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Title
Response: Five Proposals for Participation   [Participation with a View - Response]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/52q8t7mg

Journal
Places, 12(2)

ISSN
0731-0455

Author
Klein, Stephen Marc

Publication Date
1999-01-15

Peer reviewed

Five Proposals for Participation

Stephan Marc Klein

Randy Hester's article raises necessary, important and timely issues. I would like to expand his critique of participation and suggest additional directions that participation might take to achieve its original goals of a just, equitable and humane society.

Participation as social control. In addition to the benefits Hester mentions, it is also claimed that participation can ameliorate dissatisfaction and bind users to the goals of a project or its sponsor. Unfortunately, these goals are often contrary to the interests of those affected by the project and those who will use it. Participation initiated and controlled by organizational managers can deflect participants from focusing on critical, sometimes uncomfortable (for the sponsor) issues, such as class and other differences. It can also serve (as it has in many workplaces) as a form of confessional and a means for identifying dissidents and controlling or purging them.

Participation that reinforces social inequalities. Hester points out some of the benefits of collective action, such as redressing power imbalances. However, it is important to not lose sight of the differing, conflicting interests and power imbalances that can occur within participating groups. Too often participation functions to blur these differences, and thus reinforce them.

It is important to understand who participates in or dominates the process. If participation is to address meaningful social change it must not essentialize the community but, rather, develop means for empowering the disempowered within the community and for equitably negotiating differences.

Compartmentalized participation. Despite the putative intentions of the Founding Fathers, the U.S. is not a very participatory society. Most education in the U.S., from beginning grades on up, teaches people not to participate, to accept authority and the world as it is presented. Advocates of participation in design and planning should conceptualize strategies for implementing participation that connects to every aspect of life, especially work (including the workplaces of designers and planners) and education (including education for the architecture, design and planning professions).

Most education in the U.S., from beginning grades on up, teaches people not to participate, to accept authority and the world as it is presented. This holds true for education for the architecture, design and planning professions. Proponents of participation, particularly those who teach, need to explore new pedagogies that encourage participation in decision making by students, that empower students to engage in such activities, and that motivate students to incorporate participation in their designing. In education, as in practice, process and product must be conjoined.

Participation with a view. Can there be an aesthetics, or perhaps multiple aesthetics, of participation? Projects that have incorporated participation tend to look rather ordinary, not unique. Issues of aesthetics and the symbolic power of the material world are, for the most part, missing from the discourse of participation.

Numerous studies in recent years from feminist and other perspectives have focused on the power that the built environment has to influence the thinking and actions of users, and how the environment has functioned in this capacity to reproduce inequitable social relations and support power interests. To fulfill an emancipatory agenda towards creating just and joyful environments, and not inadvertently produce a built world which undermines this agenda, proponents of participation must become concerned with formalist issues.

Participation and social imagination. Vision is often missing in the discourse of participation. If we harbor broad social goals, we need to articulate and discuss them, and then devise participatory strategies for achieving them, realizing that the social imagination is a moving target, not a fixed one.