URBAN DESIGN IN DIALOGUE

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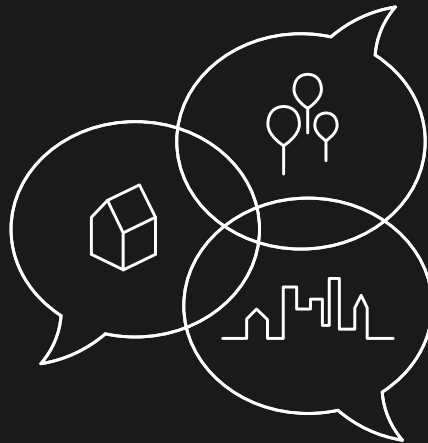
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Introduction

Urban planning and changes in urban space sometimes cause strong opinions, feelings, and debate among citizens and other stakeholders. The built environment is the site of negotiations, varying interests, and controversies. Different actors see and experience urban design and planning differently. Local residents and other stakeholders may have ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and desires that they would like to share with urban planners, but they do not necessarily have the right forums or means to do it.

Urban design in dialogue aims to enhance constructive conversation and understanding among different actors in the city. The objective is to co-design and co-create urban spaces together even in difficult and contradictory situations. Strong participation, genuine interaction and the integration of different viewpoints into urban development are the central characteristics of urban design in dialogue. Dialogic conversation does not necessarily lead to any concrete outcome but it increases understanding among people and helps in sharing experiences and knowledge between different stakeholders.

Dialogue should be in a central role in all participatory urban planning, but strict goals, haste, or the lack of resources may prevent profound dialogue during planning processes. The dialogic urban design model represented in this pamphlet utilizes various methods common to co-creative urban planning practices. The definition and rules regarding dialogue and dialogic conversation are mostly based on the Timeout method[I] developed by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra. The method has been modified and adapted to meet the special needs and realities typical to urban planning issues.

The dialogic urban design model reminds different stakeholders and actors about the importance of interaction, participation and constructive discussion within urban planning and development. The objective is to increase pluralism and democracy in planning. The model describes the features, elements, and processes of dialogic urban design at a general level. Literature references are listed at the end of this publication where the reader can get more information about dialogue and participatory planning if they wish.

Users

Dwellers

Planners

Entrepreneurs

Land owners

Third sector organisers

Policy-makers
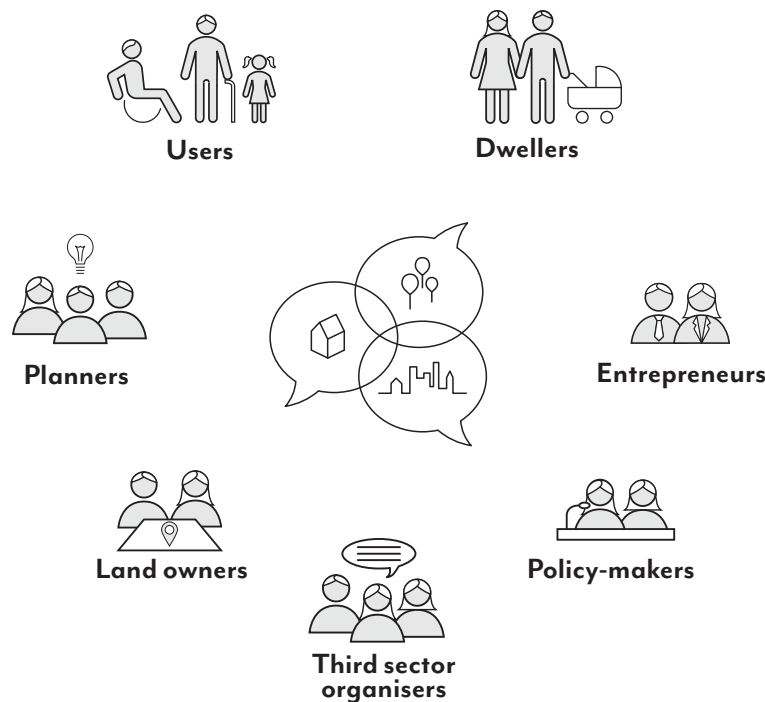
Diverse stakeholder interaction, participation and constructive discussion within urban planning.

