



ReThink Urban Spaces

Young Urban Designers Involving Children and Youth in Urban Development in Germany¹

Urban planning should be a people-oriented, communicative process in which citizens participate. This attitude has become a matter of course in Germany and many other countries all over the world since the 1970s. Initially, the discourse and practice of communicative planning focused on formats of “being participated”: namely, options for citizens to have a say in decision-making that were opened up and moderated by politics and administration. The underlying assumption of a bipolar relationship between the public and the private sphere, however, has dissolved in favor of a much more plural understanding of urban development. Urban development is now understood as interaction between the different logics and interests of politics, administration, economy, civil society, and intermediary stakeholders.

Taking up and developing this debate on the plurality of urban planning and its stakeholders, I will argue that people-oriented urban development should not remain limited to approaches that focus on urban planners as professionals who take into account “the people” and design for people. Although the people should of course be put at the heart of planning efforts, this approach falls short. People-oriented design should embrace approaches that actively involve the people in urban development with people. Even more so, I argue that urban development is always also shaped by the citizens and that this should be acknowledged, appreciated, and fostered by planning professionals and decision-makers. Undoubtedly, this broad understanding of urban development poses great challenges for urban planners and requires a rethinking that will transform our understanding of urban planning and the roles and responsibilities of the planning profession.

My focus in this contribution is on young people and their role in urban development processes. In the case of Germany, children have been understood as a target group of planning for several decades now; especially in the context of the development of family-friendly residential areas, they are taken into consideration by planning professionals. Adolescents have been increasingly involved in planning processes in the last fifteen years; however, initially, they were mostly seen as active participants in planning processes. In recent years, they have increasingly been understood as stakeholders who shape urban development independently.

In the following sections, I will distinguish between three different modes of youth participation in urban development: state-led participation, youth advocate-led involvement, and youth-led projects. My aim is to broaden our understanding of young people’s involvement and open up a spectrum of opportunities for citizen participation and co-production in different contexts. Thereafter, I will focus on youth advocate-led participation: an approach to urban development that, although it might involve state agencies, is the responsibility of youth advocates as intermediary stakeholders and that motivates and empowers young people to act as urban designers. As an example of such a youth advocate, I will introduce the German non-profit organization JAS: Jugend Architektur Stadt e. V. (engl.: YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY). As for my background in relation to this, I myself am an active member of this organization, and together with other colleagues I have done research on participatory processes carried out by YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY. In order to inspire participatory processes, I will describe how non-profit organization shapes participation along four phases: exploring, envisioning, designing, and communicating. Following this, I will provide insights into one practical example of youth involvement in the redevelopment of a playground. Here, I will reflect on several success factors and obstacles with regard to youth participation. In conclusion, I will briefly touch upon the consequences of different modes of youth participation for urban planning professionals.

¹ This paper was presented at the International Symposium on People-oriented Urban Design, Southeast University (Nanjing, China), 28–30 Oct 2019. The article will be published in the following book: „People-oriented Urban Design: First Series (2021)“. Publisher: Southeast University Press.

Different Modes of Participation: State-Led, Youth Advocate-Led and Youth-Led

In 1992, Roger Hart set a milestone regarding youth participation: Adapting Sherry Arnstein's (1969) seminal ladder of participation to the involvement of young people, Hart (1992: 8-14) exposed modes of non-participation that range from manipulation to tokenism. Furthermore, he differentiated between different degrees of participation, ranging from young people being "assigned but informed" to "adult-initiated, shared decisions with children" and "child-initiated, shared decisions with adults" (Hart 1992: 8). These degrees describe differing grades of youth agency and are in and of themselves equally important and need to suit the respective context (see Hart, 2008: 23).

Despite Hart's eye-opening perspective on various degrees of participation and the resulting sensitivity for differing degrees of agency, a rather one-dimensional understanding of participation continued to dominate participatory practices for a long time. Youth participation in processes of urban development was still primarily confined to activities initiated and executed by the state. Procedures and methods remained close to classic formats of democratic opinion formation (see Jupp 2008, Percy-Smith 2010, Heinrich/Million 2016).

