

# Local community responses

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How may municipal actors make use of local community reactions and responses to urban planning proposals concerning new housing and regeneration of existing housing? May inclusion of such reactions and responses in an early stage of planning processes lead to increased satisfaction of basic human needs? Why is it so difficult to be receptive and open to citizen's knowledge and experiences? How may citizen's views, opinions and knowledge from such processes be taken care of and be transformed to other actors in planning processes? Are we in for a more daring change than we understand when talking about citizen participation in design and planning?

The lack of citizen dialogue in planning is increasingly becoming a problem due to the quick changes society is going through and the awareness of problems becoming more and more complex. Authorities and experts can no longer understand the problems by themselves, but need to develop learning processes where a large amount of actors are involved, which has developed the planning procedure considerably lately. Citizens as individuals are through general elections considered to be represented by politicians or civil servants in such processes, however as time passed it has been obvious that this is not always the case. Many individuals in society consider themselves to be excluded from not only decision-making in planning processes but also from information and dialogue. Moreover, planning processes does not encourage citizens as *groups* to co-produce planning together with each other, and other actors such as e.g. enterprises, implying there is no chance for a common learning process about cities to take place. As a consequence, cities more and more tend to be planned in a way that not just disrespect democratic values (as all actors are not invited to dialogue), but the lack of citizen knowledge (local as well as political) in planning have implied that cities become something that not many citizen really want – and cities are many times therefore not utilised in the way planners plan for. Consequently, planners plans for sustainable cities is unlikely to be implemented.

This background to why citizen participation in planning is considered to be important is of specific interest in view of refurbishment of the existing apartment building stock. In Europe, this refurbishment to a large extent concerns housing areas built in the 1960s and 70s. These have often poorly maintained large scaled buildings with substandard climate protection in need of large investments to achieve a high enough standard. Still, there are no resources put away in renovation funds – if being used for incorrect distribution of profits or lost due to bad administration is disputed among scholars. These areas are often also exposed to other problems. Neglected maintenance has lead to the areas being populated by inhabitants who for various reasons are exposed and socially excluded from society. Moreover, the areas often carry a stigma, significantly influencing the opportunities of the inhabitants to become community builders. What does it take for planning procedures be adapted to this reality? How can planning include also these people in dialogue and decision-making about how the city should be developed? This is one of the challenges society is facing today.

In Sweden, these circumstances have lead to a series of activities to possibly learn from, developed in a suburb as described above, which is situated in the outskirts of Gothenburg. In 2010, University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology together started a centre<sup>1</sup> in the suburb called

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<sup>1</sup> See [urban.gu.se](http://urban.gu.se) | [chalmers.se/urban](http://chalmers.se/urban)

Hammarkullen (8,000 inhabitants), aimed at developing knowledge about how to open the door to higher education also for inhabitants with a foreign background and with less economic resources than the average in higher education. By intertwining research, education and community outreach,<sup>2</sup> the centre facilitated for *inhabitants* to become knowledge producers in academic work and simultaneously their activities helped involved teachers developing higher *education* to better adapt it to the society we face (Stenberg and Fryk 2012). The ambition was also to develop the procedures of related municipal institutions, such as the city district administration, the city planning office, the real estate office (and their political committees) however this goal turned out to be quite problematic. Similarly with higher levels at the two involved universities, the municipal actors were not prepared to consider the necessity of their *own* institutional change to meet the challenges mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. This crucial experience was developed in another action oriented research project<sup>3</sup> and eventually resulted in interesting leanings. A concrete result was »socially responsible public procurement« of a building project where inhabitants of the suburb were employed for a few months. This experience of social procurement was considered a success in many ways. If involved institutions succeed in changing their procedures to force this form of procurement also in the future, this may be described as a *systemic change* which would imply the procedure to be replicated independent on »citizen-participation-enthusiasts« to be present (Stenberg 2013).

