**Lessons from Yeoville Studio, Johannesburg**

**Claire Benit-Gbaffou**

**TOPIC 1 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND/OR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT. How do you define public participation and /or citizen engagement? What role can it play improving the lives of the urban poor? How can it help create inclusive cities? Is it essential/efficient?**

Public participation/ civic engagement is the possibility offered to, or taken by, urban residents to have a say on the shaping of their direct environment. To me this is not only about supporting autonomous civil society initiative: it becomes meaningful for inclusive (rather than fragmented) cities if this includes a sustained engagement with the State. While good governance principles around the world emphasize the importance of participatory platforms (invited by municipalities, NGOs or developers), they often assume civic engagement will replace or complement failing, disempowered or under resourced municipalities. In my view, a public participation *that is conducive to inclusive cities* requires specific practices and training of municipal officials, and at least in initial phases, *more* rather than *less* involvement of the state. Public participation is also often limited to those cooperative, “invited spaces of participation” (to use Cornwall and Miraftab’s concepts); our understanding should also include more confrontational, “invented spaces of participation”, where discontent and frustration – although sometimes difficult and “dangerous spaces of citizenship” (Holston)- also tell us about the dreams and desires of marginalized residents.

**TOPIC 2 - AN EXAMPLE OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT. Provide an example of citizen engagement (or participatory planning and design) with people experiencing disadvantage and explain the successes and challenges along the way, and why? (The scale of the example, or type, is not important).**

For two-three years (2010-2012) I have been directing the Yeoville Studio, together with colleagues and numerous students from the Wits School of Architecture and Planning (see our website www.bit.ly/yeoville), Yeoville Studio revolved around three aims: it was a teaching and learning initiative (see topic 3), a multi-disciplinary research endeavor, and a community oriented initiative. I’ll develop this aspect of the Studio here.

Our research themes, topics and projects were developed in conjunction with local civil society organizations, our partners in Yeoville. Every month or two, I as the Studio director would sit with them and discuss research/ students work progress, directions, challenges, results. We developed a strong communication strategy in the community as well (not only with CBO leaders), presenting the Studio’s activities in monthly public meetings (ward meetings); in our partner organizations general meetings (once a month); using the local newsletter to update or trigger debate; organizing a number of public events in the area showcasing our work in interactive and graphic ways; having a permanent exhibition in the local library, etc. I insist on this permanent presence, availability and update, because it did a lot for mutual understanding of what the Studio was (and I think it is the same for local government, NGOs or developers engaging in participatory practices). After one year of Studio, residents started to understand better what it could *not* provide (a housing solution, a job, etc.), and what it *could* provide (a voice and the development of local pride, beyond the shame attached to marginalization of a decaying and poverty-stricken neighbourhood; tools to influence or challenge an ill adapted municipal policy; to reflect on local issues and craft locally adapted solution – in particular in the field of informal economy and housing).

Many outputs and outcomes have been developed in the Studio – that fed into community building and a sense of recovered pride and dignity, that are pre-conditions for residents to participate in constructive ways in the shaping of their environments (the use of violence, including inwards violence, are often collective means of expressing frustration, in ways that obviously can be extremely destructive for the community, in contexts of constant and repeated indifference, humiliation, lack of respect and accountability from the State in particular). One area of engagement we are still continuing, beyond the Studio and now at City and even National level, is around the place of informal trading in popular neighbourhoods. Our research has been instrumental in proving that in spite of dominant city discourses on the global city and the undesirability of informal trading, most residents and formal shop keepers were supporting managed street trading in their area – offering a service, increasing street safety and vibrant atmosphere and business attractivity. This research has been used (and still is) by local leaders in their struggle to find inclusive management solutions for informal trading (in the area and now at city level), as an alternative to the current rather repressive municipal approach.

I’ve written elsewhere more in details about the challenges of this form of engagement (Benit-Gbaffou 2011; Benit-Gbaffou forthcoming). I will mention three:

* A City Studio type of approach is extremely time and resource consuming (for directors, coordinators, planners, … engaged in driving it). It is very interesting as it constantly challenges assumptions and forces us to adapt our theories and views to the ever changing and complex local urban environment, and develop political skills that are hardly taught in the profession. It is also very time consuming as it relies on feedback, accountability, transparency, honesty, availability towards the community.
* The lack of stability of partner organizations, partly linked to their limited resources, partly to the local, competitive local politics where CBOs compete rather than construct alliances for resources: this is particularly the case in inner city neighbourboods where social diversity is huge and a level of minimal access to services has been achieved (it is significantly different in informal settlements for instance).
* This fragility was used by the municipality to ‘divide and rule’, especially as we were trying to develop alternative ways to regulate informal trading into the area (in a form of pilot project that had a lot of support from many different constituencies) – unfortunately the specific municipal department in charge of economic development/ informal activities was (unlike other parts of the city) particularly unsympathetic and opposed to this initiative, and did a lot to oppose this emerging local coalition for integrated trading.

