Visual storyboarding tools for public engagement and spatial justice

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This research investigates how the processes of, and the decision-making in, urban regeneration projects can be made more democratic, with particular attention to how the voices of residents in the areas marked for redevelopment can be represented more effectively. The researcher’s interest in this question began during a period of postgraduate study in London from 2006-2008 with investigating local residents’ attitudes to the regeneration for the 2012 Olympics in east London, planning for which began in 2004. Having moved back to Japan, which coincidently is undergoing Olympic-related regeneration for the 2020 Games, the researcher has been investigating the urban regeneration of Fukuoka. Although the Olympics are far from the centre of focus of this research, nevertheless their pervasive presence is an indicator of the continuous urban regeneration process around the world. As such large projects make explicit, global, national, city and local interests are often at stake in urban regeneration.

The centre of attention of this research is the impact of urban regeneration on local communities and environments. This is because local residents rarely have the opportunity to express their opinions concerning the regeneration of their neighbourhoods as they are often latecomers to the process. The views of local residents are often subordinated to commercial and government stakeholder agendas. Although some architects and design groups have evolved consultation techniques with local residents, typically such techniques do not allow user groups to communicate their aspirations and anxieties, and particularly not as a collective body with specific interests. At the initial stage of the investigation, research has focused on how visualisation techniques can be utilised to define and amplify local residents’ aspirations and anxieties to enhance the built environments by applying a user-centred, participatory design approach. Subsequently, this research evolved communication tools that aim to enable different stakeholders in the regeneration process to understand each other better.

Engaging with the redevelopment process at the local scale, using participatory design techniques, raises questions of an ethical and political nature for the designer. The designer, when entering the situation, becomes an active member of an emerging communal decision-making process. This contrasts with a more conventional view of the designer as a technical expert removed and above the situation (Yin 2013). While technical expertise remains a feature of design practice, there is a recognition that the designer cannot dissociate himself or herself from the social, ethical and political dimensions of any proposal (D. Oswald 2016). At this particular moment in 2010s, global issues, specifically concerning environmental and social sustainability, are presenting challenges to existing frameworks of decision-making. These circumstances have given rise to the notion of socially responsible design (Gamman & Thorpe, 2006, 2011) a trend which goes back to the 1970s (Papanek 1971). Such an approach implies the designer working with activists, social scientists and artists as a group. Together, this group may serve as community enablers helping to shape the ways in which different groups within the community and different kinds of stakeholders interact in the regeneration process. These stakeholders include local residents, local businesses, other designers, academics, activists, commercial investors and governmental policy makers. The enabling or facilitation process seeks to bring to the surface otherwise unrecognised potential in the local area under redevelopment. It also seeks to convey these insights in a clear way so that all stakeholders may arrive at outcomes that are more beneficial to a wider group of stakeholders who recognise that their interests are not mutually exclusive. This process displaces the hostility that arises from a confrontational approach to negotiation.

From the start, inquiry into the ethical responsibilities of the designer has been a part of the motivation for this investigation. This interest has been pursued through the endeavour to establish communications among different stakeholders and by developing design methods that operate as a learning process in practical workshops. These endeavours seek to enable different groups to understand better each other and their respective interests, including as yet unacknowledged common interests. It is important to understand that the ethical horizon in question concerns the broader level of ethical responsibility concerning the wellbeing of the local community and not simply the narrower conception of professional ethics, as meeting technical and legal standards, whether of the designer or the business partners. The ethical dimension is therefore understood to include human, legal, technical and political aspects.
Awareness of the significance of the distinction between the broader and the narrower understanding of ethics has emerged through the experimental workshops with different participants in different forums. Working through these ethical horizons in practice makes explicit the unequal, and possibly unjust, power relations in urban regeneration. Adopting a narrow professional ethics approach, concerned solely with meeting legal and technical standards and requirements, may not allow of inequality and injustice to be rendered visible and discussed. The design process developed through the research seeks to address these inequalities and injustices by, firstly, enabling all participants to understand each other’s perspectives and goals; and, secondly, to imagine the current lived experience of people resident in particular locales and how their lives would change as a result of the regeneration. This process of creating a common way of imagining is key to understanding how the broader ethical responsibilities are enacted in practice.

Adopting an ethical design approach that acknowledges the human, legal, technical and political dimensions of the design process challenges the assumptions inherent in design practice in modernity, that is, the development of design since the mid-nineteenth century. For example, it no longer holds that good design has all of the answers that necessarily lead to good societal outcomes because professional expertise inherently embodies what is right and what is good. In retrospect, modernist understanding is now conceptualised as a power relationship, with the professional expert exerting power over the lay person. This research, by contrast, suggests that beneficial societal outcomes emerge from participation and negotiation among all interested parties. This leads to a different understanding of what good design might mean. Good design is no longer simply a preconceived technical solution, no matter how elegant, that would lead to convenience, efficiency, luxury, consumer satisfaction. Rather, the ascertainment of good design emerges gradually through the involvement and participations of the people it is designed for. This is not just a judgement on an aesthetic or utilitarian grounds. This approach erases the opposition between designers as creators and producers, and consumers as recipients of the pre-conceived and planned artifacts, environments and services. It envisages joint creation or co-creation and shared reflection in the development process. At the same time, this approach displaces the hierarchy of values amongst the participants, reconfiguring and re-balancing the financial and communal gains in urban redevelopment. It allows finance and community to be thought of in ways other than as binary opposites. It does not present a choice between one or the other but a way to facilitate a discursive process to create a more sustainable future that is more democratic and just. It is important to note that this discursive process aims to make explicit people’s current lived situations, enabling them to participate more actively in shaping the direction and the content of their lives, moving away from the determinism in modernist urban planning. This shift is a consequence of the methodological approach the theory of action which it implies, as discussed below.

From this perspective, the notion of design is redefined as a creative facilitation process that allows different stakeholders to co-imagine their shared environment. By implication, as will become increasingly clear, design is not envisaged solely as problem solving, where expert opinion holds sway, but is the process of creating a common imaginary. The research aims to create a methodological platform for communicative participation, rather than providing conventional “good design” (Coimmina and Wigley 2016) and solutions as outcomes. By doing so, the workshop methods developed through the research enable people to perceive their roles in the decision-making process in more active terms, not subject to the authority of designers, corporations or governments. Applying these principles and methods necessitates a different theory of action and of decision-making. This need arises because it is no longer a question of authoritative figures taking decisions which are subsequently followed and implemented but rather that decision-making and actions at the local scale can impact the urban scale and the global scale and vice versa. Action and decision-making are not once and for all one-way processes. They are responsive and iterative. The new theory of action makes explicit the ethical relations of all the participants to each other and the process of decision-making. It also places emphasis on negotiation, not finding ways to legitimise predetermined decisions in a top-down enforced consensus. The aim is not that everyone should agree but that everyone has a voice and the dissent is recognised as a key part of democratic decision making.