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COPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION
(Question 7)

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In the last ten years what have we learned about the possibilities, impossibilities and problems of user participation in architectural design? Cite examples to illustrate your discussion.

Participation is a general concept, but the usual application of it is concerned with human groups and actions.

The verb "participating" means both "taking part in something" and "taking part with someone". The whole criticism, acceptance or rejection of participation as an ideology is based more on the first meaning than on the second one and begins with the identification of "something". We can propose a definition of the concept according to that distinction as follows: to participate means to join a process which is developing in the time, consequently, to modify the boundaries between the participant and the process, to influence and to be influenced by the process.

In the present case we are concerned with the participation of users in the design process.

A clear distinction, that we particularly use in order to describe participation nowadays, is concerned with the "autonomous" and "exorted" forms of it.

"Autonomous participation", in a geographically defined community, is the main characteristic of unselfconscious cultures.

It illustrates the generation of the built environment in traditional societies. Moreover, it demonstrates the beauty and the coherency of buildings and towns which have been created in times when the activity of design was not recognised, when the user of a building was his own architect, and when the form was evolving through the correction of individual technical failures, as they occurred.

On the other side, "exorted participation" characterizes contemporary social orders and may be distinguished according to the central goal which is occupied by the person, group or organisation which plays the role of catalyst.

One typical form of "exorted participation" for example is that one which aims at the community's enforcement and is to be found

in attempts like "advocacy" or "provocacy" planning. The catalyst's first aim in this case is to minimize the differentiation which characterizes the cultural or communication boundaries between him and the community. His second aim is to help the community to defend its rights or to develop its identity i.e. to modify the boundaries between the community and its social environment.

Another kind of "exorted participation" does not aim at abolishing the boundaries between catalysts and new participants, although it may seem to work in such a way. This kind of participation could be accurately described by using the P.Selznick's definition of "cooptation".

He wrote (1941):

"Cooptation is the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence. This is a defensive mechanism, formulated as one of a number of possible predicates available for the interpretation of organizational behaviour."

Cooptation and co-optative participation are examples which indicate how the understanding of boundaries varies according to the level of approach. Selznick developed this variety by speaking about participation in responsibilities but not in power.

Sherry Arnstein pointed out the same item in a productive criticism of the modern tension to involve people in the design process:

"There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process...."

Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.

Participation is generally considered as having an educational value. The modern wave to involve more people into social action and particularly the decision-making concerned with the environment, has frequently referred to the argument of the educational results of participation.

John Palmer, for example, introducing R.Goodman's "After the Planners" defined participation as a "joint educational process".

"The professional, leaving behind the privileges and symbols of his former position, joins with the people in a joint educational process".

Both prescriptions about participatory experiments- as "participation workshops" analysed by B. Goldstein - and theoretical approaches try to explain the mechanisms which function in order to produce educational results. An explanation is that one from Lisa Peattie:

"Norton Long (1958) has described the city as an "ecology of games". For some purposes, it seems to me, one might better describe it as an ecology of dramatic performances.... The image of "theater" also expresses more handily than the image of the game the quality of emotional engagement characteristic of the urban social order.... Some dramatic performances produced in the urban scene do have specified participants and a clear division between the players and the audience, as in traditional stage theater.... Other dramatic performances are much more like the audience participation production of the Living Theater or even the guerilla theater actions in which the aim is to provoke bystanders into becoming part of a play which is as much the "reality" of the bystanders as the "theater" of actors".

To some extent the general definition of education could involve the process which begins from the maximum differentiation concerning codes, language, and knowledge boundaries and ends in the minimization of it. According to this, participation is an educational process because it is concerned with the sharing of already existing experience, languages and stock of knowledge.

In fact it is an education in action additional to the education in static knowledge.

Participation, disputing positively the architect's authority, was confronted as a tool, that could lead to the democratisation of the design process. It has become a common belief that since the daily users of buildings know more about their needs than everybody else, their involvement in the design process could help to solve the environmental problems, that caused confusion to experts dealing with them.

re-birth

The era of the '60's has given birth to the idea of participation. The social and political turmoils in Europe and the US have influenced strongly both the emergence and the evolution of participation.

