

KNOWING, MANAGING, MAKING

David de la Peña

David de la Peña holds a doctorate in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning from the University of California, Berkeley, and is an Assistant Professor of Human Ecology at the University of California, Davis. He is also a practicing architect, urbanist, and landscape designer, whose work is focused on participatory design and informality in the contemporary urban fabric. He co-edited the book Design as Activism: Techniques for Collective Creativity,

New ways of building together

In 2011, I traveled to Spain as a Fulbright scholar looking for architects who were engaging the public in meaningful and collaborative ways. This was a critical moment in the U.S.; participatory design was at an inflection point, suddenly in fashion after decades of disregard, but also stuck with conventional tools and practices that had become calcified within inflexible bureaucratic processes. As a consequence, the design and planning fields were awash in unsanctioned, tactical, and guerrilla approaches as individuals circumvented red tape to get immediate results in urban improvements. I was curious about this movement, but also dubious about its ultimate impact. A sampling of these actions was offered as “Spontaneous Interventions” in the U.S. entry to the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale, and they were spearheaded by architects seemingly ready to embrace a different kind of engagement. But while the quick and immediate approach made an impressive splash in exhibitions and on street corners, as a whole the movement’s ability to provoke meaningful urban change was limited: participation was often too shallow and opportunistic, the emphasis on immediacy didn’t foster sustainable management processes, and a romanticized amateurism did a disservice to the potential for developing expertise.

Similar experiments in guerrilla urbanism were present in Spain, but there was something extra in the projects and design teams I visited: designers connected more deeply with communities of

place, collaborative organizational models were given central importance, and expertise was embraced through the sharing and development of craft. Barcelona was ripe for this new kind of participatory urbanism. Even as it celebrated its strong culture of patronizing the urban design arts, it also could not ignore its colorful legacy of urban activism that was rooted in collectives, cooperatives and worker’s unions. These parallel histories – both top-down and bottom-up – collided in the urban planning and community activism at the former factory of Can Batlló.

In 2011, when I walked past a security gate of the factory complex and entered into the newly recuperated and now self-managed social center (CSA) at Bloc Onze, I was witnessing a powerful paradigm shift in collective city-making. Inside the dimly lit nave of an everyday brick factory building, spaces were being carved out for community use. A large site plan of Can Batlló hung from the wall, surrounded by a circle of chairs made from pallets; a schedule of commission meetings and agendas boasted an impressive array of activities; volunteers catalogued stacks of donated books for a popular library that was already being planned; and urgent conversations in Catalan were accompanied by the regular staccato of jack hammers and drills.

Behind all of this activity was a robust community of residents, local trade workers, neighborhood activists, and a small group of architects from an emerging architecture collective. Unlike typical

technical consultants hired to fix problems in some other community, these half-dozen or so architects were not outsiders to the place. They sat around tables alongside the other members of the community who were similarly skilled at their crafts and willing to put in their time and energy for a good cause. The architecture collective, called *Lacol*, was formed in the midst of the hyper-participatory dynamic of this place, and so it is no surprise that the same group has now helped assemble this volume to step back and share what they and similar groups like them have been working on since. In the reflections that they have curated lies a wealth of lessons that are relevant far beyond Spain.

Spanish experiments

The contributors to this book share a common cultural milieu as a generation of Spanish, Catalan, and Basque architects and urbanists who emerged during a near decade of economic crisis—one that is only now hopefully coming to an end. The crisis brought with it a collapse of the building industry, a recoiling of municipal budgets, and widespread unemployment among design professionals; it was also accompanied by significant social unrest, most visibly in the 15M *indignados* movement.

Fritjof Capra, a respected contributor to complexity theory, explains that unstable systems like these often pass a bifurcation point and branch into what he describes as “an entirely new state where new structures and new forms of order may emerge.” These emergent structures provide a relief valve of sorts for the established systems, providing mechanisms that are “adaptive, capable of changing and evolving” (Capra, 2002). Within the planning fields, these mechanisms were already being used to account for surges in social activism. In his book *Small Change*, Nabeel Hamdi highlighted the potential for practice to disturb, by “creating opportunities for change in a messy and unequal world” (Hamdi, 2004). Across Spain the urban design field experienced Capra’s bifurcation and Hamdi’s change in 2008, and at the fringes of the professions, entrepreneurial actors took advantage of the many fissu-

res that emerged. Conventional modes of urban management became impotent to act, and well trained and available professionals filled gaps left by austere budgets to provide needed design services to communities who suffered from increasing neglect. In the context of crisis, citizens and municipalities alike were ready to embrace novel approaches to city-making.

