USER PARTICIPATION — REAL INFLUENCE OR HOSTAGE TAKING?

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ABSTRACT

Governance is based on the thought of democracy. Is it democratic to place users in a situation where they have no power over the result, but might be held hostage to justify expert interests? Is user participation a dream of the past, or can it, through a revitalisation of content still be important for future development? Our answer is yes it can and it must. Design education, for user and lay client is required in order to make qualified choices in participation within design processes. It can be acquired through general design education, evolve throughout a design co-operation, or be generated in a design work process.

Keywords: user participation, democratic design, design education, curriculum

1   USER PARTICIPATION?

User participation has been understood as including users, often lay people, in stages of a design process aiming for better design solutions. It is a seductive idea, but it raises some questions. Is user participation in this context more of a hindrance than a help? Some of the more obvious problems concerns cost and time. This however is not the most pressing issue. Governance is. Cook and Kothari suggests in their book; Participation: The New Tyranny?[1], that the involvement of users in governance processes have conspired to empower the already powerful, and less resourceful groups have been included in processes where they have been used to legitimise decisions in opposition to their own interests. Without comprehending it, the users might be held hostage by expert interests. The experts involved, though claiming user focus in their solutions, have a propensity towards basing their solutions, and arguments in individual aesthetic values [2].

Politicians involved in decision making processes, representing the users, have admitted to having misinterpreted plan and elevation drawings presented. The quote; "If we knew how it would look when finished, we never would have allowed it to be built!" [3] is taken from the debate concerning the building of a new hotel in Oslo city. The politicians made an erroneous decision based on their lacking knowledge of visual representations. This is not a unique example. Lay people are often involved in decisions concerning solutions, buildings and development, and often they lack the necessary design knowledge to understand the consequences.

2 SYNCRETISING SOCIETAL QUESTIONS WITH AESTHETIC VALUES AND LOCAL NEEDS

Design knowledge, can be developed at several levels of a process. It can be done as 'design education in action', by using a 'design consultant', or as 'prequalification through general design education' [4], or 'no design education' at all.

2.1 No design education

In this approach, the user has no prior knowledge of design or design processes. This has been the most common situation in product development, and user participation is a reaction to this.

2.2 Design education in action

Some will argue that the best arena for learning is in a situation of practice. This is within the long established tradition of reflection-in-action [5]. To educate a 'first-time user' during a design process is a great challenge for a designer. It also leaves the designer with a great portion of ethical responsibility because of his dual position as both adviser/teacher and salesman of his own values and products [6]. The client pays for both the teaching and the product. This is why a 'second-time user' is better prepared for dialogue than a 'first-time user'. Their experience with one design process becomes an education for future projects.

2.3 Design consultant

Another strategy for users is to involve an objective 'design consultant' in a design process. The consultant would have to be qualified in design, education and communication, and have a capacity for involvement in the interests of either the user, or both the user and the designer. A solution of this kind would probably increase the costs, but misunderstandings or conflicts between the involved parties could be avoided. The risk of failure is lessened. The use of such a 'design consultant' has its roots in the theory of advocacy, but it differs by not promoting a design consultant for either the designer or the user alone. Such a 'mediator' should lead and enlighten the discussion for all parties involved [7].

2.4 Prequalification through general education

To participate in a dialogue on design is a challenge for both the user and the professional designer. The dialogue between equals is different from that between laymen and professionals. This gap can seem insurmountable, but design education in primary and secondary school can go a long way towards preventing future misunderstandings and failures. Knowledge of the needs and consequences; ethical, environmental, sustainable, functional, aesthetic, and social, can facilitate a better design dialogue and thus better products. Given the right general education, a user will constitute an invaluable resource in the process, both as a critical partner and as an insightful consumer.

3 TO BE COLLABORATIVE OR TO BE LEAD

In our point of view, the perspective 'no design education' is a poor one. It leaves the professionals a disproportionate influence over the end result. The user is left at the professionals' mercy. In case of any disagreement, the user will not possess the vocabulary, neither to explain the problem as they see it, nor to understand the professional jargon. These projects might result in beautiful and well functional

products, but the jeopardy involved is great. These projects might as well turn out to be disastrous for the users.

'Design education in action' has a long history in the Scandinavian countries. Within such a perspective, the user gets first hand knowledge of the specifics of the project. It is known to him/her on all levels – from idea to finished product. Throughout the process, the user is educated within the ideas, values and aesthetics of the particular professional - exiting from the project as a participant of a certain paradigm. This could be an advantage, but also poses ethical dilemmas. The professional represents values concerning the importance of factors influencing the solution, such as material, form, colour, sustainability etc. Some professionals will value the sustainability over form, or vice versa. In a 'design education in action' relationship, the professional will inhabit the role of Master, while the user will hold the role as a less influential Apprentice. The Master ─ Apprentice model can be appropriate, in certain craft processes where the product is known beforehand, but in a creative design process, where the product is a new solution, this model has weaknesses. Another drawback in this approach is cost, as 'design education in action' requires time.

Using a 'design consultant' to speak for the user interests will strengthen the users' possibility to be heard. The user hires the 'design consultant' to act as a design solicitor ─ arguing the users' case. This is no guarantee towards a satisfying solution, but supports articulation of professional disagreements. The obvious problem in this case, is cost. Another risk is the bonding of professionals, where the user is seen as the outsider. The ramification might be an even more uneven power balance.

