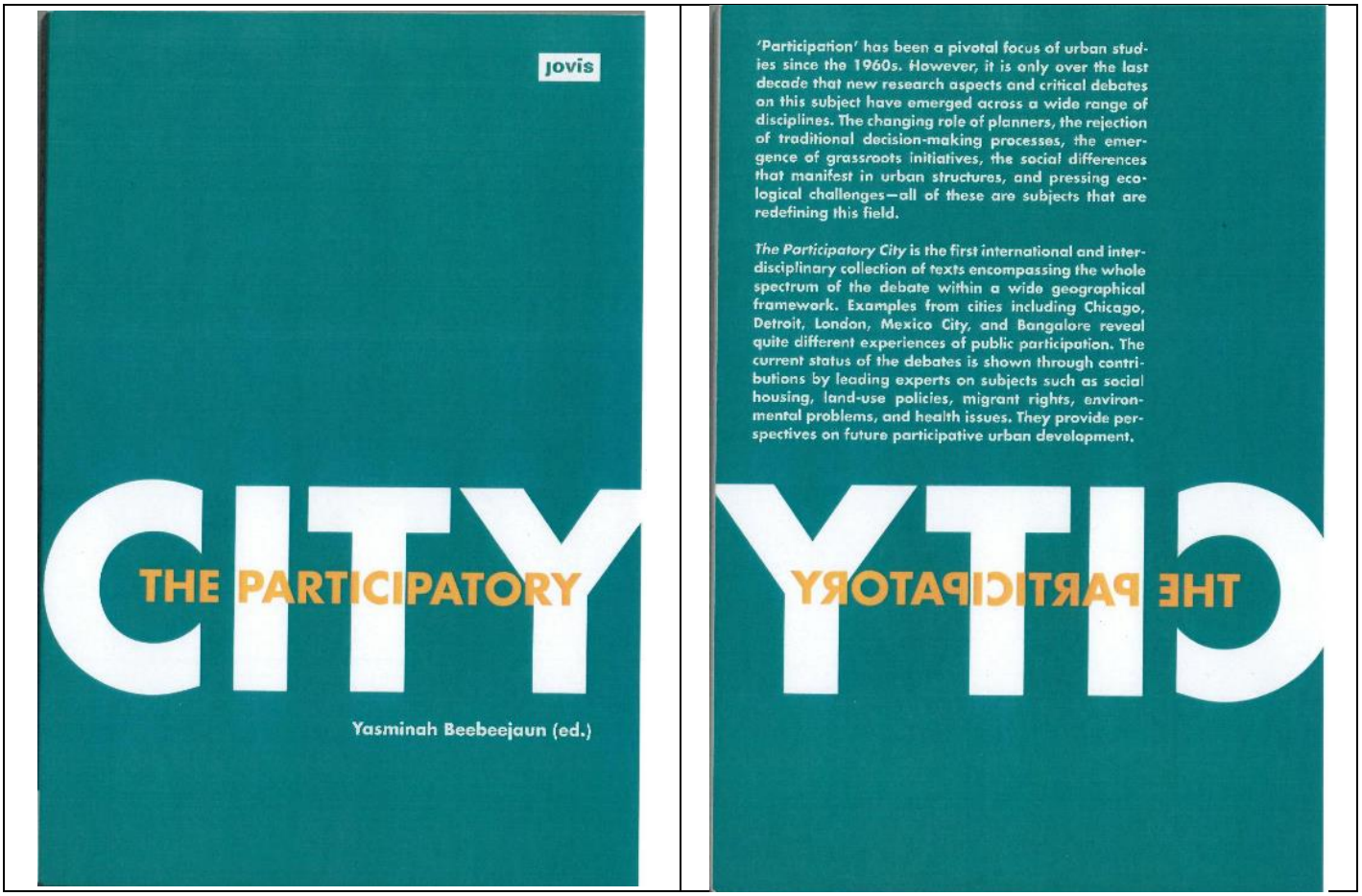
ECM-0070
The Participatory City



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Note argumentaire de la contribution

La « participation » est au cœur des études urbaines depuis les années 60. Cependant, ce n'est qu'au cours de la dernière décennie que de nouveaux aspects de la recherche et des débats critiques sur ce sujet ont émergé dans un large éventail de disciplines.

L'évolution du rôle des planificateurs, le rejet des processus décisionnels traditionnels, ainsi que l'émergence d'initiatives de base, les différences sociales qui se manifestent dans les structures urbaines et les défis écologiques pressants sont autant de sujets qui redéfinissent ce domaine.

