

Imagination and the Political in Design Participation

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Legitimacy within Design Participation: Between the *What* and the *How* of Design

Many authors agree that the concern about participation within the design disciplines arose in the 1960s amid a climate of social changes in developed and developing countries.¹ Besides this strong social context, the emergence of design participation cannot be fully explained without considering the development of the design methods movement. Nigan Bayazit has explained how the movement's primary focus on optimization and rational decision making later evolved into "user involvement in design decisions and the identification of their objectives."² In fact, several scholars have recognized the Design Research Society (DRS) conference of 1971 to be an early milestone in the development of design participation theories and methods.³

Since these early developments, there have been differences regarding the definitions and reach of design participation and what participation actually implies. Regarding planning processes, Sherry Arnstein defined real participation to be citizen control,⁴ while Reyner Banham stated that "do-it-yourself is the only real design participation."⁵ Peter Stringer wrote about communication between designers and the public, and about participation being part of a process and its solutions.⁶ More recently, authors from the information technology (IT) tradition emphasize "mutual learning" when writing about participation.⁷

Most design participation practices and theories privilege the process over the results. Concepts such as "local involvement" and "empowering people" are a common feature of those traditions.⁸ In the North American tradition of community design, for example, the original goals of design participation were to "emphasize the involvement of local people in social and physical development of the environment they are living in."⁹

In a recent publication on participatory design and understood in the IT realm, Liam J. Bannon and Pelle Ehn comment on their definition of an overarching concern within that tradition,

- 1 Henry Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000); Mario Garcés, *Tomando su Sitio: El Movimiento de Pobladores de Santiago, 1957–1970* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2002).
- 2 Nigan Bayazit, "Investigating Design: A Review of Forty Years of Design Research," *Design Issues* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 21–22.
- 3 Among them Bayazit, "Investigating Design"; also see Yanki Lee, "Design Participation Tactics: Redefining User Participation in Design," in *Wonder-Ground 2006 DRS Conference* (Lisbon: IADE, 2006), 1–15.
- 4 Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): 216–24.
- 5 Reyner Banham, "Alternative Networks for the Alternative Culture?" In *Design Participation. Proceedings of the Design Research Society's Conference*, edited by Nigel Cross (London: Academy Editions, 1972), 15–19.
- 6 Peter Stringer, "A Rationale for Participation," in *Design Participation: Proceedings of the Design Research Society's Conference*, edited by Nigel Cross (London: Academy Editions, 1972), 26–29.
- 7 Toni Robertson and Jesper Simonsen, "Participatory Design: An Introduction," in *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, edited by Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 1–17.
- 8 Zeynep Toker, "Recent Trends in Community Design: The Eminence of Participation," *Design Studies* 28 (2007): 309–23.
- 9 Sanoff, *Community Participation*.

namely, on the *how* of designing or the practice of design.¹⁰ By practice, Bannon and Ehn mean, among other definitions, “the need for providing means for people to be able to be involved, the need for respect for different voices, the engagement of modes other than the technical or verbal.”¹¹ They distinguish this approach from others, allegedly more focused on the *what* of design (namely the aesthetic and/or functional results).

We consider that this binary opposition between *how* and *what* is not productive, all the more when there is another interpretation of the *what* that has been around for a long time and is not being properly grasped at the moment. We suggest to think (again) about the design problem as being the main *what* of design instead of the product or results, and thus to look at the construction of the problem as being the political core of legitimacy within design participation.

Nigel Cross said that analyzing and understanding the design problem is an influential part of the design process. According to him, the problem necessarily has to be reformulated and interpreted by the designer; when the designer happens to be a team, the designer must “reach some shared or commonly held understanding of the problem.”¹²

In our view, that is precisely how the process of commonly understanding the problem in design participation processes—and particularly within what Richard Buchanan calls the “design of complex systems or environments for living, working, playing, and learning”¹³—should be understood: as a political imagination situation, “acting-in-concert,” and therefore—a collaborative construction process. Since the emergence of participation in design during the 1960s, the focus has mainly been on methodological procedures and the role of experts or the public being the designers, while the political “wickedness” of design problems has been overlooked.

The well-known definition “wicked” of planning and design problems, which originally meant not only ill-structured definitions but contentious ones, and the approach to design thinking being essentially rhetoric, and design itself—an “art of deliberation,” all make perfect sense when approaching them from the perspective of design participation as political imagination. Rittel and Webber’s seminal paper sprang from the problem that city planners (and professionals in general) faced at the end of the 1960s,¹⁴ namely the discontent of the public with purely technical solutions. In Rittel and Webber’s terms, planners and designers were at the time “forced to expand the boundaries of the systems we deal with.”¹⁵ Planning problems were labeled either “wicked” or “tame” (definable, understandable, and consensual), partially

10 Liam J. Bannon and Pelle Ehn, “Design: Design Matters in Participatory Design,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, ed. Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 37–63.