4   EMPOWERMENT AND GENERAL DESIGN EDUCATION

Governance is based on the thought of democracy. Is it democratic to place users in a situation where they have no power over the result, but might be held hostage to justify expert interests? Is user participation a dream of the past, or can it, through a revitalisation of content still be important for future development? Our answer is yes it can and it must. Design education, for user and lay client is required in order to make qualified choices through participation.

General education reaches everyone irrespective of future occupation. In a democratic society, the possibility of developing governance for the layman and the empowerment of the common man is general education [8]. Design knowledge is recognised as important for how a society is developed, and design education is consequently self evident as a core subject. In Norway design is therefore mandatory in general education from 1st to 10th grade, and has been increasingly emphasised. This is a consequence of an epistemological realisation of the fact that democratic processes in the physical environment are as important as in the personal.

4.1   No longer pedocentrism

In Norway and to some extent also in Europe and the US, the education in art and design was not focused on product, context or process, but functioned rather as a concomitant theme within the tradition of self-expression and art appreciation [9]. The dominant epistemology, that for a long time seemed almost sacrosanct, was both in education theory in general [10], and art and design education in particular [11], that of individual orientation. The education turned introspective and in the sociologist

Skarpenes' [12] words, the situation today is still marked by having an increased focus on the individual student over the collective knowledge base. He introduces the concept of 'pedocentrism' and suggests the development has been on the expense of subject specific knowledge, and that knowledge has been handled as exclusively a private and individual factor.

If the leading educational paradigm within art and design education is individually centred to such a degree that it is seen as moral upbringing and care more than subject specific knowledge, the education as a societal factor where knowledge is a common goal, and as such recognisable outside the individual, might be lost. The thoughts of personal freedom and individual expression, has somehow come to be seen as synonymous with democracy. When education is arranged uniquely with an individual focus, based on a specific individual's situation and experience, and the individuals' sense of feeling secure and self-realisation sets the parameters, the teaching method and attitude become the main aims of education on the expense of subject-matter knowledge [13]. This, together with the misinterpretation of democracy as solely individually oriented is problematic, as the critical factor, the reflexive critique in light of a context, the society that constitutes the democracy, is lost [14]. The concept is stretched too far and the thoughts of education as a tool for social justice and participation for all [15], is lost in introspection.

This introspective attitude could prove a tremendous hindrance in processes where lay people are brought in to participate in planning and decisions concerning development. The lack of a solid frame of reference outside the individual, a knowledge base from which the suggestions and solutions can be discussed, might prove to lead to less influence than more. The agenda is set by those claiming to 'own' a more comprehensive 'truth' of the consequences [16], and the user that participates, becomes an alibi-hostage.

This is recognised within the Scandinavian design education research field, and subject-matter knowledge and its invaluable contribution to democratic influence on processes within society is recognised [17]. In the new, Norwegian curriculum, design knowledge is discussed in a broader light than i.e. style history or techniques [18]. It is seen to encompass individuality, style history, techniques, ethics, sustainability, democracy, critical processes, product, studio work and the ability to evaluate [19].

5   PREQUALIFICATION IN DESIGN THROUGH GENERAL EDUCATION - THE NEW PARTICIPATION

As previously mentioned, prequalification in design through general education has the potential to reach everyone. As a result the users with 'no design education' will in the long run be eradicated. A knowledge and understanding of design processes will give insight into when to interfere and when to trust the professional recommendations. Evaluation of dynamic projects where the user/client is knowledgeable, show that the projects tend to be successful [20]. It will also have a cost reducing effect, as failures and unnecessary meetings are minimised.

To allow for prequalification through general education will instil in people an awareness of their physical environment. This awareness will be present throughout the reflections in everyday life. It will not be a new discovery as it might be if 'educated in

action'. The knowledge along with the reflection gives bases for a democratic discourse — not only on the political arena but also on the lived arena of local everyday life. A common knowledge base will provide the opportunity to discuss the products and physical environment prior to any projects that might become of importance to the community. If a project is initiated, the local discussion will be known to any users that might participate. As such, he/she participates not on the grounds of individual views, but on the basis of shared reflections. The dangers of egotism, is lessened. The solutions and the aesthetical and ethical has prior discourse references, and as such the unbalance of knowledge and influence can be levelled. In the long run this will provide better products and services and hence, more satisfied users.

One of the dangers addressed in user participation is inequality in power. The cases where professional knowledge is used to coerce on the user the professional's view, turns into a hostage taking situation. The user is left no alternative but to agree. This might be countered through prequalification in design through general education. If the user has the ability and vocabulary to propose critical points of view, the user will have influence on both the project agenda and his/her local environment. Any such informed questions have to be taken seriously by the professionals. Knowledge can lead to a 'win–win' situation where the qualifications of the lay user can contribute to the professional designer's production. The design community will profit, with more satisfied users and clients.

6   USER PARTICIPATION – REVITALISATION OF CONTENT
The tyranny of participation described by Cook and Kothari [21] evolves partly, as we see it, from the lack of participation skills, and in this connection lack of design knowledge. General education has, until recently, not provided an arena to develop these skills and knowledge. Informed discussions around design processes have been lacking, and the focus has been either on material or product.

The new, Norwegian national curriculum has however, within the subject *Art and Crafts,* risen to the challenge of *prequalification through general design education* by incorporating *architecture*, *design* and *visual communication* as mandatory themes in the subject from primary through secondary levels. The curriculum is trying to solve the question, "What basic knowledge should the next generations have within each subject?" and it signals an orientation towards syncretising societal questions with aesthetic values and local needs. They are seen as sides of the same coin [22]. Empowerment through general design education will provide a tool towards democracy and a new way of regarding user participation.

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