Systemic change may be described in many different ways depending on discipline. What they have in common though, is the focus on some kind of transfer of power. In design and planning research is often referred to analysis of power aspects with awareness of understanding the »rationalities« (Foucault 1982; Flyvbjerg 1998; Lapintie 2002) of different actors when implementing measures.<sup>4</sup> Such an analysis result in the exposure of »black boxes« (Callon and Latour 1981), which may be found to be under reconsideration when »micro-actors« found reason to oppose them. Thus, a black box is containing elements – modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects – which no longer need to be reconsidered and one may describe a strategy of openness as an important step in enabling the citizens (micro-actors) to oppose certain black boxes – i.e. to help changing ordinary procedures, e.g., in planning.

An actor grows with the number of relations he or she can put, as we say, in black boxes. A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes – modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects – the broader the construction one can raise. Of course, black boxes never remain fully closed or properly fastened /.../ but macro-actors can do as if they were closed and dark (Callon and Latour 1981: 285).

Thus, a macro-actor with certain elements put into black boxes does not need to renegotiate from scratch all the time; this actor may instead use the taken-for-granted assumptions hidden in black boxes in new negotiations. »To summarize, macro-actors are micro-actors seated on top of many (leaky) black boxes« (Callon and Latour 1981: 286).

In the discipline of sociology there is also a distinction between *first and second order change* (Petit and Olson 2013) to make of power aspects more visible. These concepts stems from Gregory Bateson (1972) arguing that reality is a semantic and social construction. There is no neutral and objective world »outside« to be observed by the viewer. They argue that when observing, describing and acting in the world, we are at the same time creating it, making sense and meaning of it, through our preconceived

<sup>2</sup> See urbanempower.se for description of the first experience of such an integration since the centre started. The reason to why the area of Hammarkullen was chosen for starting a common higher education centre in 2010, was that teachers and students from the department of Social Work, Gothenburg University, had been active in the area for 25 years, collaborating successfully with the local municipality. Chalmers Architecture joined with an annual place-based master course in 2008 and other disciplines from the universities carry out courses in the area on temporary basis.

<sup>3</sup> See mellanplats.se

<sup>4</sup> Some of this text about black boxes has earlier been published in Stenberg (2004).

concepts, experiences and knowledge. When taking part in a dialogue or co-creation of design and planning, trust and confidence is therefore important in the relationship between the co-creators – that is if all participant’s perspectives are to be included. When realising this we are »living« the concept of the *second order change*.

What we therefor argue in this text is the importance of carefully designing the circumstances around the interface between community and municipal institutions when co-planning and co-creating the world together. This design is important as knowledge is power and the balance of power is at the moment tipping heavily towards municipal structures. Therefore there is always a learning project connected to a co-planning project. If this level of »learning project« is neglected, the co-planning strategy will take place only on the level of *first order change* – which is usually not satisfactory as the major challenges we face in society requires major changes. First order change is an incremental and linear progression, often initiated from a position outside the local interest. When co-planning an area in such a manner, the municipal structures often involve local dwellers just through collecting information, and using local knowledge in a way that confirms established power structures. Even though supportive laws and guidelines for citizen dialogue are formed, municipal representatives may continue acting on the level of first order change. This is problematic and in the next chapter this will be further elaborated.

However, we will here focus at the very local level and discuss how local work can influence norms, laws and regulations and why this is important. Answering why is of course quite easy. Structures that are formed mainly from above implies if not dictatorship, still a society with a serious lack of democracy. A systemic change formed by co-creation and co-planning would instead be a clear indication that involved authorities really had been responsive to a dialogue they invited citizens to. A changed balance of power namely imply new relationships between stakeholders of the local community. It is not self-evident that municipal actors really want to carry out such a professional journey even if they may be considered as obliged to in their policy documents, thus if the can they may choose to keep black boxes sealed / first order change, as it is faster and easier (not to forget that all tasks should not challenge power, it would waste too much energy and financing). However, as research projects fundamentally exist to really develop the society, in this context it has been interesting for us to investigate what circumstances there are, that facilitate a kind of learning process where the balance of power between inhabitants and professionals develop in an eligible (according to policy documents) direction (thus changing balance of power).