La ville participative est la première collection internationale et interdisciplinaire de textes englobant tout le spectre du débat dans un large cadre géographique. Des exemples de Chicago, Detroit, Londres, Hong Kong, Séoul ou Bangalore révèlent des expériences très différentes de participation du public.

Abécédaire

2016 - **CHICAGO** - COMMUNITY - **DETROIT** - DIFFERENCES - ECONOMY - GENDER - GREEN SPACE - **HONG KONG** - **LONDRES** - MIGRANTS AND RIGHTS - **MONDE** - PARTICIPATION - REAL PLANS - **SÉOUL OU BANGALORE** - URBAN NATURE - URBAN PLANNING - VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Yasminah Beebeejaun

The word 'participation' has compelling imaginative force. The call for more public involvement in shaping our cities has had a wide resonance beyond academic and policy debates. There is a seductive appeal in the idea that we can co-create urban life for the better. Grassroots movements and citizen activism have directly taken control, if only temporarily, of urban spaces or agendas, demanding that their rights be heard and that they be involved more fully in decision making.[1] A select number of examples have become popularised as showing the potential for public engagement. These include many instances of resistance to urban road building from the 1960s onwards, the resident-led Coin Street redevelopment in London, and participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from the late 1980s. The idea of opposing state-led urban development and proposing community-centred alternatives has had a wide impact upon contemporary debates that reaches beyond these individual cases.[2]

Participation has expanded across numerous fields. In many ways the vagueness of the term and its capacity to encompass a diverse range of activities are part of its inherent appeal. Public involvement is seen as a 'good thing'. Conversely, promoting a 'non-participatory city' would be a surprising option. Yet the term has become increasingly elastic, and critical analyses remain limited. Whilst participation gestures towards a set of practices that are empowering and democratic, its limits and contradictions remain insufficiently explored and analysed.

Despite the wealth of literature that promotes the desirability of participation, particularly within the field of urban planning, there is no obvious consensus over the impact of public involvement upon planning processes. Inadequacies and failings within existing practices have been explored from a range of perspectives.[3] Whilst there are a number of compelling accounts of specific cases of participation, the question remains: who actually benefits in the long run? Attempts to reconfigure the role of the professional planner from that of technical expert towards that of skilled mediator able to negotiate between contested interests dominated collaborative and deliberative forms of theory from the 1980s to the 2000s. Whilst such practices may have success at specific moments, they further complicate the relationship between traditional 'expert-led' decision-making and the role of community based public knowledge.

A key challenge is the limited evidence demonstrating not only public influence but also power to shape decisions. In short, what changes when there is public participation? A range of good examples can be identified but this should not be confused with a significant movement of power towards citizens. The political scientists Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright use the term 'experiments in democracy' to explore specific examples of moments when citizens are not only able to influence public agendas but also seek to reconfigure power and create bureaucracies that draw upon grassroots forms of deliberative democracy. However, they note that such initiatives are not easily replicable but require certain preconditions in order to become successful. There must be recognition and understanding between diverse groups. Processes of building relationships and commitment are by nature time consuming; they are inherently unstable coalitions susceptible to external forces.[4]

Despite these multiple challenges and the lack of evidence of widespread success, there is still much faith in the possibilities of the promise of more locally accountable and engaged ways of shaping urban agendas. Indeed, it is all too easy to be uncritical of grassroots forms of participation and to overly praise selective examples. Success somewhere leads to attempts to transplant an example to another locale in an attempt to resolve seemingly intractable problems.

Participation without Citizen Control

The starting point for many discussions of participation is Sherry Arnstein's influential article 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation' published in 1969. Popularised as 'Arnstein's Ladder' this typology is ubiquitous within academic and policy literature. The ladder conceptualises eight levels of participation from non-participation to full citizen power.[5] Her model has become widely reinterpreted, particularly within the policy literature, as a mechanism to determine what forms of participation may work in particular circumstances. Whilst it is valuable to acknowledge that citizen input into decisions has many different guises, this reinterpretation of her typology misses the important question of

power. 'There is a critical difference', suggests Arnstein, 'between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process'.[6] Concerns about citizen power came from a context of urban renewal, the Civil Rights movement, and the urban cleansing of poor, mainly African American communities. Arnstein explored a range of programmes involving the public. Her assessment of participation centred on questions of power, race, and the legitimacy of the state and professions to decide what is best for citizens. 'In most cases where power has come to be shared it was *taken by the citizens* not given by the city.'[7] Her articulation of citizen control occurs when budgets shifted from city hall and those citizens previously lacking power became directly responsible for running programmes.

