

Book Review

Participatory Design Theory: Using Technology and Social Media to Foster Civic Engagement

Reviewed by Carlos Nunes Silva, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

Participatory Design Theory: Using Technology and Social Media to Foster Civic Engagement
Oswald Devisch, Liesbeth Huybrechts, and Roel De Ridder

© 2019 by London and New York: Routledge

269 pp.

\$140

ISBN 978-1-138-08768-2

The book “Participatory Design Theory: using Technology and Social Media to Foster Civic Engagement,” edited by Oswald Devisch, Liesbeth Huybrechts, and Roel De Ridder is a useful addition to the already vast library on citizen participation by offering a critical overview of the concept of participation in all its variety and different meanings both in theory and in practice. The editors revisit the debate around the notion of participation, going back to the landmark article of Sherry Arnstein “A ladder of citizen participation,” published half a century ago, in 1969, presenting also a brief overview of the historical development of ‘Participatory Design’ which has been introduced in the early 1970s.

When citizens are demanding a more direct form of participation in decision-making processes, in developed as well as in developing countries, a book on these issues is certainly a timely publication, in particular considering that the aim of the book, as the editors refer, is to unpack the concept of participation and to examine current forms of citizen participation, taking into account the metaphor of the ladder proposed by Arnstein.

For the IJEPR readership the book has an additional interest since it is more specifically focused on the role that technology and social media can play to foster civic engagement. The sixteen chapters that make up the book explore in different ways how technology and social media can support or enhance the participation of marginalized or dis-empowered citizens. In other words, how can technology and social media help to maintain and diversify participatory processes. Also crossing all chapters is the argument that participation processes should not seek to move citizens engagement from lower steps in the ladder of participation to upper ones, but instead to engage as much groups of citizens as possible in the different levels, moving through them as found appropriate. In this sense, participation is seen in the book not as a one-off event but as a never-ending process, in which citizens, organizations and institutions meet to discuss issues of common interest.

All sixteen chapters explore and discuss different collective and democratic design experiments with each chapter addressing a specific spatial issue. They are clustered in four groups defined by what the editors term strategies: the first strategy, with five chapters, aims to diversify, or to make marginalized needs and groups visible and audible; the second strategy, with four chapters, is focused on co-production, on opening-up the participatory process; the third strategy—to interrupt—also with four chapters, aims to introduce controversy in the participatory process; the fourth and last strategy, to document participatory processes has three chapters.

In Part I (“To diversify”, pp. 13-86), the book comprises five chapters. In chapter 1 - “Valuating narrative accounts in participatory planning processes. A case of co-creative storytelling in Antwerp, Belgium” - Tim Devos, Seppe De Blust and Maarten Desmet show how co-constructing storylines can help to frame participation processes and in that way to create productive citizen engagement. Carolin Claus in the following chapter - “Using a complex sound world for a participative dismantling and redefinition of the collective appropriation of industrial landscapes” - presents preliminary results of an ongoing research on how urban electronic music can contribute to the development of a qualitative approach of sound in landscape design. This is followed in chapter 3 - “Reflections on the counter-mapping of urban “arrival neighborhoods” through Geoweb 2.0 in Brussels and Ghent” - written by Bruno Meeus and Burak Pak, by an exploration of how new digital platforms can be used for participatory knowledge construction and alternative mapping practices, reporting the practice of counter-mapping with the help of Geoweb 2.0 in the context of Belgian inner-city neighborhoods, identifying at least three key factors for the facilitation of better Geoweb 2.0 supported counter-mapping practices: accessibility, privacy, reliability. The following chapter - “Data-driven design for civic participation” -, by Saba Golchehr and Naomi Bueno de Mesquita, is focused on how social media data can inform public space designers about the local social context in the pre-design and pre-participation phase, and on how this data can be a valuable resource for designers interested to engage citizens in their projects. In the last chapter of this section - “Design initiatives in public spaces. Eight interpretative lenses”, Maurizio Teli and Maria Menendez-Blanco argue, based on how six researchers understand public space and on how they enact participation in their projects, that designing in public spaces means “to engage with relational practices that continuously redefine participation in a historically and geographically contingent way”.