After being active during a long time in the suburb mentioned above, it has become obvious that many of the learning activities that included a change of power balance, have interacted with a municipal institution called *Mixgården* – a youth centre that existed in the area since the 1970s. The work team at *Mixgården* has developed a dialogic and engaged »culture« at the centre, which may be described as relational and capacity-building rather than controlling, and the working methods have often been praised – not only locally but by actors also at other levels of society (Jordan and Andersson 2007). Around 60-80 youth in the ages of 15-20 are at the centre on a typical day. They (or their parents) come from many different countries and a number of youths consequently carry with them frustrating experiences and feelings from different kinds of conflicting perspectives such as in Balkan, Somalia, Palestine, Iraq, Kurdistan and Syria. So how do *Mixgården* succeed in working dialogical under these challenging conditions?

*Mixgården* has a strategic location in the area, close to the square with the area’s only tram stop where people pass naturally every day. Moreover, the facilities are spacious and flexible which suits an establishment with openness to the complexity that characterizes the area. The staff goes into every working day without knowing for sure how it will become and the localities may be changed to fit different purposes. Further, the global connectivity described above influence their approach. They share

a strong awareness of the variety characterizing the society of today and the wide gap between rich and poor. Youths coming to the centre bring with them different views of global problems. The staff do not try to avoid this kind of difficult conversations, but are instead open to it and facilitate for it to create a sense of security among the youths. If the physical prerequisites mentioned above are called *a room for core activities* as youth centre, this second approach may be described as opening up for *a global room*, creating cultures of capacity-building where young people's globally rooted everyday lives and difficulties are at the heart. The reason to why tough conversations are possible to carry out in a friendly or at least not violent way at the centre, is the approach of letting the youth using the place as an *extended living room* for discussions between themselves.

As a result, youths at the centre feel that they have support for turning outward with activities related to their thoughts. When e.g. a Somalian association organize reception of political representatives from Puntland, the staff at the centre collaborate on receiving them well and connecting them to appropriate Swedish institutions. In order to do this kind of work, the staff have a well established and well thought out relationship to the local context, implying active links to schools, associations, religious institutions, police, housing companies, politicians, citizen office, etc. This outreach strategy may be labelled focusing *the collaborative room* and has been a core activity for many years, which has created a significant trust capital which is crucial for their work. This way of working also explains why employees at the centre work as team, implying constant and systematic dialogue about what happens at the centre as well as in the global context, and common decision-making at weekly meetings.

How do this flat and organic structure and the »four room approach« then fit into the linear and quite top-down municipal city district organization the youth centre is part of? Obviously, there is friction, but still they continue working in this way and actually also help other local municipal and civic institutions/organizations to develop a dialogical and collaborative approach. This is interesting. What can we learn from them about how to act on local community reactions and responses? One thing we directly can make use of is awareness of problems being opportunities: conflicts should not be avoided but considered as »triggers for learning« (Krogstrup 1999). Community reactions and responses, regardless of whether they are considered positive or negative and in whatever form they are presented in, thus provide opportunities for development. How may actors in charge for housing and regeneration of housing areas – which is in focus for this text – make use of this knowledge?

Our experience from intertwining research, education and community outreach in Hammarkullen have shown the weight of approaching a local area with a genuine desire to really *share* power. This does not mean that democratic systems should be eliminated, but citizen dialogue need to be allowed *developing* democracy. In the case of housing and regeneration of housing areas, such an awareness imply quite a change of approach. In current research we investigate how this may be carried out. In a programme called *Sustainable Integrated Renovation* funded by Swedish research financier Formas 2014-2018 with 250 000 euro and likewise by the participating partners, the research aims at developing knowledge about how to radically change national renovation practice through collaboration, participation and holistic views on sustainability. The programme involves researchers from different fields and focus on five areas; establishing a living knowledge base: analysis of earlier and on-going cases of renovation; innovation, demonstration and Living Lab, developing models, methods, tools for integrated sustainable renovation; and communication, dialogue and dissemination of results.



