

TRENDS IN 35 YEARS OF USER PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

After the Summer Academy of 2001, Andrew Jamison stimulated the author to write down experiences during 35 years of citizen participation and advocacy planning, because of the historical value of some events, like the emergence of “woonerven” in Dutch city-streets. The analyses of experiences can result in better understanding of the conditions for “meaningful” participation and for new approaches today. Writing down what happened and analysing the context of events could even result in new theoretical insights. The author’s involvement in citizen participation is divided into 5 periods:

- 1. 1966-1970: The discovery of the counter culture;*
- 2. 1971-1980: The counter culture in business;*
- 3. 1981-1990: Dealing with change: money and solidarity;*
- 4. 1991-2000: Playing as a way of life;*
- 5. 2000-.....: Perception of risk.*

Some events are placed in a wider context: "woon-erven", the sign: "Bridge open, Stop engine" and quality assessment as means of self-learning for occupants of houses. Within this context, the question is raised: what options do researchers have, if they want to provoke change, for the good of society and themselves?

METHOD

Information comes from personal experience of the Dutch author, so the culture and history of The Netherlands is the context of experiences. This work lies within the realm of constructivist thought. Coffey and Atkinson promote the concept of abductive reasoning: starting from the particular phenomenon, we try to account for that phenomenon by relating it to broader concepts. We do that by inspecting our own experience, our knowledge of other comparable phenomena within our discipline and within neighboring fields. Analysis is the process by which the researcher expands and extends information beyond a descriptive account. The researcher constructs networks, underlying the linear order of (text) information. Theorizing is integral to analysis. Theorizing goes beyond the local setting of the research (data, or cases) and engages with formal ideas at a more general level. A common way of thinking about theoretical ideas is to link themes in terms of causal relationships. It is well equipped to cycle back and forth between variables and processes, to show by examples that variables have

connections over time. For this reason modeling can contribute to theory. Empirical research serves more purpose than to induce laws and generalizations or, on the opposite inductive side, to test theories, it is a way to generate new ideas. The context of discovery must be the major preoccupation of all researchers (Coffey & Atkinson 1994).

RESULTS

1966-1970: The discovery of the counter culture

In this period, norms and values changed and all young people were part of that process. The post-war period brought work and capital in The Netherlands together in a joint effort to rebuild the country. The generation in power had great visions of economic development, boosted by the wonders of technology and the new consumerism. This optimism and sense of co-operation led to a situation, in which politics was influenced by a small group of businessmen, “the 200 of Mertens”. The priority for economical growth stimulated the demolition of old quarters, the construction of wide corridors for cars and the emergence of mono-functional shopping centres. Commercial project developers had the power to overrule the interests of local neighbourhoods. In Brussels the people in the old neighbourhoods tried to stop this demolition process. In Amsterdam the Provo movement protested against the tearing down of houses for a subway system. Free bicycles came, instead of more cars. The counter culture was born. In the USA, the young students did not want to fight in Vietnam, dropped out of school, hitchhiked along the Pacific coast and enjoyed peaceful music festivals. Provo’s and hippies are different in social and cultural context, but brother and sister in political context. In Europe, the intellectuals wanted to break free from the repressive norms and values and tried to rule out the power system. They protested in the streets and occupied university buildings, and in Paris the clash with the police and the power system was quite massive. The Beatles then present the album “Sgt. Pepper’s lonely heart club’s band” and the hippy movement is already on its way back. In only a few years it is all over, but with great effect on the political and power system and on the relation between social classes and the sexes.

Into the neighbourhood

Students provoked change in the universities, but in organisations, commercial companies and the neighbourhoods as well. In 1969, students at the Faculty of Architecture at the Delft University of Technology influenced the selection of new professors. One of these professors assigned his students to create a small commercial centre in an old neighbourhood in the city of Delft, with beauty parlours, an ice cream bar and boutiques. Five students refused, because they wanted to study more social relevant design problems. They broke up, dropped out (for one year) and went into an old neighbourhood, to show their solidarity with the people there. A neighbourhood committee was formed, a project on playing areas was organised at the elementary school, needs were investigated and plans were drawn. One Saturday morning, one small side street was blocked, to become a playing ground for children. The protest was planned as a joint action of students and neighbourhood committee, but when the students arrived, the street had been blocked already, a word-fight was going on with a shopkeeper on the corner and the police was present. A solution was found and the street would never be open for cars again. Other streets were selected, where through-

going traffic was blocked. Also, at the junction with small side streets the pavement was raised, to draw attention to the dangerous traffic situation. The official urban planners of Delft were creative in finding effective solutions for the neighbourhood. They became the inventors of “woon-erven”, areas in neighbourhoods, where cars are not allowed or only at a maximum speed of 30 km/hr. Woon-erven can be found in every city and village in The Netherlands now.