11 Bannon and Ehn, “Design,” 41.

12 Nigel Cross, *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 93.

13 Richard Buchanan, “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking,” *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1992), 5–21.

14 Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155–69.

15 Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas,” 159.

because of the confusing fact that social problems relied “upon elusive political judgment for resolution,”¹⁶ even while the authors were well aware of the expert’s position as a “player in a political game.”¹⁷

Design processes are always political—especially those concerning design participation. To think about design in terms of imagining the world otherwise—and act accordingly to change it—already involves an evident political edge. Furthermore, when Buchanan stresses that design is an activity of invention whose subject matter is indeterminate,¹⁸ precisely that indeterminacy presupposes a space of contention and therefore a political condition that must be discussed. The construction of design problems, understood as a process of political imagination, also involves the possibility for the formation of publics in the Deweyan sense, which DiSalvo has recovered as a framing concept to understand and make visible complex contemporary issues through design-erly means.¹⁹

Those publics—assemblages of concern and action—are, in our context, not only made up of designers and citizens but also other kinds of agents. In the next section, we explore the relationship between imagination and the political in design, acknowledging the political and aesthetic links between humans and nonhumans, and discuss the instituting and dismantling dimensions of political imagination.

Design, Imagination, and the Political

Over the past fifty years and particularly from the 1980s, an ongoing and growing discussion has existed on the political quality of artifacts and the political assemblages of designing agents—namely, the relationships between designers, communities, and objects. Langdon Winner advocated for the need to combine a “theory of technological politics” with a “theory of social determination of technology” to address these problems.²⁰ He emphasized that neither of the foregoing accounts constitute a sole source for explaining the phenomena of interactions between society and technology. Instead, both are necessary to enhance our abilities to deal with the political assemblages that lead to the development and implementation of a given technology and with the transformations in social life the former could produce.

Arguing that the “conventional boundaries that separated design from politics have begun to dissolve,” Winner says we should better understand tools and instruments as the “political artifacts that strongly condition the shared experience of power, authority, order and freedom in modern society.”²¹

16 Ibid., 160.

17 Ibid., 169.

18 Richard Buchanan, “Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design,” in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, ed. Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 23–68.

19 Carl DiSalvo, “Design and the Construction of Publics,” *Design Issues* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 48–63.

20 Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

21 Langdon Winner, “Political Ergonomics,” in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, ed. Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 147.

Discussing the implications of this thesis and its strong influence over the later discussion about the links between politics and design, Bernward Joerges states that Winner's position must be complemented with what critics said after "Do Artifacts have Politics?"²² was published in 1980. Joerges has regarded the "social constructivist" perspective inherent to the sort of criticism that has been the trademark of the Science, Technology and Society studies (STS) school as a necessary counterpoint of Winner's "strong version,"²³ one that stresses the ultimate importance of contingency and indetermination in every kind of relation between politics and things. Although one can certainly trace a political intention behind the choices that come to "make a thing possible," its ultimate political effects can never be totally decided by the sole will of the designer.

Bruno Latour and Joerges remind us that politics is not that simple because one cannot determine a priori the agents intervening in the disputes and the controversies that finally result in an action of power.²⁴ In this sense, not only does the power of things not lie in themselves,²⁵ but politics itself "is not some essence, it is something that moves, it is something that has a trajectory . . . 'political' is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or procedure, but it is what qualifies a *type of situation*."²⁶

What type of this sort could frame the action of design? Based on Latour's view, if we want to assess the problem about the relation between things and humans, we cannot reduce politics to its traditional narrow space—that of national sovereignty and parliamentary deliberation—which are just some particular forms of political arrangement. Between the emergent associations of elements that inform new fields of dispute—the minimal form of politics that Latour calls "political-1,"²⁷ to the naturalization of a variety of different governmentalities, its most general form, "political-5"²⁸—politics appears in multiple ways, linking human and nonhuman actors in assemblages of a very different nature. This cosmopolitics, as Latour calls it, following the work of Isabelle Stengers, must be understood as the opposite of the postmodernist stance that "everything is political," which is the most depoliticizing effect of the radical constructivism that Winner denounces in his sharp critique on STS. Aware of this, Latour asserts that the aim of cosmopolitics is not to avoid political stance but to uncouple the political relation of science and humans, actors, and technologies from the "vast Dome of already assembled democratic politics," those of sovereignty ("political-3") and legislative deliberation ("political-4").²⁹

22 Bernward Joerges, "Do Politics Have Artifacts?," *Social Studies of Science* 29, no. 3 (1999): 411–31.

23 Langdon Winner, "Upon Opening the Black Box and Finding It Empty: Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Technology," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 18, no. 3 (1993): 362–78.

