

Participatory design of people-centered cities – How to shape the future we want?

Young urban experts' take on the steps needed ahead

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The urban transformation to sustainability will not be accomplished if it is understood as a technical endeavor limited to the field of specialists. Rather, it necessitates a socially, politically and economically inclusive approach, and, most importantly: a people-centered focus. Planning and building people-centered cities, however, can only be achieved in a participatory manner and through fundamentally new ways of co-producing ideas and solutions for desirable urban futures. “Participatory design of people-centered cities” thereby requires:

- Establishing new inter-linkages and practices between research, education and practice to make participation truly transformative.
- Embracing conflicting rationalities and allowing for flexibility, risk-taking and learning from failure as part of any participatory process.
- Questioning conventional roles in practice and research and adapting curricula to include training in new skills and competencies needed for facilitating participatory processes.
- Harnessing the innovative potential of experimental and transformative learning experiences in non-institutional arenas (e.g., Urban Labs) for institutional change.
- Providing flexible and long-term funding for the future agenda of participatory design of people-centered cities that rewards risk-taking and embraces failures.
- Developing and defining evaluation criteria in a transparent and participatory manner.

The recommendations presented here were developed in the course of a future workshop on “participatory design of people-centered cities” funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation. With the objective to develop more just and inclusive cities in the future, the aim is to improve human well-being in cities and to put people at the center of debates around smart cities and transformative change.

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A. Background - Giving a voice to young urban change agents

The Robert Bosch Foundation commissioned the Chair of International Urbanism at the University of Stuttgart to conceptualize and conduct a three-day future workshop for young and future urban change agents.

The Robert Bosch Foundation defined the term and concept of “participatory design of people-centered cities” in a report conducted by the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT). The underlying shared concern was to understand how participation can become transformative. In order to do this, there is not only a need to look at the research, but also to reflect on the practice of participatory design, and to draw lessons on how to educate and equip the next generation to shape the future we want. Development-oriented master programs with students who have first work experience and diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds have in particular been at the center of attention in terms of the potential for catalyzing change. Yet, little is known about the actual challenges they face and where and how they see the future of

participatory design of people-centered cities. Including their voices and perspectives in such discussions is thus of utmost importance.

Against this background, from 15 - 17 February 2021, around 20 students and alumni of the MSc Integrated Urbanism and Sustainable Design (IUSD) engaged with existing theories and methods and developed suggestions for how to push the participatory agenda further. To ground the concept of “participatory design of people centered cities” into the everyday realities of the young urban change makers, fictional cases were used as a basis to develop ideas for future research and enhance practice and higher education. At the end of the workshops, the key findings and recommendations were discussed with experts in the field.

The MSc Integrated Urbanism and Sustainable Design (IUSD) is an interdisciplinary and international master program hosted at the University of Stuttgart and offered as a double degree together with Ain Shams University in Cairo. It trains and prepares a new generation of urban practitioners to face the

tremendous environmental, cultural, socioeconomic and governance challenges resulting from the dynamic urban transformation around the globe.

Many of the IUSD students bring with them years of working experience and a shared understanding of the limitations of classical architectural and urban planning education to meet the requirements for designing and facilitating participatory and co-productive processes. This is in line with the communicative turn in urban planning, but also more recently with transformative science where the need for co-productive processes as a catalyst for change has become evident.

The young urban change agents understand this paper as an assessment and evaluation of the current state of participatory approaches in research, practice and education based on their experiences and recommend the following points to strengthen participatory and transformative processes through innovative methods and capacity development.

B. Key findings

The discussions by an international group of young urban change makers demonstrated not only the strengths, but also the limitations of the concept: The terminology used reflects a strong Global North perspective on the issue and hampers an application of the concept at global scale and in different geo-political and cultural contexts.

