter argues in his important book, *The Cultural Politics of Everyday Life,* these types of knowledge are 'decontextualised'. Instead Shotter calls for a knowing 'from within', a 'developmental' knowledge that adjusts to and grows out of the social-cultural surroundings in which it is situated. In Shotter's terms, this is 'knowing of the third kind' (unlike the first two knowing 'how' and 'that').[28] To develop this knowledge from within, the architect must project themselves into the spatial context, physical and social, of the user; the architect becomes 'an activist, working on behalf of and *as* a dweller'.[29] This is good advice; just as doctors in their brusque bedside manner often seem to forget that they too are potential patients, architects are prone to deny their experience as users, to forget that they too are embodied citizens. What is called for is the ability to move between the world of expert and user, with one set of knowledge and experience informing the other.[30] The architect should, in effect, be an expert citizen as well as citizen expert.

The model resonates with Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual as set out in the *Prison Notebooks*.[31] For Gramsci, intellectuals (and let's be generous and

27 Roger Barker, *Ecological Psychology*, 16, as quoted in Lerup, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action*, 156.

28 John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), xiii.. The terms 'knowing how' and 'knowing what' are initially from Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962).

29 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action*, 136.

30 In a parallel discussion of intellectuals and their relationship to ideologies, Michael Billig et al make the distinction between intellectual and lived ideologies, the first of which is characterized by being formalised and systematic, the latter of which refers to a non-formalised notion arising out of society's way of life. Architects, and other professionals, tend towards the former but cannot escape the latter because, as Billig argues, 'every great theorist has to confront the conflict between the lived and intellectual ideologies – because they also have to live out their lives as citizens'Michael Billig, *Ideological Dilemmas: a Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking* (London: Sage, 1988), 32.

31 'Each man, outside his professional life carries on some form of intellectual activity…has a conscious line of moral conduct and this contributes to sustaining a conception of the world or to modifying it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought'. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 10.

include architects in this category) should be both leading *and* representative.[32] Crucially, intellectuals should not remain as eloquent outsiders but must become active participators in practical life,[33] without denying their knowledge or relinquishing the opportunity to guide. It is in this oscillation between the expert and citizen, the specialised and the normal, that one avoids the second potential bind of participation, namely the concern that in acting normally one may lose one's professional status. The architect, moving between the worlds of expert and citizen, engages with the world as organic intellectual, a new form of professional.

However, this only gets us halfway towards a transformative participatory process. Whilst the architect as expert-citizen/citizen-expert may be able to engage more actively with the context and concerns of the user, true participation demands that the process is two-way – that the user should have the opportunity to actively transform the knowledge of the architect.[34] This will only happen if the architect first recognises and then respects the knowledge of the user. Because the user's knowledge is often grounded in everyday experience and the commonplace, it is easy to dismiss it as having a lower status than specialised knowledge or else to respond to it at the level of pragmatics.[35] It is common for architects to placate participants through reassuring practical solutions ('yes, we will deal with your rubbish bins') whilst still silently sticking to their own specialised agendas ('…..and make sure they are round the back away from our delightful front elevation.'). What is necessary is for the architect to acknowledge the potentially transformative status of the users' knowledge and to provide channels through which it might be articulated. The architect (as citizen expert) needs to listen to, draw out and be transformed by the knowledge of the user (as expert citizen). The process becomes two-way and expansive because, as Sanoff notes, 'the knowledge of the user-expert is necessary to state the obvious and the commonplace in order to expand the narrowness of vision often found in highly

trained people.'[36] In this light, one can see how participation, through bringing the users' knowledge into the design process at an early stage, far from presenting a threat to architectural production actually presents an opportunity to reinvigorate it through challenging the very limits and constraints of specialist knowledge.