24 Bruno Latour, "Turning Around Politics: A Note on Gerard de Vries' Paper," *Social Studies of Science* 37, no. 5 (2007): 811–20.

25 Joerges, "Do Politics Have Artifacts?," 414.

26 Latour, "Turning Around Politics," 814.

27 *Ibid.*, 815.

28 *Ibid.*, 817.

29 *Ibid.*, 816.

The fundamental aspect of the act of designing together in this basic dimension of the political, portrays an association of human and nonhuman elements in dispute—namely, political-1. Aside from *how open* the design process is to citizen participation and *how real* the chances are of influencing the final decision, and before the question about what to design, the emergence of a public opens the possibility of imagining a new form of assembling agents—agents who were previously distant or whose relationships were hidden behind the institutionalized definition of “the possible.”

Seen through the work of Cornelius Castoriadis,³¹ the imagination component in design thus acquires an instituting dimension that is capable of producing an “autonomous order,” that is to say—subversive toward heritage as it is situated in history. Far from building strictly *ex nihilo* or merely iterating from previously open possibilities, those who imagine—or participate in the design process, in this case—have the power of making anew, beyond the question about right or wrong deeds that is limited by the choices of free market and the imperatives of neoliberal governmentality. Castoriadis understands imagination similarly to “a power of creation, a *vis formandi*, immanent to human collectivities as well as to individual human beings,”³² which we can interpret in a double dimension of both creative framing and concrete “product” creation, an approach that we will use henceforth due to its political potential.

One of the most important premises in Castoriadis’s thinking is this relation with the “nothingness” that could be regarded as a condition for creation. For the Greek French philosopher, the imagination process comes *before* the distinction between the real and the unreal or the “fictitious”; thus, the institutionalization that comes along the imagination process may be done “out of nothing” but is not in any circumstance a creation “in nothing or when there is nothing: they [the institutions] do not develop in a void but into a context of being.”³³ In this sense, one can think of the foundations of the design process quickened by “significations [that] refer neither to reality nor to logic,”³⁴ but that are aware at the same time of the bare existence of historical, political, and social conditions. In the ontological indetermination of these significations—which Castoriadis calls “social imaginary”—one can trace the design and political ability for creation toward a renewal of “possibilizing and actualizing” the lives and environments of human beings.³⁵ To the degree that participation in design is open to this symbolic and semantic indetermination, it can help to reframe the political possibilities and the boundaries of the political/design community.

30 Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.”

31 See Cornelius Castoriadis, *L’Institution Imaginaire de la Société* [The Imaginary Institution of Society] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975).

32 Cornelius Castoriadis, “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads,” in *Figures of the Thinkable* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 72.

33 Mads Nygaard Folkmann, *The Aesthetics of Imagination in Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 192.

34 Castoriadis, “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads,” 73.

35 Folkmann, *The Aesthetics of Imagination in Design*, 194.

This instituting dimension of political imagination counters the ability to dismantle a particular regime of the possible or the sensible, already imagined by others. Jacques Rancière reminds us that democracy is not only the declaration that we are all equal or that we can afford self-determination, but mostly it is about having the power to “undo all partnerships, gatherings and ordinations.”³⁶ Determining who has the competencies to speak over this common (battle) ground is a key issue in this process, one that has particular importance in the imagination that comes with every design activity. Although he focuses his analysis in the artistic field, Rancière states that “the system of forms that determine *a priori* what would be experienced” is nothing but “a delimitation of the times and spaces, of the visible and the invisible, of the word and the noise, of that which defines, at the same time, the place and the dilemma of politics as a form of experience.”³⁷ This “aesthetic regime” of politics, the regime “for the indetermination of identities, for the delegitimation of the positions of speech, for the deregulation of the partitions of space and time,”³⁸ is one we can call democratic. The “sensitive delimitation of the common of community, of the forms of its visibility and its order,”³⁹ becomes the core feature in the relation between design—a very pragmatic and concrete form of aesthetics—and the politics of democracy.