In this period, one student lived close to a bridge over a canal. The bridge would open frequently and cars and motorcycles would blow fumes into his bedroom. Inspired by the committee in the old neighbourhood, he put a sign near the bridge: “Bridge open, engine off” and suggested the local government to make it an official statement. After less than 10 years, every open bridge in The Netherlands had this sign.

The project in Delft shows that social action for improvement of public spaces, that lie within the range of influence of city councils, was quite successful. Other experiences support the general conclusion that initiatives from the public will be rewarded, if the improvement is not too costly and the benefits are for the general public. This idea is an important incentive for participation of citizens in issues concerning the development of the city.

1971-1980: The counter culture in business

Creating your job will facilitate the individual life style a person wants. An action oriented research project in the region of Apeldoorn, that was in the process of creating a satellite village, led to the creation of a village council, to act as counterpart for the city administration. This activity resulted in a professional career: six persons started the Learning by Participation Group, part of the Workgroup 2000 Foundation. The Workgroup 2000 worked on future oriented research, from the perspective of “making your own future”. The first assignment was the organisation of a participation process for a regional development plan of Rijnmond, the mini-province with Rotterdam as major city. Spijkenisse should grow into a satellite city of Rotterdam: from 15.000 tot 60.000 inhabitants. The local administration agreed, but introduced a participation process for future citizens, that would never be equalled in scale in The Netherlands. Everyone interested in buying or renting a house could sign in. Houses were assigned in clusters of 250 to 350 houses and workshops were organised with the future dwellers, the urban planner and the architect. The design process for each mini-neighbourhood followed six steps, which had to result in final approval of the plans by the local council. About 6.000 houses were designed this way, until right-wing parties gained majority in the local council and stopped the project. The Workgroup 2000 continued more than 15 years on the organisation of participation procedures around national, regional and local urban planning and urban renewal. The peak was around 1978-1980, when the group of 6 had become a workforce of 38 persons, that still made major decisions during plenary meetings. The Delphi working method was used in most of the projects, because this method supports the participation of all workers. In contrast to commonly used discussion techniques, the Delphi method visualises the opinions of all people present in the meeting. Small cards with text up to 10 words are clustered, discussed and then rewarded with points for quick insight in priority. The orally strong representatives or the managers do not have more input than participants that like to stay in the background.

The conclusion from this period in Werkgroep 2000 is that all kinds of information and organisational aspects of participation procedures in urban planning and housing can be solved. For the participants, it is essential that the involvement is limited to a defined period, which must be divided in clear steps and each step resulting in a clear decision. Information that is needed to formulate ideas must only contain the essential conditions, data and description of the present situation. The discussion must focus on the decisions to be made, which means that the group of participants must formulate a clear set of goals and that essential questions must be answered. To facilitate this process, the discussion must be guided by a “moderator”, to whom the main concern is the support of participants in increasing the quality of their proposals. Essential in the process is the feedback from the elected council. Without support or without decisions that show the impact of the participation process, no participant will be motivated to continue to the end. The process must for that reason be limited in time: the average procedure lasted about 8 months, but the range is 2 months to two years. The procedure costs extra money, but speeds up the planning process and eventually can be effective. The administration is reluctant to start a procedure, because they lose control over the results. The main issue is the political support for participation. In The Netherlands these procedures had a chance in cities with a left-wing majority in the council.

1981-1990: Dealing with change, money and solidarity

In 1978 the author decided to start a new foundation “Woon-Energie”, to provide for a part time job close at home, as his first child was going to be born. This foundation focussed on sustainable building and maintenance. It was a regular company according to tax laws, but being a non-profit foundation, the majority of the board had to come from outside the organisation. In order to function as a self-governing team, the Woon-Energie board agreed not to run the company and support “autogestion”. For about ten years the team atmosphere of Woon-Energie was influenced by some common ideas:

- search for an integrated approach and get the target group involved;
- stability of the work-team is a greater challenge than dynamism through growth of the company or refreshing the team;
- managers change position every year, so everyone can feel stimulated to take initiative and show leadership;
- decisions are taken in plenary sessions on the basis of consent;
- research and consultancy are integrated;
- knowledge must be shared and transfer of knowledge deserves much attention.

