

From participation to co-creation. New forms of thinking interventions to improve urban/residential habitat

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ABSTRACT

Current urban intervention processes at various scales focus on the indispensable need to include citizen participation in specific projects. However, participation at the various project stages often takes place as a checklist in order to produce a specific result, where process control remains in the hands of those intervening, with very little effective and long term involvement from those the intervention was directed to. From an understanding of contemporary ways of dwelling, this paper reviews the existing problems with participatory urban processes in Chile; it specifically looks at participation within the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism 'Quiero Mi Barrio' ('I love my neighbourhood') Programme, and proposes a co-creation approach in order to improve ways of living in urban areas today.

INTRODUCTION

Latin-American cities, and in particular the Chilean ones, show extremely segregated urban centres, with very

different quality of life depending on the place where people live, as well as very dissimilar spatial quality in the various areas of the city (Jirón & Mansilla, 2013, 2014). These differences and precariousness cause very diverse urban conflicts, from sectors of the city below the level of development the country is aiming at, to citizens who resent the different ways in which the space is lived. These conflicts can be observed in housing developments of social interest and numerous segregated neighbourhoods, but also in public spaces, infrastructures and in the various systems of mobility that reproduce the inequality of residential segregation. An important part of public and increasingly private effort involves intervening these spaces with the purpose of improving the residential habitat.

However, at present, interventions in residential habitat require understanding relationally what dwelling space implies. This is related to understanding not just the indivisible relationship between inhabitants and their habitable environment, a relationship that goes beyond housing and the immediate environment and incorporates the neighbourhood and the city in general, but also between the members of the household, the neighbours and the whole community.

Part of the conceptual evolution of the residential habitat (INVI, 2005), coincides with the fact that this relationship is neither linear nor hierarchical, it has diffused boundaries

(Iturra, 2012). This means that the habitat scales are lived in a disordered way, for example, sometimes moving from the housing scale to the city scale without the neighbourhood as an intermediary. This 'disorder' of residential habitat scales and relationships is approached from acknowledging the role inhabitants have, including their experience, knowledge and understanding of how space is lived, that is, the way they dwell. This third element, dwelling, as an active element, often in movement, is essential to understand space and at the same time undertake improvements which are closer to the needs of inhabitants. In order to do this, ways of intervention that include citizen participation are essential.

The present challenge of understanding the relationship between dwelling, inhabitant and residential habitat, is one architects and urban planners have much to say about. Not only because their actions create physical spatial interventions that may last in time, but above all, because these disciplines are capable of transforming space, whose success would depend on the way in which they approach it. One of the central aspects of the training of architects, at least in Chile, is the development of the ability to observe and perceive needs, and the capacity to transform these into physical spaces. These skills are indispensable in the processes of participative transformation of the residential habitat.

Chile has made significant progress in the incorporation of citizen participation as a fundamental tool to generate more democratic processes, and this is reflected on instruments like the Ley sobre Asociaciones y Participación Ciudadana en Chile (Law of Citizen Associations and Participation in Chile), where the Chilean State “acknowledges the right people have to participate in their policies, plans, programmes and actions” (Ley N° 20.500, 2011) through access to relevant information, citizen surveys, participative public accounts and Civil Society Councils.

However, in view of the results of current urban interventions, from the public as well as the private sector, the question arises whether in our context it is enough to have citizen participation conceived as delivery of information, consultation, public accounts or council calls, or whether it is necessary to go further towards strategies to improve the quality of life democratically from other processes. In the case of interventions that have an impact on the residential habitat, the role that architects and urban planners may have is central if there is an emphasis on participative design as well as on the method to achieve physical spatial interventions as an end in themselves, and also on spatial transformation by the inhabitants.

URBAN INTERVENTIONS FOR DWELLING

One of the most innovative processes of spatial urban intervention in Chile has been the creation and constant adaptation of the Programa de Recuperación de Barrios ‘Quiero Mi Barrio’ (Neighbourhood Recovery Programme ‘I love my neighbourhood’)

of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo, MINVU). By improving public spaces and facilitating citizen participation, this initiative aims at recovering neighbourhoods of Chilean cities physically and socially. Starting with this nine-year-old programme, the MINVU shows an evolution in their understanding of the dwelling as an object and its role as a mere distributor of subsidies, towards a more complex idea of the role of the State in urban interventions as well as of the relationships between inhabitants and their neighbourhood in their residential habitat. Starting with this programme, MINVU’s progress has been so significant that it received the UN-Habitat Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment. Among the innovations presented by the programme at the current stage is the incorporation of housing scale improvement in the intervention.