Dialogue

Sitra defines dialogue as "a constructive and equal way of having a discussion. It is aimed at understanding others, but not at reaching unanimity."[2] Already the ancient Greeks – Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE) being the most famous example[3] – had adopted dialogic conversation style. The heated conversational atmosphere of our current society would require more respectful dialogue between people as well as safer places and forums for expressing different views and experiences.

Dialogue is a "way to think and consider things together"[4]. According to philosopher Kai Alhanen[5], equality is central to dialogue as well as sharing meanings and experiences with each other. Above all, dialogue is a style of conversation that involves learning from others. It is possible to practice and apply dialogue also in urban design. The premise is to bring people from different backgrounds together to consider the different sides of urban planning collectively. A skilled facilitator can help to keep up constructive conversation. The Timeout method developed by Sitra[1] and the "ground rules for a constructive discussion"[2] associated with the method are applicable tools in leading and guiding a good dialogic conversation.

Ground rules for a constructive discussion
(Timeout method)[2]

- *Listen to the others, do not interrupt or start additional side discussions.*

- *Relate what you say to what the others have said and use everyday language.*

- *Talk about your own experience.*

- *Be present and respect the others and the atmosphere of trust.*

- *Search and bring together. Boldly deal with emerging conflicts and look for issues that have gone unnoticed.*

- *Talk to the others directly and ask about their views.*

Defining Dialogue

"In a dialogue, everybody wins"
(Bohm)[6]

Dialogue refers to "a discussion where people are studying together what kinds of meanings they give for shared issues"
(Alhanen)[5]

"A dialogue is a constructive and equal way of having a discussion. It is aimed at understanding others, but not at reaching unanimity."
(Sitra)[2]

"Dialogue is a conversation with a core and without any side-picking"
(Isaacs)[4]

*"Dialogue is a conversation where people think together"*
(Isaacs)[4]

Dialogic urban design is related to the decades-long tradition of participatory urban planning. In 1969 Sherry Arnstein[7] introduced the ladder of citizen participation that is often used as a reference in the literature of participatory planning. Arnstein's ladder points out that there are several forms and levels of participation in society, from nonparticipation to citizen control. Consequently, city planners and other people with power should consider what level of participation they are heading for with their planning measures. Urban design in dialogue aims primarily to improve and deepen the quality of planning communication and hence to increase the democracy in city planning.

Theoretically, a division is often made between communicative urban planning with the idea of consensus building[8,9] and agonistic urban planning[10] that is characterized by conflicts and debate[11]. Dialogic urban design is located in between these two categories. It does not aim at unanimity nor disagreement but rather at the common and reciprocal understanding. Equal interaction and listening to others are crucial for urban design in dialogue.

The basis for the citizen participation in city planning is often defined by law and decrees (e.g. in Finland, the Land Use and Building Act 132/1999 prescribes zoning to be done in interaction with different stakeholders). Statutory planning and zoning are however quite stiff and seldom dialogic in terms of citizen participation. Yet, participatory urban design processes are widely studied and developed both in theory and practice[12,13,14]. For example, so-called do-it-yourself urbanism has lately taken root in urban development alongside the more official participation forms[15,16].

Despite the current advancements, there are still many challenges related to participatory urban design. Reaching the participants, enabling equal access, providing enough resources, enabling early-phase interaction and integrating results into actual planning are all topics that need to be developed. Urban design in dialogue offers solutions, especially, in the early stages of planning projects when there is a need for visionary ideation and communication. The contents of dialogue can also be used to support decision-making. In this way, interaction is not merely about nonparticipation, but it also reaches the next levels of citizen engagement.

