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SUGARCOATING POWER PLAY – DESIGN IN COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT
How can designers position themselves in and through democratic processes? Creating co-design workshops for community planning processes within the research project Decode my work explores design opportunities in planning. Shaped by the experience of planning, designing and holding two workshops in Upplands Väsby concerning an ongoing planning conflict this paper reflect on some of the opportunities, challenges and responsibilities for designers engaging with democratically governed processes.

BEGINNING WITH AN UNEASY FEELING
I remember the first meeting with the municipality. I was at unease not feeling comfortable in my new post-graduate role in a big research project. They talked about a conflict concerning the planning of two roads in a traffic-segregated area in the center of Upplands Väsby. The residents had protested, made a list and gathered 895 signatures. The appeal of controversy and conflict for research projects such as the one I am part of, like the critiqued character of designer as problemsolver we are in need of a plot, a controversy to resolve. We enter a conflict as the ‘good guys’ there to help and hopefully save the day. But really, save what day, and for whom?

ENGAGEMENTS
WHAT DOES DESIGN HAVE TO DO WITH PLANNING CONFLICTS?
Decode is a research project within the framework of Sweden’s innovation agency Vinnova’s call for challenge-driven innovation for sustainable cities. The project’s starting point was that collaboration with the public based on their different perspectives on social, environmental and cultural questions could help to better meet the complex challenges of sustainable urban development.

I became part of Decode in the second stage of the project when the aim and direction were already established. My part in the project was to, together with professor Bo Westerlund, explore and work with public consultation and participation in planning processes from a co-design approach. My reflections here are mainly shaped by our co-design explorations in Upplands Väsby where we created workshops to get a sense of an already articulated conflict: the planning of two roads and a shared space between apartment buildings in a traffic segregated area.

FITTING INTO OR RESHAPING THE FRAME?
Joining Decode I saw a huge challenge as well as potential of entering a large scale democratic and bureaucratic process of negotiating and affecting public space as a practicing professional. Being part of the project created a position for me as a designer to challenge myself within. Entering the project I saw an opportunity to challenge my role as a designer, to work within a context that would force me to develop abilities to work with social and democratic issues, issues I considered crucial for me as a designer and the design profession to address. I also saw potential in
contributing with ways of making sense through material reasoning that could be interesting for the negotiation of conflicts.

My initial question shaped by the framing of Decode was how form and materialization can support co-creation of understanding between different participants, with focus on citizen participation, in planning processes. This initial interest and question was quite naïvely shaped by the overarching assumptions of the project as well as the articulated aim for the work I was part of: to contribute with specific co-design understanding on how complex and controversial questions could be handled early and constructive in planning processes. As the project developed so did my interests and questions that became concerned with exploring the potential and problems of engagements between designer/designing and the planning process. One of the central questions thus became: how can I in the double meaning make sense of/in planning; how can I understand and how can I make myself understood? To engage myself in a situation and feel my way through my work e.g. creating workshops is for me a way to get a sense of and understand a situation. The workshops were thus formed, not aiming at solving specific issues or problems, but rather to explore issues and what a possible contribution could be. At the same time the workshops had to be within the framework of the project and be considered as meaningful by the collaborating municipalities.

Forming workshops concerning conflicts and issues of social sustainability together with citizens, civil servants and politicians there are different aims and terms for our participation. Through shaping the workshop to materialize and support different perspectives and interests the aim was not consensus, but rather to keep the negotiation alive and to be ongoing. What we hoped to achieve with this was a climate better suited to support mutual understanding, care for and negotiation of diverse interests as well as space to rethink the aims and frames of participation. The aim thus shifted towards making the negotiation explicit and materializing what was at stake rather than handling complex and controversial questions early and constructive in the planning processes.

COLLABORATING VS. SUGARCOATING

Is this collaboration based on a mutual engagement between designer and planner or am I simply helping to legitimize already made decisions and a set process?

Public consultation is demanded by law in planning processes and aim to obtain as good decision making foundation as possible and to provide the opportunity for insight and influence according to Boverkets webpage. The law for planning and building, PBL, was accepted in 1987 and aim to democratize the planning process, to strengthen the influence of the citizens and to move the decision making closer to the local residents (Tahvilzadeh et al., 2015). Community engagement in planning is a politically governed and dynamic process that includes, and is methodologically characterized by, conflicting interests providing interesting challenges for design practice to engage with, if we also can challenge the process.

