

Designing by Participation with Giancarlo de Carlo

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In general, architectural design is understood as a complex process that involves different procedures with concrete aesthetic, functionality, and social effect in the built environment. Frequently however, the former aspects (aesthetics and functionality) of architectural design overshadow the latter one, as Henri Lefebvre remarks: "Too often architecture is designed (and consequently comprehended) as a purely aesthetic or intellectual activity, ignoring social relations and rendering people passive" (Borden, Kerr, Rendell, Pivaro, 2002, p. 5). On the other hand, participatory design in architecture and urbanism, also known as community design, refers to the involvement of the users in architectural and urban design processes, shifting the paradigm of planning for towards planning with the users (Davidoff, 1965). It embodies extrapolation of various methods that promote balance between the users and the architects, developing new approaches where citizens are given the opportunity to participate in different phases of the design process.

In late 1960s several architects, including Giancarlo de Carlo, Lucien Kroll, Ralph Erskine and others, have introduced a discourse of participatory design in architecture advocating a new approach in designing and comprehending architecture not merely as an expression of designated formal language, but rather as an amalgamated understanding of space with social and cultural content. This proposal takes the process of design of the steelworkers' residential complex *Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti* (1969–1974) in Terni, Italy, by Giancarlo de Carlo as a seminal project on the subject. In this case, the participatory approach reveals architecture as co-creative collaborative act that articulates users' needs within spatial integrity.

The *Matteotti* project transforms architectural design from an authoritarian act into an inclusive process that embodies a set of steps leading to a specific method of participatory design. The method includes four steps:

- 1 Assembling an interdisciplinary group (architect, architectural historian, engineer, sociologist, and photographer) that mediates between the architect and the steelworkers' families.



Exhibition for a New Villaggio Matteotti, Photo: Mimmo Jodice.

- 2 Organising an exhibition (Fig.) presenting selected international case studies elaborated through architectural drawings and photographs illustrating residential neighbourhoods aiming to give the future inhabitants a "series of information on ways of living, different from those they have known or experienced so far" (De Carlo, 1969)
- 3 Conducting interviews with small groups of workers in order to understand their general needs, as basis for conceptual hypotheses of the neighbourhood; and specific needs, as basis for the housing unit's configuration.
- 4 Preparing preliminary typological schemes represented to the future inhabitants with cardboard models, so that they understand the concepts and decide for their future dwellings.

The aim of these steps is to critically explore, discuss and formulate the socio-spatial framework of the future neighbourhood and the functional layout of preferred lifestyle. The outcome of the process is an integrative architectural design that is informed by collaboration between citizens and professionals.

Nowadays, fifty years after the inception of the Matteotti project, this method has become even more relevant because it introduces interdisciplinary knowledge into the design process and creates neighbourhoods as places of collective endeavour. It is not strictly limited to creating new developments but is equally relevant for adaptive reuse of existing buildings and places, and urban regeneration of whole neighbourhoods.

References

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Further readings

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Assignment

1
Assemble an interdisciplinary group of specialists relevant for the project topic, including: an architectural historian/theoretician to provide knowledge regarding the history and the meaning of the place; a sociologist to organise meetings and interviews with the citizens (users, inhabitants); an architect to translate the collected data into an architectural/urban concept; and a photographer to take photos of the designated place/location and the different phases of the design process.

2
Organise thematic events by the members of the interdisciplinary group. This step is an educational and emancipatory phase in the process of design because it informs interested parties with the possibilities for new social and spatial modalities through: Exhibition – a selection of (international) case studies elaborated upon through visual presentations; and lectures – oral presentations of expert knowledge.

3
Interview a representative number of users about their spatial practices in everyday life, their requirements and expectations. The aim of this research phase is to collect material that informs future design. The interview works as a survey that explores and contains general quantitative data but also

specific qualitative parameters including functional, social, and cultural information about the place(s) and people involved.

4

Create design schemes, not as a final product, but as a medium representing shared thinking. This last step is part of the participatory design process. It introduces participation through a series of discussions which contribute to the preliminary definition of the social and spatial concept for the future development. The public discussions reinforce the exchange of knowledge in immediate communication between all interested parties and stakeholders.