However, a discourse has developed over the last fifteen years that fosters a broader understanding of participation (for a systematic literature review on child participation in planning, see Ataol et al. 2019). Jupp (2008: 332) criticizes the fact that, "Participation in policy frameworks is often understood to involve quite specific activities and spaces, for example attending meetings in town halls." She counters this, arguing "that the work of small-scale community groups can provide a powerful basis for the engagement, and empowerment of local people, in ways that might include, but certainly not be limited to, such conventional forums of direct interaction with the local state" (Jupp 2008: 332). Accordingly, Jupp points out that "it may be necessary to reconsider what might constitute 'participation'" (Jupp 2008: 333), and in line with this, she suggests differentiating between different "modes of participation" (Jupp 2008: 334). Besides "state-led initiatives" (Jupp 2008: 334), "community-led" (Jupp 2008: 341) activities should also be understood as participation.

Percy-Smith (2010) advanced this discourse and explicitly addressed the participation of young people. He stated that, "We need to move away from the current emphasis on participation in formal, institutionalised public decision making [sic] processes and instead focus more on the multiplicity of ways which people act, contribute to and realise their own sense of agency in everyday life contexts" (Percy-Smith 2010: 119f.). In concrete terms, youth participants should have "the right to exercise power over the agenda and process in participatory initiatives" (Percy-Smith 2010: 110). He advocates an understanding of participation, which also embraces all sorts of informal, everyday practices of active citizenship (see Percy-Smith 2010: 109f.).

Building upon this discourse, Heinrich/Million (2016) distinguish between three modes of youth participation: state-led participation, youth advocate-led involvement, and youth-led projects. State-led youth participation is understood as a process initiated and managed by a state agency that involves young people in planning processes. The topics, spatial setting, procedure, and methods are primarily chosen by the state agency. This top-down participation offers several advantages: The direct link with administration and politics ensures that the voices of young people are heard by decision-makers. This can be a fruitful basis for the implementation of ideas. Furthermore, state-led participation addresses topics and scales that are usually not covered by the other two modes: for example, the whole city or even region. Planning tasks and documents with a high degree of abstraction and long planning horizons are tackled. However, potential obstacles are that the topic may be completely detached from young people's daily lives and interests. Recurring problems are the activation and motivation of young people for such participation and the communication between state agency and youth (see Heinrich/Million 2016: 61f. and 68).

Youth advocates, again, "are stakeholders who foster youth participation either independently or on behalf of a commissioning state agency" (Heinrich/Million 2016: 57). A youth advocate could, for example, be a non-profit organization or a private urban planning office. Despite a state agency's mandate, youth advocates clearly act partially toward the young people they involve. Since they would usually have experience in involving young people, they have a "closeness to adolescents and their interests, needs, forms of communication, modes of practice and culture" (Heinrich/Million 2016: 64), which results in meaningful involvement. While this mode is characterized primarily as top-down, youth advocates prove to be very sensitive toward the target group, allowing them to be more successful in addressing and activating young people, for example (see Heinrich/Million 2016: 64, 68).

The third mode of youth participation in urban development is youth-led projects. These projects embrace “any form of activity and commitment of young people, which somehow develops a meaning or relevance for the urban environment and its citizens” (Heinrich/Million 2016: 68f.). Youth-led projects are bottom-up initiatives characterized by young people acting independently and being in charge of their activities. Young people participate in the issues that interest and concern them. With their initiatives, they mostly focus on a micro-scale, for example, reusing or redesigning single plots, buildings, or plazas. They favor short- to medium-term activities with a “hands-on” character. All of this is highly motivating for young people, and they act with a great deal of commitment. Our research shows that “youth initiatives can make a valuable contribution to neighborhood development, to on-going planning processes and that they can inspire and qualify state-led youth participation” (Heinrich/Million 2016: 63). Usually, these projects are not linked to ongoing planning processes by the city administration. However, it can be worthwhile for state-agencies to trace such projects and either support them or involve them in ongoing transformation processes. Nevertheless, these initiatives sometimes perceive such advances as undesirable interference (see Heinrich/Million 2016: 63–69).

Naturally, the three modes of youth participation described above are not to be understood as a “strict three-category scheme but rather [as] different spheres, which overlap, diffuse, and blend into each other” (Heinrich/Million 2016: 69). Analyzing different practices, we can identify hybrid forms containing characteristics of two or even all three modes of participation.

YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY: A Non-Profit Organisation as Youth Advocate

One such youth advocate in Germany is the non-profit organization YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY (<http://www.jugend-architektur-stadt.de/english>). The aim of the organization is to foster youth participation in planning and building processes and to promote built environment education for children and youth. The activities sponsored by YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY invite young people to engage with their environment. Children and youth are encouraged and enabled to perceive architecture, design, neighborhoods, public spaces, landscapes, cities, and regions with all their senses and to (re) discover and shape these spaces. Since its foundation in 2005, the members of YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY have tested and developed a broad repertoire of methods for youth participation and built environment education (see Edelhoff et al. 2019).