For a brief time it seemed that alternatives to centralised technical decision-making could develop and take root. Advocacy planning had emerged as an alternative idea whereby it was proposed that planners work on behalf of communities. Urban social movements such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords active in a range of North American cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s became involved in the provision of breakfast clubs, rent strikes, and staged events to draw attention to the inadequate or discriminatory nature of public services contributing to a degraded urban realm for Black and minority citizens.[8] A wider discourse emerged of a planning profession suffering a crisis of legitimacy as the idea of a singular public interest became more widely contested. Large-scale planning and urban renewal occurring during the post-war period onwards mobilised public opposition and, in certain cases, led to the redefinition of planning schemes.[9]

Grassroots participation, including collective concerns with the 'right to the city', indicates the transformative potential of the city as a sphere of alternative action. But these initiatives are in flux and subject to state and public agency rhetoric that seemingly promotes localism and other forms of citizen action whilst favouring private interests. We are witnessing an intensification of 'urban cleansing' as less affluent communities are increasingly denied the material resources to remain within 'global cities'. Within state-led urban development and planning, a re-entrenchment of economic interests has contributed to a state able to not only recapture participation but to reframe it in order to garner greater legitimacy.[10] At times participation masks the highly constrained and limited influence communities can have in decisions that directly affect them.[11] More local levels of planning may invite participation in a multitude of spheres, but at the same time the valorisation of cities as investment strategies has acted to commodify and privatise cities.[12] This gap in critical analysis is not least due to the perils in discussing the topic. Public involvement expands into an increasing number of arenas, including those traditionally seen to be the preserve of expert forms of knowledge. New technologies have played a part in expanding the possibilities of citizen involvement in initiatives with 'crowdsourcing' and 'citizen science', engaging new publics to generate new or expanded data sets. But familiar issues of power arise within this expanded terrain of participation.[13] The voice of citizens has moved into new arenas previously considered to be subject to expert knowledge as concern with nuclear energy, genetically modified foods, and other emergent technologies have demanded new public spheres of deliberation.[14] Such work exploring the divide between so-called expert and lay forms of knowledge has pointed towards the role of the community in generating alternative or locally specific forms of knowledge. Yet alongside participation the term 'community' also remains a contested and expansive concept. There has been too much emphasis on only certain parts of the city, and certain city dwellers as having value. Power relations infuse processes of public involvement, and the challenges of empowerment for marginalised citizens remain only partially addressed.

The Tyranny of Best Practice?

Within this collection of essays we reconsider the radical potential of participation: in an era when it has been appropriated by the state, where the capacity of the state itself has been weakened in the context of a shift from government to 'governance' and the rise of neo-liberal planning reforms.[15] However, this is in a different spirit from a handbook or set of lessons of various forms of participation. The quest for best practice has decontextualised accounts from the communities and places in which they are situated, seeking to deliver easily replicable toolkits of participation as if the solution was innovation and not engaging with the stark evidence of deepening inequalities, with a diverse and multiple set of publics.

This collection is divided into four sections. In the first section 'Planners and Others' we explore the potential to open up spaces for other voices in an era where trust in professionals is at a low ebb and where traditional approaches have struggled. How can planners productively engage with the challenges of working with others in a spirit of power-sharing that moves beyond tokenistic or placatory initiatives? What can we learn from the messy realities of engaging directly with planning and urban development debates? The second section 'Grassroots Urbanism' considers alternative spaces of participation championed by city dwellers. Essays consider how urban agendas are becoming redefined and the mechanisms being used to support such initiatives. The third section, which focuses upon the 'City of Difference', explores future directions for theory and practice. The reticence to engage with ethnic and racial dynamics, religion, feminism, or gender politics marks a continuing challenge for planning. The authors discuss the challenges for planning working beyond a unitary public interest that questions our role as professionals. The fourth and final section 'Citizen Science and Environmental Justices' focuses on contemporary challenges raised through technological innovation; it examines both the role of citizen science and citizen-based action and responses to new forms of technology, as the frontiers of knowledge challenge traditional account of expertise.

From different locations, standpoints, and disciplinary backgrounds, the essays tackle important questions within the participatory city. There is no sense that these are universally applicable, but a number of themes emerge from the collection. Writing in an era of rapidly changing cities, they give rise to a series of challenges for meaningful citizen involvement and power. This collection does not seek to present a forced binary between state practices as superficial actions designed to pacify the public or present grassroots action as inherently 'good'. These essays point to the challenges in working with communities and reflect on the persistent issues of power and social difference. Participation may be complex, muddled, and unpredictable, but it is worthwhile. By drawing upon a range of accounts we can open up space to explore in greater detail the challenges facing us as urban dwellers interested in transforming the cities we live in.

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