Community engagement in planning works as a departure point to explore what I can contribute with, how my designer approach and ways of making sense could be relevant for community planning as well as challenging the limits of my abilities, to be open for what I can learn from this engagement. This builds on the idea of the necessity of a mutual engagement between the field of design research and different forms of community engagements in planning. A mutual engagement builds to some degree on trust and requires openness from both parties in the involvement to reconsider their position and practice in relation to the other. Jane Rendell (2011, p 22) talks about interdisciplinary research in a similar sense, where the researcher reflects on her own discipline and the way she usually works from a perspective offered by moving across disciplines or through close engagement between individuals in collaborations. This moves away from the notion of designer as mere facilitator and reflects on claims of and reasons for participation both in design and planning. This also aims at questioning what space designers have to affect these different engagements with various power balances and how we might negotiate this space.

This stresses the need and challenge for designers to expand our abilities to work with social, political and ethical aspects of entangled issues, something I want to address through Responsibilities. Designers, as proposing realities, are not neutral and so we need to challenge our industrial history and recognize our own agency as well as the agency of what we make and the
situations we engage with. I would like to discuss this as a modest approach of making careful considerations, and indeed making considerations means we actually are in a privileged position of having something to consider. In a way this is addressing power sideways through putting emphasis on the privilege and necessity of being open to reconsider. Addressing the necessity of being open to reconsider in order to engage and collaborate with others, something that I have myself experienced, I draw parallels to Jane Rendell’s (2011, p 23) explanation of interdisciplinary research as both ethical and political. In her sense interdisciplinary work means to give up the “safety of competence for the dangers of inability, the transformational experience of interdisciplinary work produces a potentially destabilizing engagement with dominant power structures allowing the emergence of new and often uncertain forms of knowledge.”. To Rendell interdisciplinary research suggests a desire to challenge norms of intellectual and creative production, and through transformative activities generate other forms and modes of knowledge and understanding (2011, p 23).

PARTICIPATION – INHERENTLY DEMOCRATIC OR APOLITICAL?

I was asked to join Decode explicitly to work with participation, in this case framed through co-design, in planning. Working with participation is for me however not the central aspect of my work, I see it as a means rather then an end. What is central is rather why I do it, in this case to support a democratic process.

Participation in design is mainly branded through the concepts of Participatory Design and Co-Design. These concepts are by many people in the field used interchangeably, even by senior design researchers, although (sometimes referred to as Scandinavian-) Participatory Design is claimed to have democratic aims and Co-Design is more frequently used in commercial settings (and in the US since Participatory Design sounds too 60:s hippie-ish).

In The Journal of Design Strategies Vol. 8, No. 1 fall 2016, on (New) Public Goods one of Participatory Design founders, Pelle Ehn, addresses how PD emerged in the 1970’s as an opposition to the potential use of new public management as a tool for controlling workers rather than improving their workplace situations (Ehn, 2016, p 12). Moving away from the factory floor into todays emerging forms of publics Ehn questions how democratic and open these participatory practices are, seeing the risk of design legitimizing the introduction of corporate values and administrative norms into the public life of communities.

Subscribing to one of these concepts, Co-Design or Participatory Design, doesn’t directly change what I do; it changes what I claim to do. In best case it helps my peers understand what I do. But subscribing to either of these concepts is problematic. Participatory Design comes with the risk having a legitimizing character of participation as inherently democratic but risks to be used for other purposes as critiqued by Ehn. Co-design on the other hand runs the risk of design assumed as apolitical.

I would frame my key concern as responsibilities. There are reasons for why I choose a rather slippery term. For me responsibilities are gaps, spacing and tensions; voids that require context, understanding and action. Looking at responsibilities in design, this is not necessarily considered a field, but rather a concern that over time, in relation to what was considered contemporary societal issues, has taken numerous different expressions. With responsibilities I refer to something situated and the common thread is the critical reflection and questioning what is given, challenging the current order, status quo. To me it is crucial as a designer, most often working with a brief, exactly this: to question what is given. Calling myself a designer I consider as staying in a position that I am critical of which means that I question why and what I partake in making. It is not about finding a static answer for mass production but to create ways of working with uncertainties: to reflect and respond, to become aware of ones own agency.

My question for the consortium concerns this slippery positioning, is this in fact irresponsible? And how can I in that case position myself?

REFERENCES