Conceptualizing Processes of Youth Participation: Exploring, Envisioning, Designing, Communicating

It goes without saying that each and every process of youth participation in urban development is unique. Each process is characterized, amongst other things, by the following factors:

- Pursued aims (e.g., regarding different fields of action, groups of stakeholders)
- Defined topics (e.g., mobility, meeting places)
- Spatial setting (e.g., a plaza, neighborhood)
- Stakeholders involved (e.g., state officials, business people)
- Target groups (e.g., an age group, users of a specific place)
- Modes of participation (e.g., youth-led, state-led)
- Applied methods (for examples, see Derr et al. 2018)
- Availability of resources (e.g., staff, financial resources)
- Time frame (e.g., short-term project, longer-term process)

All of these aspects need to be explicitly addressed and clarified either before the start or throughout the participation because they shape the process. In view of these many factors influencing the process, it is helpful to have a frame of reference that helps to structure a participatory process. Therefore, participatory processes organized by YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY are usually conceptualized along four phases: (1) explore, (2) envision, (3) design, (4) communicate.

Exploring an environment is usually the first step in a participatory process. All participants are encouraged and enabled to get to know the setting in which the participatory process takes place. This is especially exciting (albeit challenging) in settings in which the young participants are well versed. It is important to choose methods that help the participants open their eyes to what is overlooked in everyday life. Furthermore, it is possible to choose methods that reveal new perspectives on a setting. Besides these approaches focusing on the perception of a setting, the phase of exploring also includes the evaluation of qualities. The young participants should appreciate what already contributes to a good quality of living and identify problems. In the course of this evaluation, they will need to explore their own needs and demands on a place in order to establish evaluation standards. In order to raise awareness among the participants about how to balance different interests in urban development, it also makes sense to motivate young people to explore other stakeholders' needs.

The acquired awareness for the respective setting serves as the basis for the second phase: envisioning. In essence, this phase deals with understanding, elaborating, and articulating what change is needed from the perspective of the participants. As a result of the previous phase of exploration, the participants have an array of potential materials that they can build upon and develop further their ideas. The problems should be addressed by their visions and, if possible, resolved. The aim is to work out alternative solutions and future possibilities for a setting.

The third phase, designing, includes making a decision in favor of one or more of the envisioned ideas. Naturally, decision making needs to be based on a fair and transparent participatory process. Once a decision has been made, the vision usually needs to be translated into concrete measures. Further elaboration is required to make the vision feasible. What this process of designing actually looks like depends very much on the nature of the whole participatory process (see above: pursued aims, topics, etc.).

The last phase is the phase of communication. Undoubtedly, internal communication is of utmost importance throughout the entire process of participation. However, this phase describes the external communication. The young participants' results from the first three phases are presented to a wider audience. Different strategies and aims can be pursued here: Young people's evaluations of their environment and visions for the future development can be communicated to the public. This can help to raise awareness in society for the needs of young people. Moreover, adolescents in particular are a group that is often burdened with prejudices; presenting their visions can help reduce these prejudices. However, the main concern in this phase of communication is usually how to address decision makers and ensure that the participatory process has an impact on urban development.

It goes without saying that these four phases should be understood as an ideal model. Within a participatory process, the phases are sure to overlap or merge with one another. However, working along these four phases has proven successful: The model serves as a reference that provides structure and guidance without overreaching.

Young Urban Designers Planning and Implementing the Redesign of a Playground in Berlin, Germany

In 2014 and 2015, YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY involved young people in planning and implementing the redesign of a playground. The setting of this renewal project was a rundown playground in a deprived neighborhood in Berlin, Germany. The playground is especially important for the young people living in the neighborhood because it is located between two well-frequented institutions: a children's recreation center and a youth club.

The first year of the process was dedicated to children and youth participation in the planning of the redesign. A dialogue was initiated between young users of the space and the landscape planners in charge of the redesign. The second year served to involve young people in the concrete design as well as the building process of a seating for the playground. Both project years were conceptualized along the four work phases of YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY and will be discussed accordingly. However, the first year focused more on exploring and envisioning, while the second year emphasized the phase of designing and the actual realization of the young people's ideas.

The whole process started with an exploration of the playground. Young people engaged with the current conditions on-site and expressed their demands for the future development of the area. In order to record their results, the participants took photographs and designed postcards pointedly stating the results of their evaluation (see Photograph 1). This served to learn more about young people's perception of the playground and to generate a product with which to communicate this. As a second step, young people were invited to learn more about the needs and wishes of all (potential) users of the playground. For this purpose, they interviewed people living in the neighborhood and created short video clips.