**TOPIC 3. URBAN PRACTITIONERS and PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION. Do you think there need to be changes to the way in which urban practitioners undertake their work? If so, how do you think professional education or practice can or should be transformed so that urban professionals are better able to contribute to improving the lives and living conditions of the urban poor? Can you provide some ideas as to how you would go about this? For example, would you be able to offer a three to four-step plan for changes to either and/or education or practice? (Bullet points preferred)**

The Yeoville Studio was about putting students in real life situations; integrating, in their individual or group course assessment, not only a design or architectural project or a research report, but a community-oriented output that was to translate their academic production into a product that could be understood, engaged with, and possibly used, by residents or groups of residents. This taught them 1) to develop their communication skills and understand their own ‘jargon’ needed translation; 2) to shape their research or design project around something relevant to the community, often in conjunction with residents; 3) that knowledge is political, and its uses are multiple (generally empowering but also potentially destructive); 4) that communities are complex, and that planners and architects need to find a balance between their own visions, views and recommendations, and the multiplicity of conflicting visions articulated in public engagement, through an inclusive process.

Lessons for planning/ architecture education, learnt from the studio:

* Importance of engaging with complex communities to understand the diversity of needs, in the search for inclusive cities (include exposures to community workshops/ participatory engagement in teaching projects)
* Importance of communication strategies, to be able to engage with them, at different stages of a project (include a communication strategy/ element in our assessment of students)
* Importance of understanding the politics of community participation and urban governance, at different scales of the city – politicizing our teaching of planning and architecture.

**TOPIC 5. ADVICE TO OTHERS: e.g. GOVERNMENT, POLICY MAKERS, EDUCATORS, NGOs, UN HABITAT, PEAK PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS (e.g. UIA, ISOCARP, METROPOLIS etc. What advice would you offer to any or all of these groups where you work (or further afield) to ensure that inclusive urbanization becomes a reality, and not just rhetoric?**

* Participation is necessary (but not sufficient), and needs to be integrated in professional practice (in government or other developmental institution). Not restricted in a specific department, platforms, exercise or outsourced specialist: but planned as a component of policies and projects with dedicated budget and staff – possibly in-house rather than outsourced, as the *continuity* of engagement is essential to the success of civic engagement.
* Regular participatory platforms (‘invited spaces of participation’), even though they have been criticized for limited decision-making capacity, are important for mutual learning (residents learn about what the institution can and cannot do; institutions learn about the needs, visions, mindsets of their constituencies). They become frustrated when no power at all is vested in the representatives or officials driving these platforms (local councilors in South Africa, in this case).
* Better training for administrative staff, especially at mid level, to adopt a ‘what can be done’ attitude rather than ‘you can’t do that’. Translating by laws and regulations into empowering tools rather than restrictive ones; problem solving rather than dismissive legislation (that is also a breeding ground for corruption, as regulations become increasingly disconnected, in cities of the south, from the livelihood conditions of most of its residents).
* Channels for residents’ recourse in case of unresponsive administration or policy – based for instance on successful, inclusive, innovative local projects that could inspire and redefine urban policies. Currently popular participation (especially in ‘invited’ spaces) is restricted to the local level with very limited ability to reshape municipal policies.

**References**

Bénit-Gbaffou C, 2011, **“**Yeoville Studio: Negotiating the Line between Research and Activism, in Edjabe N, Pieterse E, (eds), 2011, *The African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*, Cape Town: Chimurenga, pp. 196-201. Available on [africancitiesreader@chimurenga.co.za](mailto:africancitiesreader@chimurenga.co.za).

Bénit-Gbaffou C, forthcoming, “The Politics of the Yeoville Studio – Dynamic Engagements with Communities”, in Benit-Gbaffou C (ed), *Lessons from Yeoville – Leaning from the Local to Better Design Cities*, Unisa Press, Pretoria.

Cornwall, A. (2008) ‘Unpacking ‘participation’: models, meanings and practices’, *Community Development Journal*, 43(3): 269-283.

Holston, J., 2008. Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunction of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil. Princeton University Press.

Miraftab F., 2009. Insurgent Planning: Situating Radical Planning in the Global South. Planning Theory, 8(1), 32-50.