In the realm of these ideas, the organisation of participation was not just a technique, but a perception and an expression of solidarity. The perception is the awareness that conflict of interest between different groups in society asks for an equal share in the discussion, with input from all parties involved. This demands for support of the interest of users and consumers. Taking the initiative for a participation procedure is not a technocratic but a political choice, as is the act of sharing knowledge and power. These ideas were common in the group for a period of ten years. After that period ten years of new “professionalism” followed, with centralised leadership, growth of the company and focus on continuity. The management grew and became costly, the control too tight and the fun too low. Twenty years after the start, the organisation went through a crisis, some people left, the managers lost their position and finally the rest turned back to the egalitarian status of the pioneering period.

The conclusion is that partners in work teams can provide a very special atmosphere and a strong social cohesion. Solidarity is a basic feeling in these teams. But it is never stable and crises will occur every couple of years. Creating the dynamic organisation is just one of the ways of dealing with crises and growth is the motor of dynamism. But growth requires money and when money becomes important, the company tends to reflect the interests of those who have money and to use the knowledge within the company for competitive power, instead of sharing it. A stable organisation is in many ways the opposite: flexibility, creativity and dynamism of workers are essential qualities in holding a position on the market. In the economical and political climate of today, participation is not an issue.

1991-2000: Playing as a way of life.

We live in a period of great influence by mass media. Play is institutionalised in popular television programmes and the consumption of sport. Instead of play, however, it creates consumption of entertainment. It keeps people away from play, because there is no time to exercise play. The creative process that is the basis of play could even be frustrated in an attempt to match the fun that is showed on television. This situation illustrates the difference between image and reality. Politics is obsessed with image and polls and the relationship with mass media. When participation does not exercise influence or a good dialogue, it could be just entertainment. Web-polls do not reflect participation, as they do not consider feedback. Populism in politics creates an image of participation, because these politicians speak the language of the masses, but when it is not based on discussion, but instead constructs and uses the mainstream of emotions of the masses, it is in contrast with participation. Participation is debate in the public arena, not in court. The filing of lawsuits by individuals and consumer organisations can be interpreted as an anti-democratic trend, when lawsuits are abused for private profit or even when fear of lawsuits kills the debate. One reason for the higher incidence of lawsuits, however, is that law-enforcement is not standard, but available only for those who claim it.

Change in society comes from technological change and from breaking habits or taboos. When the breaking of taboos is recognised by the public as a new freedom, then the new norm will be transmitted to the masses in just a few years time. In pop-music, the self-composed music by The Beatles broke a taboo, as was their hairdo, clothing and interest in Eastern thought. Journalists, popular artists and politicians are sensitive to “emerging topics”, because they can reveal how the system works, what can be changed and where a person fits in. In The Netherlands, the emerging politician Pim Fortuyn broke a taboo on the discussion about immigrants (among other taboos) and after he was killed, his party entered with 18% of all votes in Parliament. This event shows that change in society does result from emotions of the masses. Social or political science can reveal how systems work as well, and action oriented research can focus on change. The participation procedures of the seventies did not cause political change but were a result of it. Technological change is a step by step process and sometimes the steps are large and involve the masses: information technology since the eighties and around the turn of the century the biochemical and gene-technology. This discussion about gene-technology emerges in a period of economic uncertainty and religious conflict. Defining the role of the public demands for ways of dealing with a new topic: the perception of risk.

2000-....: Perception of risk

The concept of the risk society has turned out to be one of the most popular diagnosis given to the contemporary society, not only for its indisputable analytical perspective, but also because it enjoys support in social reality, while reflecting people's actual feelings. In the "western" world, where everyone chooses his or her own biography, the perception of risk is emerging (Loudin in *Science, Technology and Society* 2-3, 2001, pp. 199-212)). Participation provides a platform for debate about risk, for exchange of knowledge and for expression of fear. As fear of health risks and uncertainty about the quality of products is a health problem in itself, then participation procedures can be elements in health risk control.

The discussion on gene technology needs accessible information. As information tends to reflect certain opinions and interests, it can be difficult to get this information across to those who want better control of risk. An example of the role of information comes from a campaign for proper ventilation in housing, which was not very successful. The idea is that bad indoor air is caused by poor ventilation and that occupants (with focus on tenants) must be educated, so they will ventilate better. In many houses proper ventilation is not feasible, however, due to technical problems. Information campaigns do not have effect and information is not welcome. The National Tenant Association stimulated assessment of the quality of ventilation systems by tenants and helped them to take action towards home-owners. A large group of tenants made a thorough study of the ventilation system in their house and absorbed complex information. The self-assessment tool was quite a success. This experience illustrates that information must support the interest of the consumers of information. Also, the motivation to get involved in participation procedures depends on the benefits: does it support personal interest, will it provide social contacts, status or just fun? In the western world, fun seems to be the key.