One of the essential pillars of the intervention of MINVU in neighbourhoods is citizen participation. According to a survey of Sur Profesionales (Cortés & Morrison, 2007), there are various ways in which participation is perceived in this programme. For instance, from the government it is seen as innovative in terms of the valuation of democracy and a renewed concern of the State for the neighbourhood; from the local government, the municipality, the view is more critical mainly due to its scant participation in the first implementation stage, a situation considerably compensated in recent implementations; ONG consultants show a more critical view regarding the design and execution, in topics of participation as well as administration;

from the point of view of the inhabitants, there is a deeper debate, which reveals a tension between an effective or real participation and the expectations of the same, perceiving active participation in some cases, and, at the same time, fear and disappointment, particularly in the first implementation stage of the programme (Cortés & Morrison, 2007). In general, it is detected that the processes of participation in these programmes are “rather linked to enquiry mechanisms, above all, at diagnosis stage” (Villarroel, 2014, p. 116). Participation in this programme has been useful to overcome the apathy there may be in certain contexts and to get the neighbours to meet, interact and trust one another (Villarroel, 2014). In some neighbourhoods, where there was previous organization, intervention may attract higher levels of participation, but in others, where this is non-existing, the mere fact of trying to persuade inhabitants to meet and begin to trust one another is a big achievement. In this sense, impact evaluation and degree of success depends very much on the social capital existing in the intervened neighbourhood (Bustos, 2012).

This basic participation aspect can be found not only in interventions from the State, but also in several interventions of the public space carried out by various institutions, mainly a new agent called ‘foundations’, which incorporate citizen participation within their scope of action as an essential element.

It is agreed that the ‘Quiero Mi Barrio’ programme requires a more complete and comprehensive assessment in its present stage, but it is fundamental for the management of neighbourhood recovery programmes and urban interventions in the residential habitat, to learn from this programme and its

multiple trials in the last nine years. It is evident that participation must go beyond enquiry and that there is a need for innovation in the use of participatory methodologies mainly in space design. This last aspect is of vital importance when thinking of the dwelling/inhabitant/habitat relationship. The programme has significant experience in the implementation of various methodologies of participatory design, with varied results, and it is essential to learn from these processes and the role the architect might have in the participatory process.

The impact of participatory design methodologies is relevant in a context in which the residents are more demanding than twenty years ago, and in which trust in the State has been worn out with the resulting lack of credibility. Both precedents imply that it is very difficult to get all the residents to participate actively in processes of urban intervention. Therefore, it is suggested here to go ahead with the incorporation of co-creation in the residential habitat.

FROM PARTICIPATION TO COLLABORATION AND CO-CREATION

The current concept of co-creation emerged from the business world around the 1990s as a new way of relating to customers, where they could participate in the production of the same products they would consume and, in return, they co-created value (Leading Cities, 2014). The importance of this approach is that all the participants in the co-creative process can derive value from the same (Leading Cities, 2014). It was predicted that empowered customers would be the main source of innovative ideas in the future (Leading Cities, 2014).

Co-creation has been slowly incorporated into public discourse and

policies (Zurbriggen & González, 2014), for instance, in entities like the Ministry of Economy in Chile or in urban developments such as tactical urbanism (Lydon, 2012; Lydon & García, 2015), social urbanism (Hermelin, Echeverri, & Giraldo, 2010) or Smart Cities (Campbell, 2012). Nowadays, co-creation is understood as a process in which new ideas are designed together with the people and not for them (Waissbluth et al., 2014). Co-creation opportunities emerge mainly from the need to change, either through technologies of service delivery, communications or patterns of service delivery. In the urban realm, initial versions of co-creation can be detected as from collaborative planning in England (Healey, 1997, 2003) as an alternative way to traditional top-down urban planning, with the purpose of empowering citizens to play a more significant role in the planning of their space. More recently, co-creation (Dork & Monteyne, 2011) becomes relevant in the context of increasingly complex and dynamic cities, which require greater innovation in diagnosis as well as in their resolution by means of urban interventions.

Co-creation of the city implies revising planning instruments as master plans that currently intend incorporating all the possible territorial elements as a result of traditional proceedings of design and urban planning. Shifting from traditional urban planning to co-creation which looks for a mosaic of transformations, requires planners to lose a bit of control of their work and implies distribution of power in the decision making part of the process. The idea behind urban co-creation is to lay bridges between architects, urban planners and other professionals working in territorial issues and the residents, and allow intervention,

participation and involvement, regardless of the social or professional context of the participants. The knowledge of urban residents should have at least the same level of authority as the experience of architects, urban planners and other professionals. The role of urban designers, architects, urban planners and other professionals in urban co-creation may be to stimulate new ideas, facilitate participation and advise urban activists (Dork & Monteyne, 2011).