1 *Making participation transformative requires new interlinkages and practices between research, education and practice.*

The discussion on the future of participatory design of people-centered cities emphasizes the urgent need to overcome persisting silos. This includes both breaking down internal silos between different scientific disciplines or different units in city administrations, as well as overcoming silos between the operational logics and ways of knowing within research, education and practice. New arenas, methods and practices such as urban experiments (e.g., in the context of various ‘Urban Labs’ or in form of tactical urbanism) have been identified as a potential ‘broker’ and means of enabling new forms of trans-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder collaboration as well

as mutual learning processes. Closer investigation is still needed in terms of the opportunities and challenges that occur when converging the different logics within research, education and practices and embedding the lessons learned in the institutional realm.

2 *Participatory processes need to embrace conflicting rationalities and allow for flexibility, risk-taking and learning from failure.*

Designing people-centered cities in a participatory manner means that different interests need to be considered, making such processes (and outcomes) complex, conflictual and to some extent unpredictable. Accordingly, there is a need to move away from the notion of participatory planning as a linear and seamless process where every step can be controlled and predetermined, and move towards embracing conflict and uncertainty as part of diverging interests. This requires a rethink of participatory planning processes as part of conflict management (not just conflict resolution) and the dedication of time and resources to allow for a certain level of flexibility, openness and reversibility as well as for learning from failure. It also requires a reflexive and circular

process that allows for adaptation along the way.

3 *Conventional roles in practice and research should be questioned and curricula adapted to include training in new skills and competencies needed for facilitating participatory processes.*

The involvement in and facilitation of participatory processes questions conventional roles and forms of legitimacies. Planners and urban researchers in particular are tasked with taking on new responsibilities to navigate the transformation towards desirable urban futures and facilitate negotiations and potential conflicts among the various interests at play. Embracing that role requires a change in mindset and calls for a new set of (soft) skills and competencies. Accordingly, planners and researchers need to be trained differently and urban curricula need to be adapted to equip the next generation with the skills and competencies necessary for taking a participatory approach to people-centered cities. There is an urgent need to recognize the value of facilitation and the potential establishment of new roles.

4 *The innovative potential of experimental learning experiences in non-institutional arenas (e.g., 'Urban Labs') needs to be harnessed for institutional change.*

Existing institutions are often too slow, inflexible and incapable of coping with increasing complexities. Innovative approaches are thus needed to both challenge and reform institutional settings as well as to unlock the transformative potential of participatory processes. A range of 'Urban Labs' has been set up with the purpose of pushing for transformation from outside institutional boundaries. However, while they are needed and seen as non-institutional arenas for experimental learning experiences, they also need a framework or study and the further development of methods, and, in this respect, there is a need for institutionalization. This potential for bringing about institutional innovation within education, research and practice still needs to be explored in a more systematic manner. The strength of networking and peer-to-peer exchanges should be considered in this regard to enhance a structured reflection on what can be learned in order to enable institutional change both from within and from outside.

5 *The future agenda of participatory design of people-centered cities needs flexible and long-term funding that rewards risk-taking and embraces failures.*

Current funding schemes are often too rigid, linear and project oriented. As a result, much of the cooperation built up by projects disappears after funding has expired. Lasting transformative processes and innovative initiatives require stable structures, time and a certain sense of security as well as a fair distribution of and accessibility to resources in order to enhance shared ownership among all parties. Funding institutions and mechanisms should thus go beyond conventional project-finance logic and consider establishing long-term funding schemes to support such processes and encourage transparent pooling of funding beyond the applicants' own resources (time and money). Funding should also go beyond the specific context and make it possible to link the contextualized knowledge to other laboratories and transformative processes elsewhere in order to draw comparable conclusions. A flexible funding scheme should thus be process oriented -not product oriented- and embrace and learn from failures and en-

courage risk-taking. These aspects should also be rewarded in the monitoring and evaluation process.

6 *Ensure a transparent and participatory manner of developing and defining evaluation criteria.*

Converging the different ways of knowing and operational logics of research processes, higher education institutions and planning practices raises the question of whose logic counts when it comes to evaluating successes and failures both in the participatory process and in the transformational impact on society, institutions and individual ways of knowing and acting. Planning practice looks for quick answers to their research needs due to time pressure, whereas research is based on scientific principles and rigor. To increase accountability, measures for evaluation should be transparent, communicated from the very beginning of the participatory design process and include definitions of what counts as success. Criteria and their definitions could potentially be defined in a participatory manner, understanding the evaluation procedure as a cooperative learning process for all involved parties.