By 2011, alternatives to the status quo were being expressed writ large across the urban landscape. In the main squares of Madrid and Barcelona, insurgent practices were temporarily reshaping public space as *indignados* rallied against top-down governance, adapting the horizontality of cooperatives to make decisions collectively, and maintaining close relationships with local community groups as they shared in the co-creation and management of new spaces. As formal spaces of urban governance faltered, informal spaces took on new importance (De la Llata, 2016). *Okupas*, or squatted buildings, provided actual spaces of organization as well as horizontal frameworks for debate, discussion and non-hierarchical management. In Madrid, Barcelona and Seville, self-managed and occupied social centers (CSOAs) became centers of participation.

In Barcelona, which regularly boasts of its architectural and urban design heritage, challenges to the status quo in planning took varied forms, best exemplified by the work of *Col·lectiu Punt 6* or *Raons Públiques*, to more autonomous self-built approaches as seen in places like *Can Batlló* and *Can Ricart* (de la Pena, 2013). The city administration responded with mixed signals but including attempts at more open design processes as well as with new programs such as *Pla BUIITS*, which endeavored to hand over parcels of underutilized land to local groups for community development purposes (Baiges, 2016). As Fritjof notes, most experiments in establishing alternative systems fail, and not surprisingly in many of the forays by the City and by community groups, both institutional and activist innovators stumbled through untested processes without a clear vision of their ultimate results.

Moments of vigorous experimentation that require pragmatic adaptation and improvisation do not typically yield solid empirical data. But because these alternatives to city-making emphasized careful diagnosis, and because of efforts like this volume to consolidate theories, methods and experiences from this moment into one place, a more deliberate evolution in urban participation is possible, and already several lessons may be drawn.

Lessons in participatory city making

The theories, methods and experiences highlighted in this book provide a clear framework for practitioners, technicians, academics, students and community actors. For English-speaking audiences, the approaches and many of the techniques ring familiar. Indeed, a common lineage of thinking connects the work in this book to that in the U.S., the U.K, and elsewhere. Drawing from Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation to Henry Sanoff's community participation methods, the contributions of this volume share an impetus to place design and planning tools and decision-making power within the hands of those to whom local places matter most—to their inhabitants (Arnstein, 1969) (Sanoff, 2000).

U.S. readers will also find references to British literature that is less familiar but that has helped shape the participatory work of this generation, from the anarchist writings of Colin Ward to the self-build advocacy of John F.C. Turner. From within Spain, the collaborative work of the Madrid architects and urbanists Isabela Velázquez Valoria and Carlos Verdaguer Viana-Cárdenas and the open source architecture of Santiago Cirugeda in Seville have inspired many of the contributors here.

Within the contributions themselves, the three following values should be called out, which are often missing from tactical urban design processes.

Knowing

Knowledge is power, and local knowledge ought to be the foundation of urban design projects. According to planner Bent Flyvbjerg, decisions

about community vision are best made not by those with technical knowledge, but rather by those with situated knowledge, or as Aristotle called it, *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In a similar vein, James C. Scott compels us to value “folk wisdom” and “indigenous knowledge” because everyday knowledge is the only way to make projects locally relevant (Scott, 1998). Actions to the contrary are ample in planning history, from the soulless urban renewal of places like Boston's West End that was movingly described by ethnographer Herbert Gans, to the well-intentioned but patronizing efforts to rebuild post-Katrina Louisiana in a new urbanist mold (Gans, 1962) (Talen, 2008). This is the “participationism” that Lacoil refers to and which needs to be avoided—one in which participation is used to justify already-determined solutions. As professionals, taking the time to appreciate a place, to diagnose its problems, and to develop rapport can be challenging—there are rarely budgets that can accommodate the time that would be necessary to undertake a valid ethnography. However, the ethic of ethnographic practice and of participatory action research, which includes local communities in the formulation of issues as well as in solution-finding, can be carried through into architecture and planning (de la Peña et al., forthcoming). The “diagnosis” described by Raons Públiques and present in numerous experiences attest to the feasibility of this approach.