Photograph 1: Postcard illustrating young peoples' wish for a soccer field in their neighbourhood



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² The following is based on (1) the project documentation (JAS e. V. 2019: 74–81), (2) the project website (<http://www.hingucker-jas.de/index.php/berlin>) as well as interviews and discussions with the involved members of the non-profit organization which were carried out as part of an accompanying research.

Elaborating on users' demands and ideas for the redevelopment, the exploration merged smoothly with the phase of envisioning. Pushing ahead with this phase, YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY created a simple participatory game for envisioning and negotiating different futures for the playground. The young people's postcards and videos were used to identify various uses that the young people were missing in their neighborhood. The aim of the game was to map out the importance of these uses for the young people. Divided into groups according to age, the young people received an equal share of building blocks and could use them to vote for the presented uses (see Photograph 2). In the course of the game, these building blocks piled up on the playing field to form towers that represented the participants' priorities (see Photograph 3). However, since the availability of space (and money) limited how much could be realized on the playground, the crux of the game was that the young people had to create alliances to push through their top preferences. After playing this game for an afternoon, the young people came up with recommendations for the redesign.

Photograph 2: A participatory game to negotiate needs – Young people voting (with colourful building blocks) for their preferred ideas for redesign of their playground (black-and-white pictures)



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Photograph 3: Building blocks piling up on the playing field and indicating young peoples' prioritised changes to their playground



Two important requirements for the phases of exploration and envisioning can be identified from this project: First, youth advocates should deliberately choose methods that address a variety of modes of communication. In the example, photography, postcards, filming, oral discussions, and a participatory game were chosen. Offering participants different ways to engage with the process fosters inclusive participation. Different participants will feel more comfortable with different modes of communication.

Therefore, a broad spectrum should be covered, including verbal (e.g., oral presentation, storytelling, interviewing, writing), visual (e.g., photography, filming, sketching, collaging), and haptic and spatial (e.g., modelling, gaming) means of communication. Second, the youth advocates created two moments in the process where participants were asked to engage with the needs and demands of others: Young people interviewed other users, and they negotiated with each other while playing the game. Letting young participants discover other stakeholders' needs is worthwhile because it gives the young participants a realistic idea of how urban planning always has to meet different needs. It makes planning processes transparent for young people and forms a basis for consensus and cooperation.

The phase of designing was only realized to some extent. In prioritizing preferences by playing the participatory game, aspects of the design phase were addressed. However, as will be shown below, designing was the focal point of the second year of this process.

The phase of communication was relevant in three respects. First, from their videoclips, the young people developed a video message summarizing their demands for the landscape planners in charge of the redesign. Second, the young people's recommendations for the redesign were forwarded to the landscape planners. This transfer of results was organized by the youth advocates who represented the interests of the young participants. Third, the young people's recommendations were printed on large-format posters and displayed on a firewall next to the playground.

These facets of communication hint at an aspect that is relevant to the communication phase in general: Youth advocates need to ensure that their participants' voices are heard. In the example, YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY negotiated with the landscape architects to make sure that the participants' ideas had an impact on the redevelopment process. And indeed, the young people's ideas were incorporated and fundamentally changed the plans that the landscape architects had originally prepared before the participatory process. So as not to be accused of tokenism, youth advocates must keep an eye on ensuring that the results of the participation actually find their way into planning and implementation processes.

Furthermore, it can be worthwhile to address a wider public, as was achieved with the posters. This can help to make a neighborhood aware of young people's needs. Displaying young people's positive contributions can also contribute to reducing prejudices towards adolescents.

The second year of this redevelopment process was dedicated to design and implementation. In negotiation with the landscape architects in charge, a consensus was reached that one element of the future playground could be designed and built together with the participants. Picking up on the young people's ideas from the envisioning phase, desired seating was chosen.

Building on their work from the previous year, the young participants started with the design phase straight away. Developing and displaying their ideas in models, they elaborated on characteristics this seating should have (see Photograph 4). Of course, the seating needed to be feasible within the given budget and meet all constructional requirements of the building authorities. Therefore, YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY translated the young people's design proposals into a ready-to-implement design.

Photograph 4: More than just sitting - Models for a multi-functional seating furniture



As a next step, all of the young people built models of the seating on a scale of 1:20 (see Photograph 5). These models already contained all constructional elements that were to be used on the construction site. This step served to simulate the later construction process so that the participants could imagine the implementation process.

