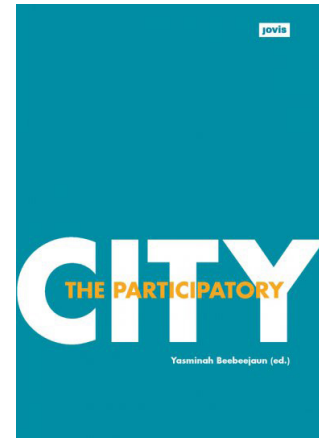


The Participatory City

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Bob Gilbert

bob.gilber122@gmail.com



It was the length of the chapter headings which alerted me that I might have strayed inadvertently into an academic text. When they run to as many as 16 words apiece, you realise that this might not be a book for the everyday reader. What I had naively anticipated was a gritty account of efforts to redefine our relationship with our increasingly alienating cities. After all, with more than 50% of the world's population now defined as urban dwellers, there could hardly be a more pressing task. What I found myself reading, however, was one of those texts that constitute a sort of private conversation between academics in the same limited field, using a shared language and bolstering themselves by continually citing and re-citing each other's work.

The nineteen essays in *The Participatory City* have been brought together by Yasminah Beebeejaun, Lecturer in Urban Politics and Planning at University College London, who also provides the Introduction and a very brief Epilogue. To be fair, they do have an impressive global reach, raising issues or initiatives from eight countries across four continents, though I can't help but think that something from Africa would have been a useful addition. Topics vary from deliberations on a global scale, a rather unengaging account of an involvement in UN policy making, down to the everyday concerns of stall-holders in a Bangladeshi bazaar. The greater number examine top-down participation exercises, in what might be called authority-led initiatives; a smaller number consider campaigns that have begun from below. There are, too, a few that look at more generic issues. It becomes clear that a new development in urban planning is the discovery that people have feelings and several of the authors wrestle rather awkwardly with how the social sciences might incorporate emotions, or assign a role to subjectivity. It has the rather embarrassing air of listening to your parents talk about sex.

Elsewhere in the collection, Julian Agyeman takes several thousand words and 26 references to conclude that "we need to be humble". "We do not have all the answers," he tells us, "but at least we can find the right questions." One might have hoped that 'the right question' is something that could have been sorted out in the Introduction and, to be fair to Beebeejaun, she does have a stab at it. "What," she poses, "changes as a result of public participation?" The answer, on the basis of the essays that follow, is not much. The "Plan for Transformation" in Chicago, which will demolish 18,000 units of public housing, "provides little opportunity for those impacted to have real power in shaping the plan." The Just Space Initiative in London makes noble efforts to influence the London Plan but the "small policy changes" that it secures are "wholly insufficient, despite enormous expenditure of effort." The outcomes of a plethora of participatory exercises in Mexico City turn out to be "less than stellar" and excite only very low levels of public engagement. And so on.

Perhaps what all this highlights is that there might be a different "right question" that no-one is really addressing: does participation assist in any way to shift the inequitable distribution of power? And, of course, the answer is no. The small shopkeepers of Kulna are consulted on the future of their bazaar, or so the consultants say. Nonetheless 58% of them will be displaced to make way for large developers. The citizens of Mexico

financial and political power, can, in some parts of the book, be stark, for instance in the voices of the women from south-west Pennsylvania, where shale extraction has been allowed adjacent to their homes: “The USA has been taken over by a corporation.It’s going after people and not caring; it’s going after all kinds of life and not caring. It’s going after the future and not caring.”

I do not doubt that the early pioneers of public participation saw in it a means of empowering the powerless, or at least of giving them a voice. As these examples demonstrate, it has very often now become the opposite; a way of providing a process with democratic gloss and fig-leaf respectability whilst corporations and authorities carry on doing whatever it was they had always intended. The problem begins, of course, in the very framing of the participatory exercise which, far from being an open ended investigation of possible futures, usually presents a range of pre-determined options, none of which may be particularly palatable to those they are affecting. Thus in my own spell in local government I witnessed the strange spectacle of a local authority consulting people on how it should make cuts. It was akin to asking the turkeys the best way to conduct the Christmas cull.

It was a relief to turn from the examples of top-down initiatives to those that could be described as more grass roots. But even here, the grass could have been greener. The development of community gardens in Berlin becomes, in an essay by Marit Rosol, a neo-liberal rolling back of the local state and a response to lack of funding. In the same city, the experience of the Berliner Energietisch initiative is instructive. The group, or coalition of groups, is calling for a referendum on the re-municipalisation and democratic control of energy distribution in the city. In the event, 82% of voters support the proposal but, when the Berlin authorities change the date of the election so that it no longer coincides with that of the general elections, this falls short of the required quorum by 0.9%.

Despite these and other striking examples, much of the rest of the book seems to be fussing around the edges of the issues and avoiding the crucial question of what can really make a difference. There seems to be too much of a concern to contribute self-consciously to the critical literature, rather than to advance our understanding of what a genuinely participatory city might look like. And in this respect it remains a frustrating book stuck within its own hermetic world, while the issues out there remain both urgent and enormous. As Andy Merrifield says, quoted in one of the essays: “City dwellers now live with a terrible intimacy, a tragic intimacy of proximity without sociability, of presence without representation, of encounter without real meaning.” And, he might have added, of participation without power.