NEGOTIATING SPACE

As it stands, this notion of transformative participation is too cosy; it suggests idealised conditions of mutual co-operation, uncontested knowledge bases, open communication and eventual consensus. In reality, such ideals do not exist, and it is dangerous to hope blindly that they might. Better instead to accept that no participatory process, no matter how well- intentioned, is going to completely dissolve the power structures and inequalities of the various parties.[37] Any theory of participation in architecture must also include the notions of authority[38] and otherness. One aspect of participation makes confrontation with difference inevitable, and this is that the users will bring to the table their personal beliefs. In the negotiation of the personal with the social, the individual with the collective, political space emerges; the participatory process is, as the Design Methods conference found out, inherently political. Here it is easier to see how participation presents a threat to mainstream architectural culture, which so often exists in a state of denial about the political implications of the processes and products of practice.[39] Interestingly this denial is

---

32 Carl Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 77.

33 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 7–23.

34 see Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 68.

35 For a development of this seeFriedmann, *Retracking America; A Theory of Transactive Planning*, 109–11.

36 Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning..*

37 In this context it is interesting to note that in Habermas' theory of communicative action, it is his argument for an 'ideal speech situation' that has drawn the most fire. His critics accuse him of seeming naivety in even positing the possibility of authentic speech, his defenders note that people act, and need to act, as if the possibility of ideal speech was achievable.

38 Johann Albrecht, "Towards a Theory of Participation in Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 42, no. 1 (1998): 24–31.

39 There is not the space to develop the argument here, but it is neatly summarised by the French architect Jean Renaudie who writes: 'The stubborn refusal of some people to admit to the influence of politics on architecture, and the narrow assertion of others that architecture is politics and nothing

echoed in much participatory architecture that has gradually been divested of its initial political impulse. The rise of conservative politics, and the necessity of being seen to be politically 'neutral', has seen a shift in architectural participation from the idealistic stance of the sixties to the pragmatic expediency of the eighties and nineties.[40]

The participatory process brings forward the moment when the political nature of space has to be dealt with; in so doing it disturbs the comfort zone (which architects so often revert to) of a world stripped bare of the messy, complex, lives of users. The functionalist architect attempts to abstract and thus control these lives, whereas participation brings them into unavoidable focus as something that is beyond strict management. However, the attempt to banish politics from architecture is only to delay the inevitable. Just as King Canute was swept away by the waves, social life will find its way through the cracks in the wall of architectural denial, eventually overwhelming the hopeless purity of the forms within - because those forms, conceived in a political vacuum, can put up no resistance.[41] Better then to take on board these contested territories earlier rather than be disappointed later. In this light participation should occupy a central position in architectural practice as opposed to sitting on the token margins where it tends to be found. Lars Lerup is clear about the opportunities that are afforded in the addressing of the political nature of space at an early stage. 'The fact remains that if dwellers and their designers take an active part in the negotiation of political space, new and better vistas will open up.'[42] The key terms here are 'negotiation' (because that defines the reality of participation without being idealistic about reaching consensus) and 'new and better' (because that sets the

ambition for participation to transcend pragmatics). Lerup goes on to say that if 'negotiation dies, the *hope* for splendid inhabitation dies and most likely someone else other than dwellers will take over.' This sets a new context for transformative participation as the *negotiation of hope*[43]– a potentially contested but ultimately positive process, both alert to the realities and positing a better future.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PROBLEM

The idea of the negotiation of hope sits uncomfortably with one of the normal premises of architecture, namely that it is a problem solving exercise; hope projects ambiguously forward, whereas problems look determinedly backwards. In education, the architectural studio is held up as an exemplar of problem-based learning, the space where students are set a 'problem' and through the creative, and reflective, act of design come to a 'solution'. In architectural practice the 'problem' is what gives the profession something to act upon in a specialised manner. As Reyner Banham notes, 'a professional is a man with an interest, a continuing interest, in the existence of problems.'[44] Solving problems is how the profession legitimates itself; setting problems is how it perpetuates itself.