Photograph 5: Ideas taking shape – Modelling the seating furniture on a scale of 1:20



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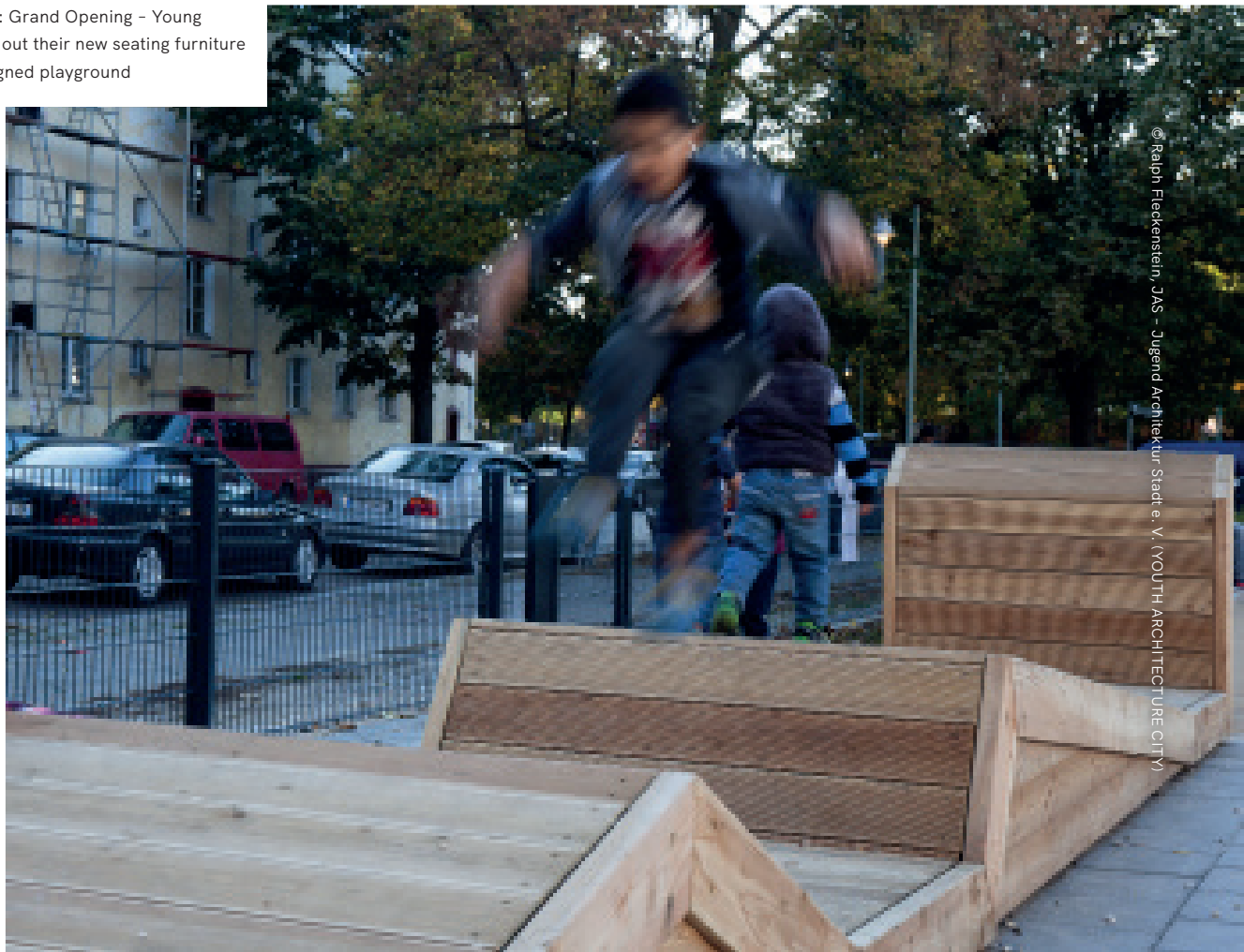
The highlight of the participatory process was setting up a participatory construction site to build the seating. Guided by pedagogically experienced construction professionals from the Bauereignis architecture and design studio (<https://bauereignis.de/en/start-page/>), children and adolescents were able to build their own wooden seating on the playground (see Photograph 6). While the construction process and the finished seating themselves communicated the young people's involvement in the neighborhood, a public opening ceremony was also held to celebrate the young people's success and to communicate their valuable contribution to a wider public (see Photograph 7).