In this sense, participation in the design process appears to be a manifestation of what Rancière (while questioning himself about the fate of politics in the contemporary world) calls “specific form(s) of subjectivization.” In it, participants produce a dissentient reconfiguration of that “division of the sensible whereby domination imposes the sensible evidence of its legitimacy.”⁴⁰

For Rancière, within that kind of subjectivization—capable of instituting or dismantling beyond the limits of previous governmental sensibility—democracy operates like a paradoxical power “of those who have no ‘entitlement’ to exert power.”⁴¹ It is precisely that paradoxical power that can overcome the limitation in most design processes—the *what* decided beforehand by the authority—and assemble a new proposal in which all agents involved (including nonhumans like streets, public spaces, or projected buildings or objects) acquire a new political dimension, one potentially disruptive regarding the one imagined initially.

Design Participation as Political Imagination: Controversy around a Design Problem

Here we introduce a case study of design participation where conflict arises and the design process is broken due to antagonistic political views of the issue that is about to be addressed. With this case study, we illustrate and expand on the idea that political imagination has both an instituting and a dismantling dimension

36 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 32.

37 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 8.

38 *Ibid.*, 9.

39 *Ibid.*, 13.

40 Jacques Rancière, *Aux Bords du Politique* [On the Shores of Politics] (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 17.

41 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2000), 79.

and that it can produce autonomous orders where there were none just as it can undo agreements and disassemble social and spatial structures.

We have conducted institutional and case study research on public space production in Chile, questioning to what extent design participation methods and views involve—and eventually bring together—creative and political approaches to design participation and to the design problem posed to the collective. Even though design participation culture in Chile is still weak and lacks a sound institutional architecture,⁴² some experiences are worthy of examination. Due to legal definitions, for almost two decades urban planning processes have involved participatory experiences, most of them related to consultation without further involvement of the community in actual design or policy making.

Our case study is part of a recent program that has intended to take citizen participation from “informing and consultation” to “partnership,” in Arnstein’s terms.⁴³ Inspired by the institutions and procedures of France’s *démocratie de proximité*,⁴⁴ in 2006 the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (MINVU) created Quiero mi Barrio (PQMB), which is an urban recovery program aimed at developing processes of design that involve citizen grassroots organization during the imagination, deliberation, and decision-making stages.

It is relevant to briefly reflect about the rationale behind PQMB and what inspired it. The program’s methodology is a framework for the deployment and movement of designing actors, strictly setting the procedures (the *how* of design) and the limits of collective imagination and decision making. The fact that the *how* is determined beforehand by the authority remains a critical issue for this program and helps explain the development of the design process.

French sociologist and political scientist Yves Sintomer characterized *démocratie de proximité* as a public administration modernization process, which fosters the idea of opening a dialogue between citizens, politicians, and technicians. Dialogue is led mainly through debates at the local level, which are not deliberative processes in a strict sense. In other words, this model keeps the monopoly of decision making in the hands of the elected representatives (*élus*).⁴⁵ The main spaces designed for this public dialogue are the neighborhood and city councils created in 2002, *conseils de quartier*, who develop citizen participation and are consulting bodies to the mayor.

PQMB’s methodology sets up a process where blighted neighborhoods are subject to state intervention through a participatory process. After appraisal and choice of the neighborhood, inhabitants are summoned to create a new organization called Neighboring Development Council (CVD for its Spanish acronym), which is meant to partner with the ministry and municipal teams

42 Daniel Opazo, “Creating and Appropriating Urban Spaces—The Public versus the Commons: Institutions, Traditions, and Struggles in the Production of Commons and Public Spaces in Chile,” in *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*, ed. Mary Dellenbaugh et al. (Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2015), 117–29.

43 Sherry Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): 216–24.

44 Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Yves Sintomer, “Gestion de Proximité et Démocratie Participative,” [Proximity Management and Participatory Democracy] *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* [The Annals of Urban Research] 90 (2001): 148–55.

45 Yves Sintomer, interview by Daniel Opazo, September 16, 2015.

and is to a certain extent modeled after the *conseils de quartier*. Once the CVD is established, the deliberation and decision-making processes about recovery goals, the investment priorities, and the design criteria for the neighborhood begin. After these decisions are made, the team of experts develops design and building proposals within regular state protocols for infrastructure development, and CVD becomes a close observer of the design and construction stages.

Even while citizen organization precedes and informs design discussions in this program, most of PQMB's results could be criticized in terms of legitimacy because design responses are still mostly predetermined in the form of given spatial typologies (a square, a pedestrian boulevard, a multipurpose sports field, etc.). At the 1971 Design Research Society conference, Robin Roy criticized indirect ways of participation in which people were making choices based on what had already been decided by experts, and thus not being able to deal "with the choice of new possibilities."⁴⁶ Roy pointed this out four decades ago, and similarly in PQMB, that experts end up making most design choices before collecting input from the community—sometimes failing to investigate the uses and history of the site in search of design possibilities.