Housing in Hammarkullen. Photo: Albin Holmgren

One of the Living Labs in the programme is carried out in the suburb of Hammarkullen. This Lab focuses at »sustainable property management and maintenance« and how this may affect renovation requirements. It aims at (a) developing methods for integration of knowledge from the tenants early in the process, (b) discussing with all actors what different lifestyles imply in the context of sustainable renovation, and (c) finding forms for tenants to participate in the *decision* making process in renovation. Thus, the ambitions are high concerning sharing of power, however there is – for better or worse – not an actual renovation process taking place. Without the stress a real renovation process put for all parties, it is possible to focus at the *learning* process. To emphasize these circumstances the project has been labelled *Learning Lab Hammarkullen*. The involved actors are Bostadsbolaget Housing Company (municipal), Carnegie/Graflunds Housing Company (private), Swedish Union of Tenants, SP Technical Research Institute, Chalmers University of Technology, Lund University of Technology, Gothenburg University, Stamfast and Rotpartner (private companies for renovation and financing). The actors meet on a regular basis for planning and implementation of the project and also collaborate closely with university students who, in dialogue with tenants, in an organized manner contribute with work. The challenge is how to organize the common learning process. How may it be formed, to allow the participants to act on local community reactions and responses in a manner that integrate produced knowledge from all actors, and use it to form proposed new renovation strategies?

One obvious way forward for a research project like Learning Lab Hammarkullen is making sure to be part of the *collaborative room* that Mixgården and other actors form, which is relatively easy as several of the participants have a long history in the area and a built up confidence. Still, these activities have to be scheduled and made room for in the time plan. The Learning Lab also need to be exposed at other places locally where community responses may show, e.g. in the three local schools and at different kinds of gathering sites. This is important as renovation of housing from the 1960s and 70s in Sweden raise a lot of

strong feelings which are expressed in different fora. The debate is extensive at the moment and it is discussed who should pay for the high costs, in some cases the tenants are threatened with rent increases of 60%. One important question is how knowledge and opinions about these circumstances may be integrated in the learning process. And in the end, how this kind of information may be part of a model for renovation on a regular basis – a systemic change.

In action-oriented research projects such as investigations based on Learning Labs, it is close at hand to organise common learning processes also for analysis and theorising. This phase is maybe where it is most relevant to transfer of power from those actors with the most to those with least. Such an approach, however, puts high demands on the design of the learning process, as tenants, employees in housing companies and academics have very different prerequisites of exercising of power. The design need to handle these inequalities. In our case, one way of doing this may be for the Learning Lab team to, by being part of the *collaborative room*, be aware also of what happens in Mixgården's *extended living room* and be open for discussions taking place there. A following strategy could be to embed for being aware also about other *extended living rooms* that local actors use for dialogue on a regular basis. Maybe it imply learning from what takes place in more local premises in a staircase or in someone's home. Discussing things there – where inhabitants have an advantage in terms of power as it is their place – may bring with it new information put on the table and subsequently new discussions. Thus, instead of having as strategy to invite inhabitants to power-neutral meeting rooms (e.g. to People's Hall / Folkets Hus which is quite a common way of trying to neutralise power), it may be wise to invest time in the *collaborative room* and subsequently see what it entails for knowing more about what is happening in the other rooms.

Ultimately, such an approach could open up for a Learning Lab creating cultures of capacity-building where *tenants'* everyday lives and difficulties is the heart of the learning process. The tenants in Hammarkullen have their roots in many countries and are often also well connected with relatives and friends in these countries. What can they, with their many different experiences of housing and renovation, contribute with in a learning process about sustainable renovation in Sweden? Such kind of interest from authorities and estate owners in not only joint knowledge production on housing, but actually a changed balance of power in relation to inhabitants, would radically change procedures and require entirely new skills and competences from experts. And from inhabitants. These are competencies in need for being developed.

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