Photograph 6: Participation permitted – Young people building a wooden seating furniture on a participatory construction site



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Photograph 7: Grand Opening – Young people trying out their new seating furniture on the redesigned playground



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Several lessons can be learned from this example project: In the design phase, it might be necessary to adapt participants' suggestions so that they are practicable. However, youth advocates need to be very sensible about this so that the young people continue to identify with their results. This is why YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY invited the young people to build models of the final design. This process allowed them to dig deeper into the construction details and to explain why the design looked the way it did. What is more, this can also be regarded as built environment education, which gives the participants an understanding of processes of designing and building in general.

One special feature of this participatory process was the participatory construction work. The ideal model of YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY does not generally embrace a realization phase because the actual implementation of urban development measures can only rarely be performed participatorily. However, it is a factor of success for young people's participation in urban development processes to produce visible outcomes of some sort. In other projects organized by YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY, this has taken very different forms. For example, at the end of a participatory process, YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY often motivates young people to keep some material reminder of participation that can remain visible for them. This might be a poster that can be hung up at the institution where the process took part, or this could mean that the young people take home the models they built. This helps young people remember what they accomplished and reminds them that they can make a difference and change things. Promoting visibility among a wider public can be achieved, for example, by means of temporary interventions that attract attention and highlight young people's demands and ideas such as public exhibitions of the results or local media coverage. In the past, results were communicated to decision makers in the form of a manifesto, for example, summarizing the young people's claims to urban development. This manifesto was handed over to politicians in a public event.

Conclusion: Manifold Ways to Involve Young Urban Designers

Throughout this contribution, I argued that people-oriented urban planning should embrace the involvement of young people as fellow citizens and that this should take manifold forms. Urban planners as professionals should plan not only for young people but also with young people and appreciate urban development promoted by young people. Since this undoubtedly poses great challenges for urban planners, this article presented different modes of participation that illustrate how young people can be involved as urban designers. Developing on Roger Hart's ladder of youth participation, I proposed a stakeholder-centered perspective that focuses on the question of who is in charge of what in different modes of participation. The modes of state-led participation, youth advocate-led involvement, and youth-led projects illustrate how urban development is shaped by young people's knowledge, demands, and ideas and how these modes offer planning professionals different opportunities to further enable, foster, intensify, or channel these participatory activities.

The focus of this article on youth advocate-led involvement and the work of the non-profit organization YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY was intended to offer insights and practical "how to" instructions. It became clear what influence the young participants could have and what responsibilities the youth advocates assumed: While the process was primarily designed by the youth advocate, the young participants were clearly most influential regarding the contents and outcomes.

A key requirement that accounts for all modes of participation was illustrated: Participation should lead to visible results that are meaningful for the young participants as well as for urban development. Of course, this can take many forms and can entail an interplay of diverse outcomes and formats of participation: ranging from temporary interventions and installations to permanent changes in the built environment or from events to policy documents. With regard to the outcomes and impacts of participation, it is also important for planning professionals to communicate transparently from the beginning and throughout the process what mode of participation they are using, what degree of agency the young people have, and what influence the participatory process might have. This avoids disappointing participants' expectations.

Although a participatory planning culture that structurally involves children and youth is still a long way off, many examples of best practice for participatory urban development can be found in Germany. These positive examples once again underline the importance of youth participation in urban development since they show that when young people get involved, new interpretations of urban spaces can find their way into debates, unusual ideas can flow into the design of public spaces, appropriation processes can be initiated, and people-oriented neighborhoods can be developed (see Million/Heinrich forthcoming).

Acknowledgement

In this paper, I mainly draw on the work of the non-profit organization JAS – Jugend Architektur Stadt e. V. (engl.: YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY). I have a twofold perspective on this work: For one thing, I am a member of the organization. For another thing, together with my colleagues at TU Berlin, I research the work of YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY. It goes without saying that both my personal experiences and the observations and reflections of my colleagues at YOUTH ARCHITECTURE CITY and TU Berlin have been incorporated into this contribution. Therefore, I would like to thank all my colleagues, especially Andrea Benze, Ralf Fleckenstein, Christina Jiménez Mattson, Angela Million, Anke Schmidt, Zuzana Tabačková, and Urs Walter. I would also like to thank Felix Hugo and Boy Boysen (Bauereignis architecture and design studio) who played a key role in the participatory construction of the seating.

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Key words

built environment education, children, participation, people-oriented design, urban design, urban development, urban planning, young people, youth, youth advocate



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