The social and political implications of participating and the changes needed in order to enforce it and make it real have absorbed the energy of people involved in these.

Major issues, such as, the redistribution of power, decentralization, strengthening of the community, social justice were asking for solutions.

Disputes on participation, possibilities for implementation, evaluation of its results hinged on ^{the} mentioned problems, which up to now seem to be unresolved.

My intention is not to dispute the positive results of this approach, since it has contributed to the analysis of the social and political factors that determine the users participation in the design process. I would like to emphasize some other points that have stayed on the margin in a lot of cases, although they are important and necessary for a successful conducting of participation.

The ultimate goal of users participation in the design process is not fulfilled at the point when the power and dependence relationships between users and catalysts are in balance. However these relationships determine the context of participation and its potential results.

Moreover, "participation brings people together, involves them in their world, it creates feeling between people and the world around them, because it is a world which they have helped to make"

This derives from the belief that ["the environment is only working properly for people when they have shaped it themselves, when they have both given it the shape it needs to meet their needs, and also had an active hand in shaping it. It is not only the liberator of their energy but the product of their liberated energy. It is not merely a tool for making us feel good, but the product of our hands and hearts while we are feeling good."]

This has to be taken as a premise, since it extends the purpose of participation to the generation of real and coherent buildings and towns.

Whose statement?

participation ?

The users participation in the actual design and construction of buildings, into the present framework of planning, has reached a deadlock.

Desparate efforts have tried to solve this problem. Most of them have ended in playing with the term "infrastructure" in a very sophisticated way.

Although, for instance, Yona Friedman wrote that the real city is an infrastructure which receives an individual city by any citizen - i.e. the set of common characteristics of mental images people have about the city- in his proposal, infrastructure is a huge construction which could be used as a framework for adapting each citizen's required house. Everyone could be able to choose an ideal environment for himself from a large stock of alternatives and to fit it to the infrastructure. "Like in a restaurant" he concludes.

The failures of these efforts allude to the discordance between the concepts of participation and planning.

People are asked to participate either in a process that ends in the prediction of the future or to accomplish their needs according to a master plan that has been already fixed. From this point of view, it becomes clear why participation in this given context has not helped the qualitative improvement of the built environment.

Only when "planning and construction will be guided by a process which allows the whole to emerge from local acts" undertaken by the users, then hopes of environmental improvement can be held.

Buildings and users will be adapted to each other slowly and continually, through a process of embellishment, modification and improvement of their environment.

I doubt if these acts can take the label of users participation, since it is a vested interest of the people to design the environment by which they are affected.

Based on these assumptions, architects have to replace their current ideas and practice about architecture, building and planning.

They have to intensify their efforts towards the development of communicative tools between them and the people, that could give the right information in a coherent and assimilable form.

That implies that they have to help the emergence and the creation of an understandable and easy language that could help the communicative building of the environment.

This point is very clearly and strongly stated in the "A Pattern Language":

"Towns and buildings will not be able to become alive, unless they are made by all the people in society and unless these people share a common pattern language, within which to make these buildings, and unless this common pattern language is alive itself".

I have realized the problem of lack of communication and its consequences, after an experience I had, trying to apply users participation in a redevelopment project of a settlement in Greece. The chosen settlement - in Thessaloniki - was erected in 1931, after state care, when the site was granted to a refugee's group (81 families) living since 1923 in slums. The living conditions in this settlement were very bad. However the state had taken no care of it. From its part, there was no intention for improvement.

The entire design process was based on the users participation. Emphasis has been given mainly on the possibilities for a real participation of all the inhabitants of the settlement.

The result of the process, as concerning the proposals for houses, remained on a poor level. It was the first time that the participants had such an experience. However, we have not helped them to develop images for their houses, to feel the space, to be creative and active.

The common basis of understanding and communication was missing totally. Rarely, we have been able to share the same language.

As a consequence, the finally designed houses were missing that quality, that is generated from the release of the individual's creativity in a common effort.

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