The term 'co-creation' provokes different ideas in different people. For some, a telephone application like Uber, for instance, is a form of co-creation. According to Leading Cities (2014), co-creation is the flow of information and ideas from five areas of society: government, academia, business, non-profit making organizations and citizens; this would allow participation, involvement and empowerment in the development of policies, creation of programmes, improvement of services, and facing systemic change with every dimension of society represented from the beginning.

Co-creation may be very well informed by new technologies, including broad band connection, public interfaces, personal intelligent devices, cloud computing and open data infrastructures. Co-creation techniques have the potential to overcome time and location limitations and may allow a scale jump and influence of public involvement. While technology has widened the ability of citizens to co-create, this is not a requirement. Co-creation literature (Oksman, Vääänen, & Ylikauppila, 2014a, 2014b; Dork & Monteyne, 2011; Waissbluth et al., 2014; Ruta N, 2015; Espinosa, 2014; Nevens, Frantzeskaki, Gorissen, & Loorbach, 2013) does not generally

incorporate a low technology approach, and tends to focus on applications and tools based on the web. But it is possible to develop creative techniques where people become proactive citizens rather than service consumers, focussed on the culture of change more than on short term results. Rather than asking people to be 'plugged' into existing predetermined programmes, initiatives or campaigns, co-creative approaches centred on citizens may help them to form and promote their decisions, create new actors maps, build capacities for self-government and develop open and non-conclusive civic processes.

In this sense, true co-creation is not planned, structured or led by outside experts, professionals, organisations or those who do not belong to the community. Neither does it intend to inspire, persuade or manipulate people to adopt a certain point of view or position in a specific schedule. Then, what would be the difference between co-creation and public participation? Public participation is an essential component of the process of policy planning and formulation and it allows collecting and delivering information on the needs of the community, identifying attitudes and opinions, generating new ideas, allowing more fluent implementations and building constituent support (Leading Cities, 2014). Instead, for citizens and community organisations, co-creation can offer opportunities to obtain more representation and be listened to, exercise public rights and influence policy decisions.

According to Leading Cities (2014) a central principle of co-creation is that knowledge does not only come from experts, like architects, urban designers or planners. The local knowledge of

residents is as relevant as that of the other actors in the process, including the experts. An effective agent of a co-creative process must ensure the commitment of the participants, manage risks, reduce complexity without imposing restrictions, establish trust and, above all, continue to produce value for all the participants. Co-creation moves the scales of power, that is, it modifies the traditional role of the government inviting the general public to comment and give their opinion on predetermined programmes. It works in a more iterative way in decision making and implies levelling hierarchies, which demands an important degree of trust and transparency between citizens and public servants.

IMPLICATIONS OF CO-CREATION ON INTERVENTIONS IN CHILE

These new trends should be taken with caution and reflection on them must take our reality as a starting point. Co-creation ideas are often translated as a mere incorporation of technology to urban management and intervention. This technology, in the end product as well as in the manner of the intervention, may exclude important portions of the population without access to it, especially when the changes develop at high speed. Approaches like co-creation should be careful with local reality and the possibilities of social exclusion that may be generated when emphasizing technology. This is where we should ask ourselves whether co-creation should be understood as a method or as an end in itself.

Another relevant point is related to the way in which trends in urban intervention move at international level and then land in various countries, often forgetting precisely how innovative co-creation is. In the end, many times

the same interventions are carried out in Santiago as in New York, Medellín or Copenhagen, without setting local reality in the context.

The above implies, on the one hand, locating and contextualizing urban interventions into local reality, and, on the other, acknowledging the political nature of urban participation and, above all, co-creation. This creates uncertainty on the results of the interventions and we may not be prepared to face it. It also implies the generation of situated knowledge, acknowledging the context, the inhabitants, the history and the diverse wisdom, of architects, urban planners and other professionals that intervene, and various actors that take part in the dwelling process, including the residents in general. What to do with this knowledge becomes a relevant debate to start in the Chilean context.

From this point of view, the exercise of spatial design at its various scales has the potential to understand the relationship between dwelling, inhabitants and habitat. A way of achieving this may be by means of participative/collaborative or co-creative design. This process may generate products which are closer to local needs but, above all, it may generate instances of co-creation transforming not only physical space but also acknowledging residents as co-creators of their residential habitat. **m**

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