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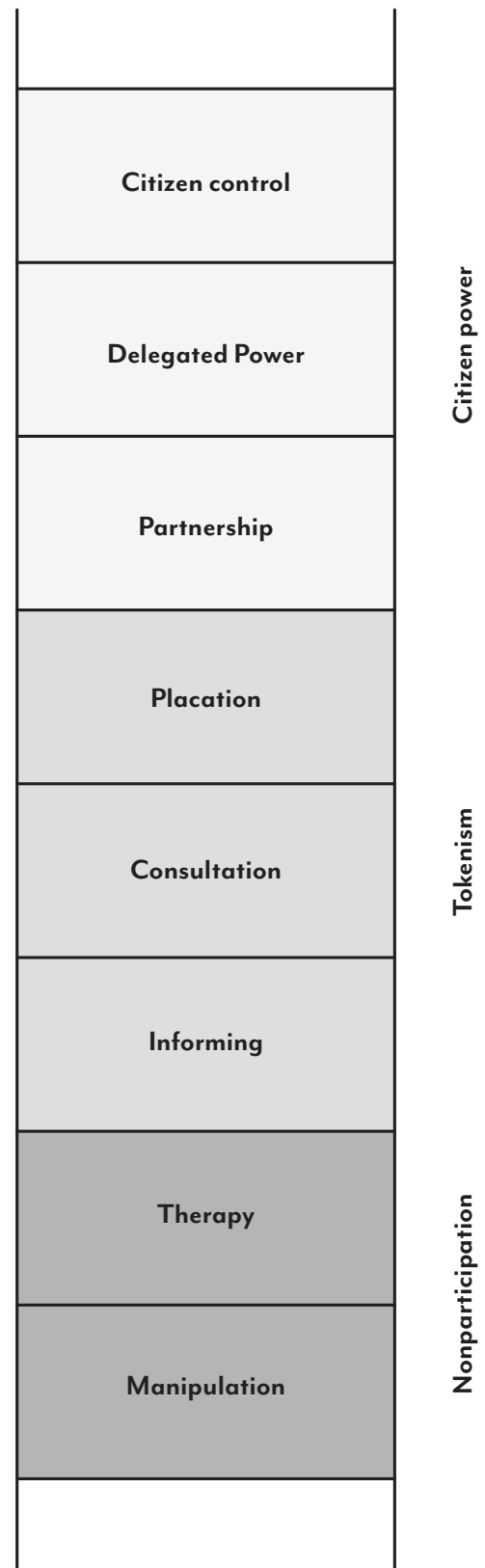
The ladder of citizen participation
(Arnstein 1969)

Urban design in dialogue *is a model for participatory planning that enhances discussion and understanding among different stakeholders. Urban space is designed together, equally and sometimes in contradictory situations. Strong participation, genuine interaction and the integration of different viewpoints into urban development are the central characteristics of dialogic design.*

Urban design in dialogue is based on recognizing the experiences and thoughts of different people and actors. Citizen knowledge complements professional knowledge, which improves the quality and democracy of city planning.

In practice, urban design in dialogue refers to a way of talking and discussing that involves listening to and respecting others. The aim is to bring together different stakeholders and participants for an open discussion and to create a respectful and safe space for sharing experiences, views, and knowledge as part of an urban planning process.

Dialogue is about discussing together and listening to others

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"Please tell us more. Let's take time and listen to different points of view."

"What kind of experiences did you remember when you were listening to what was just said?"

"Thank you for bringing up your views. Now, it would be important to hear what the others think."

"It is not necessary to try to resolve conflicts in a dialogue. It is enough if we gain a better understanding of what they are about."

Some Timeout guidelines for a dialogue[2]

Dialogic urban design is an additional approach to the other methods of participatory planning. It involves particular features, elements, and preconditions that make it a unique way to approach, improve and deepen the meaning of interaction in city planning and development.