DISCUSSION

Professor Taeke de Jong presents changes in society as waves, with complex interactions (Figure 1).

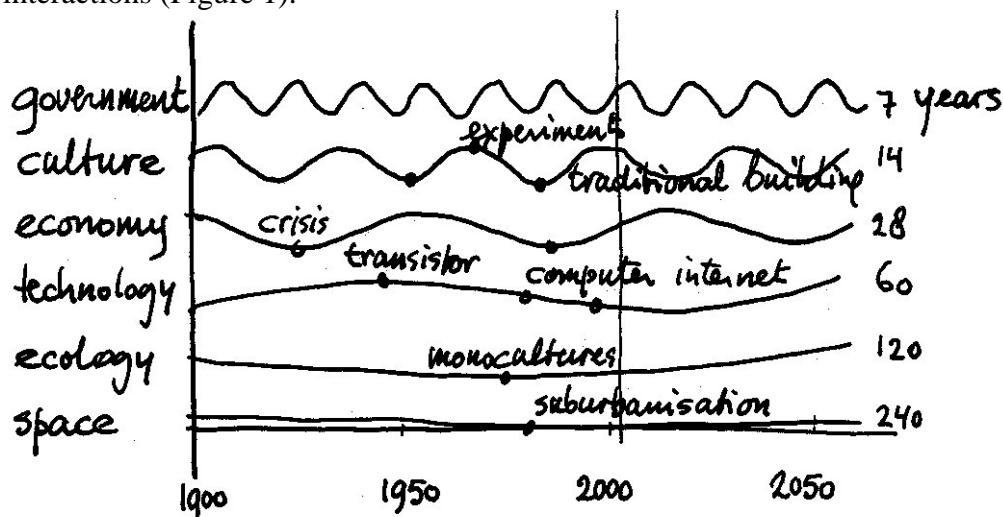


Figure 1. Macro-events

The government can be directive or passive, culture can be innovative or traditional, the economy can grow or go through a crisis, technology can focus on specialization or integration, ecology can differentiate or turn more and more monotonous and space can concentrate or de-concentrate. Points on these waves illustrate specific moments, which are important in urban planning. An image of change is illustrated in table 2, where the course of events concerning participation shows a wavelength of two generations. Figure and table are tentative examples.

period	event	impact
1966-1970	Provo, Democraten 66 party	democratic reform, women's lib., action oriented research
1971-1975	Learning by Participation	participation procedures in regional development
1976-1980	energy crisis	participation procedures in urban renewal
1981-1985	financial crises	loss of support for community organisations
1986-1990	economic reform	consumer society, end of participation procedures
1990-1995	new liberalism	the polder model
1996-2000	individualism	mainstream, neglect of minorities
2001-2010	pessimism	populism, risk perception, conflict
2010-	the new revolution	new norms and values

Table 1. Participation procedures and change in society

The figure and table suggest, that participation was an issue in the 1960-1970-period, and that the phenomenon cannot be recreated, but results from mass movements. These mass movements can be triggered by single events, but the event is just the drop of water, that makes the bucket flow. Sensitivity to these mass movements creates insight in "emerging topics", that can reveal how the system works, what can be changed and where a person fits in. So it is important to study mass movements for creative problem solving in the field of technology and the public.

The experience of 35 years of citizen participation resulted in conditions for successful procedures:

- discussion about fundamental goals must be possible;
- information must be accessible to every participant and technical information must be translated into user-friendly bits of information;
- laymen must get support in the process of formulating their opinions and interests;
- a strict and short procedure must be followed, each step resulting in a clear decision and along a strict timetable, legalised by the formal decision-makers;
- formal decisions that are not in accordance with the proposals of participants, must be accounted for in public.

Participation procedures can be successful when issues to be discussed are well defined, when political decisions will be taken and when the input of participants reflects the public interest. In the case of risk assessment and risk control, the participation procedure can take away fear and support the healing process in the community.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of participation procedures reflects the common sense of the masses. In periods of change, these procedures support the expression of concern and needs of the masses. If participation is not based on information, discussion and feedback from

decision-makers, but on emotions, the mass movements may support populist and undemocratic decisions.

Theory is the abstract formulation of the structure of events and experiences. Any theoretical framework is useful, as long as it helps to structure data and knowledge and facilitates the re-construction and communication with others. The context of scientific work is mainly determined by the “self”.

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