It is difficult to reconcile the notion of hope with that of problem solving. The negative connotation of the term 'problem' casts a gloomy pall over the design process, implying that the best we can expect from the solution is to make the world a less bad place, as opposed to the negotiation of hope which is founded on a mutual aspiration to make the world a better place. John Chris Jones gets it just right when he says that 'to think of designing as "problem-solving" is to use a rather dead metaphor for a lively process and to forget that design is not so much a matter of adjusting to

---

else, result in the same thing: inefficiency in practice." The key text in the recent reawakening of the political dimension of space must be Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

40 Mary Comerio, "Community Design: Idealism and Entrepreneurship," *Journal of Architectural & Planning Research* 1, no. 4 (1984): 227–243. See Blundell Jones' chapter in this book for the story of the sixties.

41 Koolhaas' pithy reminder is apt here. 'Once we were making sandcastles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away.' Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995), 971. The problem is his ambivalence in how to deal with the condition. See Jeremy Till, "An Incomplete Encyclopedia: Rem Koolhaas and S,M,L,XL," *Artifice* 4 (1996): 19–27.

42 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action*, 30.

43 I take this formulation from the title of Howell Baum's book The Organisation of Hope, which in turn comes from a description used by a planning student Stephen Blum. See Howell S. Baum, *The Organization of Hope : Communities Planning Themselves* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). The word 'organisation' is maybe too instrumental for participation, hence my replacement with 'negotiation'.

44 Banham, "Opening Remarks."

the status quo as of realizing new possibilities and discovering our reactions to them.'[45]

If one problem with the problem is the way that it closes down the potential for new possibilities, the other is that the framing and solving of the problem is an exclusionary act, and thus inappropriate for the terms of transformative participation. Problems, as Banham indicates, require a certain type of professional, expert, knowledge to solve them. The identification of the problem thus inevitably privileges the expert over the user, limiting the possibility of the negotiation of hope as a shared enterprise. We therefore need to find an alternative paradigm for the design process. In an eloquent paper, the planner John Forester suggests that we should replace the normative metaphor of design as the search for a solution with the idea of design as 'sense-making'. 'Sense making is not simply a matter of instrumental problem-solving, it is a matter of altering, respecting, acknowledging, and shaping people's lived worlds.'[46] Central to Forester's argument is that such a move from the problem to sense-making necessarily brings with it an acknowledgment of the contested social situation in which the design process is first initiated and of the contingent social world in which buildings and their users will eventually be situated. Where problem solving, predicated as it is on positivist thinking, tends to either abstract or exclude the social and the political, sense-making inevitably engages with them and in so doing accords with a model of participation in which social and political issues are brought to the fore and then negotiated through spatial discussions. 'If form giving is understood more deeply as an activity of making sense together, designing may then be situated in a social world where meaning, though often multiple, ambiguous and conflicting is nevertheless a perpetual practical accomplishment.'[47]

It is Forester's insistence on making sense *together* that resonates so powerfully with the idea of transformative participation, and so it is worth following through the implications of this approach. These are threefold. The first we have already encountered; sense-making leads to a reconsideration of what constitutes architectural knowledge. As opposed to the instrumentalist knowledge of problem solving, sense-making is developed through knowledge of the third kind – knowledge from within in which the participatory process is founded on the will to achieve mutual understanding. The second implication arises out of the first; in order to achieve this mutual understanding one needs new models of communication. Thirdly, sense-making brings with it uncertainty and imprecision that demand the participants face up to the very contingency of architectural practice. It is to these last two issues, communication and contingency, that we now turn.