C: Recommendations for action

The following recommendations derive from the key findings set out in Part B and have been tailored to serve as a ‘working basis’ for future strategy making for institutions and funding agencies aiming to become leading voices in the urban transformation towards people-centered cities.

1 Making participation transformative requires new interlinkages and practices between research, education and practice.

- Map the current state of research, practice and education in the field of “participatory design of people-centered cities” to identify promising interlinkages between the three realms.
- Encourage studies that look at the process of bringing together the different operational logics and ways of knowing.
- Examine potentials and barriers for shared learning experiences between the three realms.
- Fund across the silos by developing programs that: e.g., invite practitioners for short stays as visiting researchers at universities and expose researchers to settings of practice

2 Participation understood as a process needs to embrace conflicting rationalities and allow for flexibility, risk taking and learning from failure.

- Augment the definition and perception of people-centered cities with the concept of conflicts and uncertainties.
- Rethink time planning and budget modalities to embrace conflicts and uncertainties inherent in participatory planning processes.
- Design programs in a manner that allows for a certain level of flexibility, openness and reversibility towards the aspects of conflicts, risk-taking and learning from failure.

3 Conventional roles in practice and research should be questioned and curricula adapted to include training in new skills and competencies needed for facilitating participatory processes.

- Explore in-depth research on the diverse roles played by planners and researchers engaged in participatory processes and their ways of coping with different operational logics and ways of knowing to better identify the new skills and competencies needed.
- Facilitate a dialogue on soft skills and competencies through networking between researchers and planners or embedding these into the respective institutional context.
- Support capacity development of actors in research and practice in new skills needed for participatory processes.
- Enable the transition from university studies to practice by embedding students and young urban agents in innovative and cutting-edge participatory practice.

4 The innovative potential of experimental learning experiences in non-institutional arenas (e.g., Urban Labs) needs to be harnessed for institutional change.

- Move away from project finance logic and invest in long-term structures. Foster structured learning experiences to improve harvesting of lessons learned from experimental non-institutional arenas (e.g., ‘Urban Labs’ / urban experiments) to push for institutional change.
- Critically reflect on the achievements of previous programs and their potential to enhance transformation through participatory processes.
- Support and enable the networking and exchange of knowledge across world regions by considering the continuation and upscaling of existing regional programs that have been received well.

5 The future agenda of participatory design of people-centered cities needs flexible and long-term funding that rewards risk-taking and embraces failures.

- Consider continuing existing funding or establish flexible funding schemes to attract innovative applications that bridge between the realms of research, practice and education with a focus on “participatory design for people-centered cities”.
- Introduce a multistage procedure in funding calls as well as long-term funding possibilities (min. 5 years - 3+2).

6 Ensure a transparent and participatory manner of developing and defining evaluation criteria.

- In order to professionalize the use of methods and tools in participatory processes and to become a leading platform for a much needed agreement on quality standards, the following steps should be taken:
- Develop evaluation criteria and evaluation procedures together with representatives from research, practice and education - and in some cases together with the receivers of funding - and link evaluation with follow-up measurements to embed the knowledge gained from the evaluation in practice and directly use it for further improvements.
- Define evaluation criteria (and their indicators) as clearly and unambiguously as possible, including definitions of what counts as success.

The paper was developed with the input by IUSD students and alumni as well as other contributors, namely (in alphabetical order): Alfred Palacios, Diana Barrera Salazar, Eliana Gómez, Franziska Laue, Friederike Thonke, Girisha Sethi, Jossie Torres, Makda Akelom, Marlene Franck, Martin Valinger, Melvina Puspahati, Natalia Urrego Díaz, Rumman Mateen, Shaharin Elham Annisa, Shalakhia Reji, Simone Gretsche, Vladyslav Tyminski, Wasela Altaher, Yara ElMaghrabi.

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