Characteristics

Urban design in dialogue is based on equal and pluralist planning. The special characteristics of dialogue include adding the understanding among and sharing experiences between people from different backgrounds.

Way of talking

The objective of dialogic urban design is to listen to, respect and encourage others. Dialogue is open-ended but facilitated. The participants are asked to be interested in other people's views and empathic towards their experiences.

Atmosphere

Creating a trustworthy atmosphere and a safe space for the participants is crucial for a genuinely inclusive dialogue. This is best achievable by being present and by listening to what others have to say.

Benefits

The main goal of the urban design in dialogue is to increase common and reciprocal understanding. Dialogue can be utilized as a source of ideas and creativity, a method for co-design and co-creation, and a tool for gathering constructive feedback as part of different planning projects.

Preconditions

Dialogue has to be based on real needs and will to improve participation in urban planning. There are particular rules in dialogic conversation that the participants must undertake. Resources have to be adequate enough and the group of people participating in the dialogue should be heterogeneous. It is important to consider in advance how the results of the dialogue will be integrated into the actual planning work.

Equality	Listening	Trust	Creativity	Need
Participation	Encourage-ment	Safety	Ideation	Rules
Pluralism	Freedom	Respect	Co-design	Resources
Under-standing	Curiosity	Interaction	Co-creation	People
Experiences	Empathy	Presence	Feedback	Integration

Dialogic method in practice

The dialogic method is suitable for the early stages of an urban planning process when there is a need to explore the background, hopes, and desires related to a city planning project. Dialogue is also usable in other phases of planning when any interaction is required with the stakeholders and when feedback is collected from the people.

Dialogue is useful if there are conflicts rising in the process. It can also be applied as a co-design tool when the goal is to create new ideas and visions based on citizen knowledge. The dialogic method offers means to tackle difficulties as it helps the participants and stakeholders to understand each other's perspectives and starting points.

In urban planning, concrete results are often wanted even if it would not be the original goal of a dialogue. Knowledge and views that have been reached through dialogue are important to be included in urban development within the given frameworks. Iteration is a central part of a democratic planning process even though it might require some extra resources.

The most comprehensive result will be achieved if the group of people participating in the dialogue is versatile. In practice, this is not always possible because participation opportunities are often organized separately for stakeholders and residents during the traditional urban planning processes. Even in such situations, it would be important that the city planners are ready for a constructive discussion and willing to listen to the experiences and thoughts of the participants. Urban design in dialogue must be well guided and facilitated so that the conversation stays equal and no one is dominating the discussion.

A dialogic conversation can be preplanned like the contents of any other participatory workshop. First, a background check is done before the actual discussion. The need for and the theme of the dialogue are decided as well as who will be invited to join the discussion. In the actual dialogue workshop, first, the topic is introduced, the participants will get ready to start the discussion, and the rules for a constructive discussion will be scrutinized together. Practical hints for leading and facilitating a dialogue can be found e.g. in Sitra's Timeout guidelines[1,2]. The dialogic discussion ends in finishing the workshop and reporting the conclusions, but the process continues with integrating the results into the real urban planning procedures.