URBAN STORYTELLING

> *'Doctrines must take their beginnings from that of the matter which they treat'.*
>   *- Vico*

There is always the nagging, but quite serious, concern that conventional methods of architectural communication are describing something that is in fact not architecture. Drawings can never describe the fullness of the future occupation of space; they are, of course, radically reductive. As Robin Evans argues so brilliantly in The Projective Cast, this representational reduction is not necessarily a problem as long as one acknowledges the role of the architectural imagination in achieving the translation from drawing to building.[48] The alchemy of imagination is a second means by which the architect achieves professional closure; specialist technical knowledge with indefinable creativity is the combination that establishes architecture apart from other vocations that might have one aspect but not the other. However, in the context of participation the architectural imagination presents a problem, in so much as it is an internalized impulse and thus not available for mutual understanding with the other participants. Drawings, which for the architect may be pregnant with possibilities,

---

45 J. Christopher Jones, *Design Methods*, vol. 2nd (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), xxix.
46 John Forester, "Designing: Making Sense Together in Practical Conversations," *Journal of Architectural Education* 38, no. 3 (1985): 14–20. See also Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power*, 119–33.
47 Forester, "Designing: Making Sense Together in Practical Conversations," 14.

48 Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

remain mute to the outsider. The exclusion is reinforced by the technical nature of so much architectural discourse.[49]

In order to achieve transformative participation, it is therefore necessary to look for a new model of communication. The clue as to what this may be lies in the nature of the knowledge at stake and the makeup of the participants. 'New knowledge neither grows out of a special method, not the special mind of a genius nor from new theoretical monologues… but from the voices of ordinary people in conversation.'[50] Where professional knowledge tends to reaffirm the status quo, or to incrementally shift it, the knowledge contained in the conversations of ordinary people, of participants, contain the germs of new spatial possibilities. The trick is how to recognise this, how to identify the 'real possibilities present in those fleeting, extraordinary, non-professional moments of indeterminacy, undecidability and ambivalence'.[51] The key lies in recognising the power and validity of ordinary conversation as a starting point for the participatory process. Of course this challenges normative patterns of professional and academic legitimacy. Both of these sets of discourse are often predicated on the principles of logic and completeness,[52] against which measures the openness of ordinary conversation is seen as a lower form of communication, and thus one capable of being dismissed. However, this overlooks the potentials to be found in everyday conversation which 'contains more possibilities for our future development than we ever before imagined.'[53]

What is suggested here is the appropriateness of conversation to the architectural participatory process. First, conversation moves the architect from being a detached observer into an engaged participant, enabling him or her to see from within a given situation. Second, it anticipates the future spatial possibilities in terms of time and occupation rather than seeing them as fixed and empty forms. Thirdly, conversations bring into play social relationships because, as Rom Harré notes, the primary human reality is in persons in conversation.[54] Fourthly, conversations in their open-ended nature give rise to unexpected consequences; they may lead the participants down paths that they may have never found through logic. In all these four ways conversations can actually describe what architecture may be, namely the temporal, contingent, social occupation of space - a world undiscovered in the reductive drawing. If we follow Vico's urging that 'doctrines must take their beginnings from that of the matter which they treat',[55] then ordinary conversations can form the perfect start to architectural production. What the participatory process does is to provide a context for those conversations to be initiated – and once again participation is here a catalyst for new ways of looking at architectural practice, exposing the limits of normative architectural methods.

'Conversations' is maybe too vague a term, and also it does not necessarily avoid the imbalance of authority found in most participatory processes. A more equitable and focused conversational mode is found in storytelling. 'The very act of storytelling, an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality.'[56] The authoritative positivist explanation of the expert ('You should have your front door here because it is closest to the road') is replaced by the suggestive and imaginative storyline of the potential dweller ('..we ran through the back door, steaming bodies into air dense with chip fat.') All of us have stories within us, be they

---

49 Having sat on many interview panels to select architects for community-based projects, I am continually astounded at the language that most architects choose to use. Jargon and technical terminology, together with nods to me as the supposed expert, do nothing but alienate, and confuse, the eventual users. These architects do not get the job.

50 Billig, *Ideological Dilemmas: a Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*, 162.

51 Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind*, 52.

52 See Ibid., 141. Much post modern academic discourse may be seen to challenge notions of logic, but still work out from it as a principle.