The following Part (“To co-produce”, pp. 87-142) includes four chapters. In the first of these chapters - “Sharing authorship and measuring influence in architectural training in neighbourhood communities” - Jose Carrasco, Antonio Abellán Alarcón, Verónica Amorós, Jorge Bermejo Pascual and Sergi Hernández Carretero explore findings of recent research or experiments that challenged the role of experts by using the rationale of the affected communities, calling nonetheless the attention to some of the risks involved in these new forms of participatory processes. Magdalena Baborska-Narozny, Eve Stirling and Fionn Stevenson in chapter 7 - “Digitally networked action. Developing self-organization in weak-tie residential communities through a Facebook group” - explore the innovative use of Facebook Group for grassroots community self-organization among residents of apartment blocks in housing developments in the UK. In the next chapter - “Communal garden and the liminal city” - Torange Khonsari argues that the architect/designer needs to position him/herself in the liminal space between a consultant and citizen, as well as to consider the governance of common grounds, and its power structures among other aspects. In the last chapter of this section - “BIMBY. Modeling, civic empowerment and the invention of a new profession” - Rémy Vigneron, Denis Caraire and David Miet show how modeling technology, as the one used in the BIMBY process, shows great potential to foster civic engagement.

Part III (“To interrupt”, pp. 143-210) comprises four chapters. In chapter 10 - “Design, technology and social innovation. The serious game of TrafficO2” - Salvatore Di Dio, Giorgia Peri, Gianfranco Rizzo and Ignazio Vinci show, based on preliminary results that still requires further research, that in order to bring about innovation in an urban context, it could be sufficient to interact with its citizens’ culture, as seems to emerge from the TrafficO2 experimentation in Palermo. Katharina Gugerell,

Philipp Funovits and Cristina Ampatzidou in the subsequent chapter - “Daredevil or socialiser? Exploring the relations between intrinsic motivation, game experience and player types in serious games with environmental narratives” - explore and discuss the idea that serious games and gamified tools improve participation and citizen engagement. They show these positive influences in citizen engagement but highlight also the indications that gamification might lower motivation to engage. In chapter 12 - “Fabricam. Participatory urban interventions in a post-communist context”, Teodora Iulia Constantinescu, Loredana Gaita and Alexandra-Maria Rigler explore the case of Fabricam as an experiment of participatory interventions in a post-communist context, an example of the societal and political dynamics that allow and give new forms to participatory processes over public spaces in post-communist societies. In the last chapter of this section - “Rethinking the designer”’s role in the collective re-imagination of societies. A necessary reinterpretation of design and social innovation”, Chiara Del Gaudio explore and reflect on what designers can do to contribute to more democratic practices in urban contexts.

The last section of this book, Part IV (“To document”, pp. 211-262) has three chapters. In chapter 14 - “Participation within and beyond museums with the help of digital technologies” - Zsófia Ruttkay and Judit Béneyei explore and show how design can enhance civic participation in museums, transforming them in a forum for social discussions in which the visitor through the use of digital technologies is an active participant. In the following chapter - “Challenges and opportunities of documentation practices of self-organised urban initiatives” - Andrea Botero and Joanna Saad-Sulonen examine the documentation practices of two citizen initiatives in Helsinki, the challenges and limitations confronting this sort of initiatives and possible alternatives. In the last chapter - “Documentation games. A comparison between games to support participatory design teams to document their design process” - Jessica Schoffelen, Liesbeth Huybrechts, and Oswald Devisch explore the potential and limitations of games to support the documentation of participatory design processes.

The insights provided in each of these chapters open up new perspectives on citizen participation processes and confirm also long held views on these issues. A participatory process is essentially a process and not a one-off event, as citizen participation is still often seen and practiced. The role of citizens is crucial but the role of designers and planners is also critical and their responsibility in the participatory process needs to be transparent requiring from the professionals an attitude of continuous self-reflection.

For the insights, critical perspectives and the empirical evidence provided this is a book to be commended to all those working in the broad field of urban (e-)planning and design, namely those interested or engaged in citizen participation processes.