We highlight a case within the PQMB that to some degree exemplifies our argument about understanding design participation processes as possible spaces for political imagination. The case is the development of a park in the commune of Valparaíso on the central Pacific coast of Chile—specifically in the sector known as Placilla—in a wooded plateau just above the seaport and poorly connected to the city. The project began in 2007 with the constitution of the CVD and later evolved into the design process of the so-called Placilla Park, a public space of 12.5 acres that was meant to be developed in five stages.

Returning to the legitimacy issues, the constitution of the CVD in Placilla already implied a conflict. According to current CVD president Rubén Meza, the local community did not want to create a CVD because they saw it competing with the traditional neighborhood council, already established by law in every Chilean municipality.⁴⁷ Given that the process methodology demanded the creation of the CVD, the community complied, but the decision brought about a problem: considering that while the people who led the neighborhood councils were the ones forming the CVD, the councils were left without leadership and almost without activity.

Even with this initial conflict, the design process ran smoothly. The CVD worked together with the MINVU and municipal teams, devising the vision of a park that would contain programs that the community and its organizations longed for: a sports field-turned-stadium, a community center, and a family health facility.

46 Robin Roy, "Choosing the Future," in *Design Participation. Proceedings of the Design Research Society's Conference*, edited by Nigel Cross (London: Academy Editions, 1972), 21–25.

47 Rubén Meza, interview by Matías Wolff, June 1, 2015.

In the sense of our discussion, the design of the park seemed to be a “tame” problem for the municipality and the ministry: a process ran by simple protocols, with a well-known architectural program, and fairly straightforward along the bureaucratic budget procedures and schedules. Four of the five stages—including the stadium and the community center—were designed and construction completed without conflict.

Everything changed in the park’s fifth and last stage, when the Placilla community saw an opportunity to envision a long-cherished goal, namely, to be emancipated from Valparaíso and create a new commune, which would give them political and financial independence from municipal administration. The community asked MINVU to purchase an additional land plot to build a civic center within it, which was originally conceived to be the local office of the Valparaíso municipality but ultimately imagined as the cornerstone of the new territory’s city hall. While using the park as a political imagination device or platform, the community organized around the CVD and emerged a public—capable of “undoing agreements” and dismantling the structure of the design process, changing the design problem from satisfying basic needs of urban infrastructure to imagining a new “autonomous order.”

This move caused a latent conflict to resurface: the CVD’s search of a space of political representation faced fierce opposition from the municipality—the owner of the plot—which ultimately intervened in the park design by choosing the family health facility as the program for the fifth stage, even though this decision had not been considered in the participatory process. This prompted the community to quit the participatory space to question its legitimacy and protest its limitations.

The conflict between the *instituted* design elements (the urban design program and the institutions involved) and the *insti-tuting* ones (understanding the process as a chance for political independence at the local level) led the project to an indefinite halt, and its final results remain uncertain.

Nevertheless, the design process gave room for political imagination and resulted in the search for a form that embodied such imagination, which went far beyond the limits of the park’s design development. In 1971, Roy described participation processes in terms of creative disorder, asserting that people in such processes were “attempting to create today what is desired for the future by obeying the law and order of a future time.”⁴⁸ Perhaps it was a creative disorder what the Placilla community was doing, or paraphrasing David Harvey’s terms, maybe they were exercising their right to change themselves by changing the city.⁴⁹

48 Roy, “Choosing the Future,” 25.

49 David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 23–40.

Conclusion

The conflict and the development of the design process in this case study show that the common understanding of the design problem is undoubtedly political, all the more so in a participatory process. The position of designing actors as “players in a political game” is also apparent.

To think of the collective construction of the design problem as the true *what* of design also allows us to understand it in terms of being a vantage point for conceiving design participation processes as possible spaces for political imagination. This implies that a political community can view design participation as an opportunity to rethink itself in terms of its boundaries, its common goals, and its form; it also means that deliberation over the definition of a design problem may lead to forming a public and to political (and design) action.

This essay has discussed how political imagination involves instituting and dismantling dimensions. It poses a challenge to our theoretical and methodological corpuses, and the dismantling dimension may seem problematic in the context of design being understood to be the creation of something new. The challenge is to embrace the relationship between imagination and the political as the source of radical questions to practices and discourses of design—understood as assembling and disassembling agents and modes of relationship.

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