53 Ibid., 39.

54 Ibid., 128. The same point is made by John Forester: 'Design as sense-making via conversation situates the designer's work in a historical, practical context'. Forester, "Designing: Making Sense Together in Practical Conversations," 17.

55 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), Para. 314.

56 Kristin Ross, 'Introduction', in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

descriptive of the past, fictional for the future, anecdotal or practical. Stories have within them elements that are both personal and social, they become a means of describing one's place in the world, of locating the individual within shared spaces. Stories are the place where the imagination finds lines of flight. If one starts a participatory process through a 'what if?' question, and then develops the answers through the forms of stories, two things happen. First the stories arise out of experience of the world and thus have a grounding in reality; secondly the 'what if?' allows stories to imagine and to project new spatial visions.[57] Stories thus become conduits for the negotiation of hope, but because of their founding in everyday experience that hope is not impossibly idealistic. Too often hope is associated with unachievable utopias, and participation is founded on idealistic notions of consensus; stories avoid such delusions whilst at the same time not shutting down possibilities and opportunities. The role of the architect becomes to understand and draw out the spatial implications of the urban storytelling. This role requires both knowledge and imagination, but in both cases these attributes are externalized and shared, rather than being internalised and exclusive as happens in non-participatory practice. The architect, as negotiator of hope initiated through urban storytelling, thus is much more than a mere technical facilitator but at the same time is not tarnished with the brush of unfettered power.

MAKING BEST SENSE

If one develops the participatory process out of the strength of storytelling, then these conversations bring with them uncertainty; they bring contingency into the process. So many architectural values are founded on the banishment of contingency,[58] that to be confronted with contingency at the start of the design process represents a serious disturbance to purist architectural production. Again, we see how participation, by bringing forward what is otherwise denied or delayed, presents a 'threat'.

In order to understand how participation, in dealing with contingency, actually offers an opportunity rather than a threat, we need to return to John Forester's notion of design as making-sense-together, and in particular to the ambiguous and complex conditions that such an approach throws up.[59] The question remains, however, as to what type of sense we are making. The most obvious and soothing answer is that we are making common sense – that the process of participation leads to a sense of shared, 'sensible', values. But the notion of common sense is compromised. On the one hand it suggests that solutions will be arrived at in an unthinking, uncontested manner.[60] Small wonder that the Conservative Party used the slogan '*Time for Common Sense*' as the title of their 2001 Election Manifesto, as if they could pass off their deeply ideological agenda under the guise of 'straightforward' Middle-England saloon bar logic. Common sense is also problematic intellectually. The very proposition that sense can be arrived at through commonly agreed principles presupposes that universal structures of thought can be erected,[61] and with these

---

57 In a non-participatory context, Sarah Wigglesworth and I initiated the design of our own house, 9 Stock Orchard Street, through telling each other stories. This was to avoid one of us claiming the design first (as would have happened with drawings) but also allowed open-ended, negotiable scenarios to be developed and shared. See Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth, "Table Manners," in *The Everyday and Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1998), 31–36.

58 The suppression of aesthetic disruption through proportional systems; systematized design methodologies; the obsession with cleanliness; the denial of the occupant in media images; Corbusier's 'A boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences'; the Vitruvian Triad; fear of time as identified by Karsten Harries. All of these and many more point to architecture's discomfort with contingency. These arguments will be developed in my forthcoming book, Architecture and Contingency.

59 Forester notes how this approach recognises design practice as an 'institutionally located, practically constrained, politically contingent, ambiguity resolving, social process'. Forester, "Designing: Making Sense Together in Practical Conversations," 19.

60 This resonates with one of Vico's less useful, but probably most widely quoted, aphorisms: 'Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire nation, or the entire human race'. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Para. 142.