Managing

Transversality cuts across the landscape, and within social and disciplinary relationships it demands intersectional collaboration and management. Participation, then, cannot be a tool used by one discipline as a way to include others. From its foundation, it requires more horizontal approaches that cut across teams of technicians, historians, artists, workers, parents, and youth, creating projects that transcend singular disciplines and objectives. In Spain, most of the radical spaces of participation use the term *autogestión* to describe how they work. Translated as “self-management,” the concept derives from social movements in Italy, from community-run schools and libraries

in Spain, and from worker cooperatives throughout Europe. Throughout Spain, self-managed social centers (*centros sociales autogestionados*, or CSAs) like Can Batlló operate on carefully-articulated platforms of horizontality, sustainability, mutual help, and autonomy. The participatory methods and experiences described in this book follow suit, with a heavy emphasis on the importance of organization. The concept of the “motor group” is one expression of this value, in which the long-term management and activation of a project is made by local actors, not the design team or the City.

Making

This book is called Building Together, and I will end with the obvious lesson—that the collective craft of making is the aim of all of this work. Developing craft is not the same as installing impromptu interventions in public space. Pallet furniture, self-painted bicycle lanes, and guerrilla parklets have their place, but they do not serve to build expertise. Ann Deslades refers to this type of DIY urbanism as “exemplary amateurism” and worries that the romanticization of DIY as “favela chic” is mostly about justifying gentrification by a new generation of upwardly mobile city dwellers (Deslades, 2013). Making something yourself, and making it look like you made it yourself, it follows, does not require the refinement that would come from craft. The opposite could be said of projects like Can Batlló, which expressly dedicates space and effort in the training of craftspeople through what Richard Sennett would call “sociable expertise” (Sennett, 2008). In this way, technical expertise is not disregarded as tools of the City or its agents, but rather as skills that can be shared and further developed by local actors. The aesthetic of *autoconstrucción* does not need to be an end, but rather evidence of a nascent value of learning to make things well without dependence upon outside expertise.

In the end, building together has tremendous potential to create not only wonderful places but also technical capacities, sustaining organizational structures, and local knowledge production.

References

- Arnstein, Sherry R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
- Baiges, Carles. (2016). El Pla Buits de Barcelona. *Ciudad y Territorio Estudios Territoriales*, XLVIII(188).
- Capra, Fritjof. (2002). *The hidden connections : integrating the biological, cognitive, and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability*. Doubleday. New York.
- De la Llata, Silvano. (2016). Open-ended urbanisms: Space-making processes in the protest encampment of the Indignados movement in Barcelona. *Urban Design International*, 21(2), 113-130.
- De la Peña, David, Allen, Diane Jones, Hester, Randolph T. , Hou, Jeffrey, Lawson, Laura J., & McNally, Marcia. (forthcoming). *Design As Democracy Techniques for Collective Creativity*. Island Press. Washington, D.C.
- De la Pena, David S. (2013). *Experiments in Participatory Urbanism : Reform and Autogestión as Emerging Forms of Urban Activism in Barcelona*. (Dissertation).
- Deslades, Ann. (2013). Exemplary Amateurism: Thoughts on DIY Urbanism. 2013, 19(1), -188. doi:10.5130/csr.v19i1.2481
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. (2001). *Making social science matter : why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Oxford, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1962). *The urban villagers : group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*. Free Press ; Collier Macmillan Publishers. New York, London.
- Hamdi, Nabeel. (2004). *Small change : about the art of practice and the limits of planning in cities*. Sterling, Va. Earthscan. London.
- Sanoff, Henry. (2000). *Community participation methods in design and planning*. Wiley. New York.
- Scott, James C. (1998). *Seeing like a state : how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press. New Haven.
- Sennett, Richard. (2008). *The craftsman*. Yale University Press. New Haven.
- Talen, Emily. (2008). New Urbanism, Social Equity, and the Challenge of Post-Katrina Rebuilding in Mississippi. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 27(3), 277-293.