The phases of a dialogue
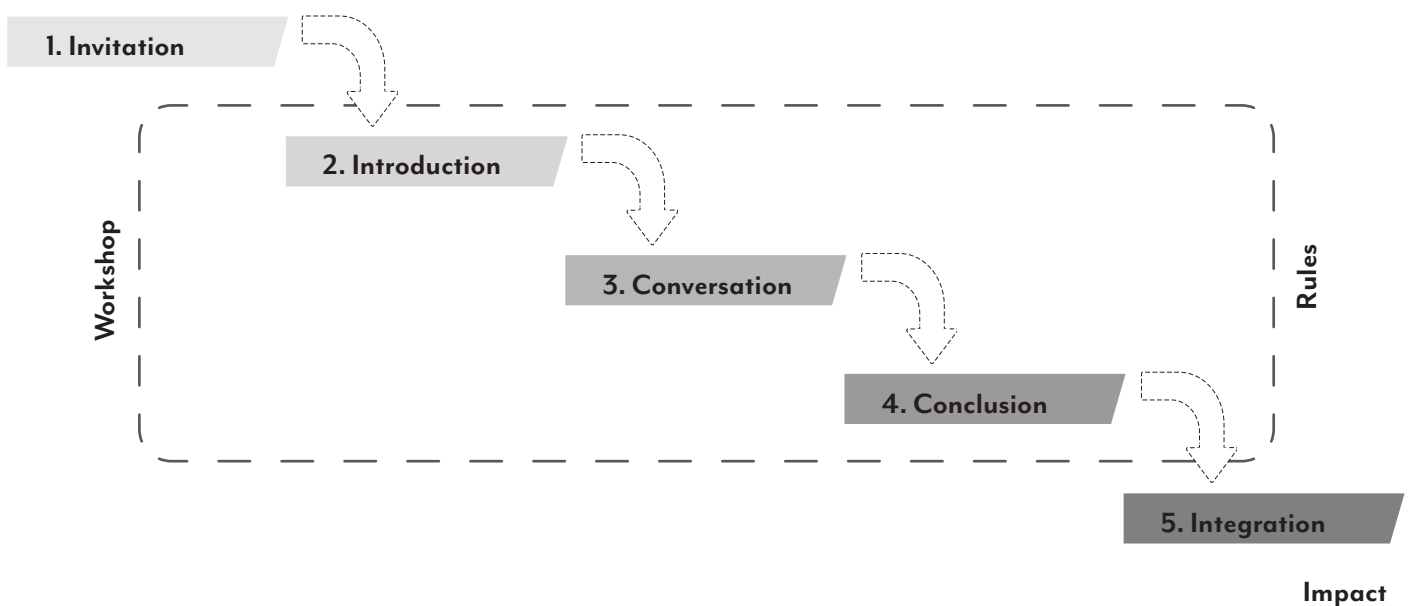
Background

Lahti

In the city of Lahti, Sitra's Timeout method has been applied several times. Dialogic conversation has been used to gain a deeper understanding of the future development of the city as well as about the dissatisfaction of the current situation. The results can be utilized in urban development and planning. The participants, for example, hoped for better citizen participation in decision-making already in the early stages of the processes. In addition, more sites for direct interaction were asked for. 100 per cent of those who took part in and gave feedback about the Timeout dialogue in Lahti in 2018 answered that there is a need for a similar kind of discussion also in the future.

Tampere

Hiedanranta is a plan for a new city district in Tampere with participation in the central role of the planning process. Before the development of the district started, a large garden party was organized in the area, and hopes and ideas about the future of Hiedanranta were collected from participants. Later, there have been many events where more thoughts about the development of the area have been gathered from people, companies and other communities. In the spring of 2017, an open workshop series was held with a versatile group of participants ranging from local people to architects, researchers, city planners and other developers in the Hiedanranta district. Workshops brought together people from different backgrounds and a common vision for the area was created collectively.

Riihimäki

The general plan of the railway station area is one of the flagship projects in the city of Riihimäki. Several different kinds of participatory planning methods have been utilized in the planning process, such as stakeholder workshops, citizen evenings and map-based internet questionnaires. Some of the methods have been dialogic in nature whereas some have represented the more traditional forms of interaction.

In the autumn of 2019, a pop-up planning event was organized for local people in the hall of a popular supermarket in the area. Residents had the possibility to come and discuss the different planning options with Riihimäki City representatives and planning consultants. There were hundreds of participants in the event and the communication was direct and reactive. An extensive report was made from the participation materials and results, which were then incorporated into the actual planning work satisfactorily.

Espoo

The city of Espoo has organized Timeout discussions e.g. when creating new development programs for the city or when planning open public spaces in the suburbs. The insight that has been raised through the Timeout method has been that it is important to dismantle the invisible barriers if, and when, designing better urban spaces for all.

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