61 As Deleuze notes: 'Philosophy refers to common sense as its implicit presupposition…Common sense is thus taken to be a determination of pure thought. ..Common sense shows every day – unfortunately that it is capable of producing philosophy in its own way'. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference*

universal solutions can be found. In the context of participation, such universal structures clearly suppress the development of particular desires. In addition, by identifying common sense with the realm of the detached intellect, one removes it from the social world; common sense in this light becomes formal and prescriptive rather than social and cultural.[62]

Therefore instead of seeing participation as the move towards the establishment of common sense, it may be better to posit it in terms of making best sense. The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that best sense aims 'not an absolute best but a partial best…(it offers) the more realistic orientation about the good, but also allows us to best understand and make sense of the actions of others'.[63] The idea of making best sense thus acknowledges three things: first that that no one perfect solution exists; secondly, that others are involved in the process, it is not the work of the lone intellect or expert; thirdly, and crucially, it identifies the very contingency of architectural practice. Architecture is open to forces beyond the direct control of the architect. In participation, this contingency is represented first through the desires of the users, and the architect has to face up to the often conflicting status of these desires. It is not matter of attempting to find a consensus among these competing positions, but of using one's judgment to make best sense of them. The process, whilst potentially leading to unintended consequences, thus still has intentionality.[64] This

inevitably leads to the acceptance of difference rather than the imposition of a false equality, even if this might grate with accepted liberal norms of participation, in which the search for a solution acceptable to all is paramount. The spaces arising out of the contingency of participation are thus not necessarily those of static harmony, but 'a common space that is also a fissured space is not an oxymoron'.[65] Instead a different notion of equality arises, not one based on principles of absolute universality, but one which 'as a contingent outcome of a conflicts and strategic calculation is a sedimented moment in a fluctuating equilibrium'.[66] The hope, therefore, is that a participatory process that is based on the principle of making the best sense will lead to architecture capable of accepting difference and architecture that is responsive to change over time, since it avoids the stasis of any universalizing tendency.

THE NEGOTIATION OF HOPE

In this chapter I have attempted to formulate an approach to participation that moves beyond the token involvement of users towards a more transformative model. In order for this to happen, architects need to accept changes to the standard methods and values of practice, and in particular to see that the issues that participation brings to the fore present not a threat but an opportunity, leading to a more empowering form of architecture. This is a achieved through an acceptance – or let's hope a welcoming – of the political aspects of space, of the vagaries of the lives of users, of different modes of communication and representation, of an expanded definition of architectural knowledge and of the inescapable contingency of practice. This acceptance leads not only to a revitalised, and more relevant, form of participatory practice, but also to a revitalised, and more relevant, form of architectural practice. For too long architecture has isolated itself in the vain pursuit of the incompatible bedfellows, innovation and timelessness. Participation challenges these values and

---

and Repetition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 132–35.. Deleuze contrasts common sense (which identifies and recognises) with good sense (which forsees), but sees them both as complementary in their attachment to pure thought. 'Good sense and common sense complete each other in the image of thought'. See also Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 78–79.

62 'Kant's notion of "sensus communi" is ultimately cognitive and formal rather than social and cultural'. Michael Shapiro, Cinematic Political Thought (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1999), 14.

63 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self : the Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 57.

64 As John Shotter notes: "Joint action … gives rise to unintended consequences, that is outcomes which are not intended either by you or me, but which in fact are our outcomes". Shotter, Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind, 47.

65 Benjamâin Arditi and Jeremy Valentine, Polemicization: The Contingency of the Commonplace (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 135.

66 Ibid., 124.

brings an awakening of the virtues of engagement, an awakening that might come as a shock to architects more used to a deluded detachment, but an awakening that is necessary if architecture is to have any future relevance.

Participation is not a worthy sop to our political masters; it is not an excuse for mediocrity; it is not distraction from supposedly higher values. Participation is the space in which hope is negotiated. What is clear is that this hope refers not just to a better future for the users of the built environment, but also to a better future for architectural practice.