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FROM INNOVATION TO SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Abstract:

As the urban design discipline develops renewed interests in participatory design and collaborative place-making, it becomes critical to review the potential and limitations in current process to ensure a sustainable method for future development. This paper explores how collaborative design can be a key to future sustainable urban development. The process involves a multi-disciplinary collaboration and an innovative learning process by sharing ideas as well as careful consideration on social, economic and political circumstances among government and district stakeholders. This intrinsic proposition of innovative participatory planning implies interdisciplinary collaboration between professionals and local residents to integrate knowledge into new urban place-making thinking. Design innovation in contemporary society can manifest itself in the discourse sustainable urban development by application of bottom up planning and community driven design.

This paper examines the emerging design pedagogy which promotes interdisciplinary coalition of professionals and local stakeholders in community development as an innovative design rubric to create a sustainable urban approach. Through two case studies in the Asian context, this paper reviews and critically evaluates the process of how the notion of sustainable development in contemporary urban planning theory is underpinned by the collaborative design practice.

Keywords:

Collaborative Design, Design Innovation, Sustainable Development, Urban Development

Introduction

Sustainable urban development raises critical questions on current practice of how design professionals manifests itself in the discourse of culture, aesthetics, society and politics. As the discipline of urban design develops renewed interests in social responsibility associated with the call for participatory design and bottom-up planning in recent years, it becomes more critical to review the process of potential prospects and limitations in current mode of operations. There are many critiques and fallacies associated with community planning ideologies generated from the 1960's with participatory urban planning can be traced back to the concept of advocacy planning (Paul Davidoff), equity planning (Norman Krumholz), transactive planning (John Friedmann), and diverse city planning (Jane Jacob).¹ Rondolph Hester, a participatory practitioner, argued that participatory process is institutionalized.² The notion of sustainable development in contemporary urban planning theory is underpinned by the collaborative design practice. Healey defined collaboration as "the power sharing process that operates within the social system where people's identity and social relations are constructed and interrelated with each other".³ The collaborative process includes consensus building through engagement activities inviting different stakeholders to take ownership of the design. In particular, collaboration in place-making strategy is examined in this paper to understand how innovative urban planning can be an engine to drive more sustainable development. Through an analysis and a critical review of two case studies in Hong Kong, China, this paper examines the effectively on utilizing collaborative design strategies as an innovative planning mechanism for future urban sustainability.

Collaborative Design Process

Located in the Southeast coast of China, Hong Kong has a total land area of 1,106 square kilometres with a population of over 7.3 million. As one of the densest cities in the world, Hong Kong is thriving to balance existing bureaucratic government structure with new mode of urban place-making process. Collaboration in contemporary place-making process can help define common concerns over shared space among key community stakeholders and can "build up social, intellectual and political capital that transformed into a new institutional asset".⁴ Public participation can capture the "pluralism of values and knowledge in a society where preferences have not been properly captured by the technocratic bureaucracy".⁵ The inclusive dialogues embraced in public engagement can potentially shape the social space by promoting "new synergetic partnerships between stakeholders with new mode of governance that acknowledges the need to involve multiple stakeholders".⁶ This partnership further produces negotiated knowledge that is co-constructed by social actors with diversified views and priorities. Here diversity is

recognized as a form of social asset to celebrate differences and encourage a discursive mode of governance for a sustainable urban development.

Hitherto, the collaborative approach simply assumes a unified, coherent voice but few scholars (Albrechts and Denayer 2001; Brand and Gaffikin 2007; Healey 2006) have noted that this is seldom realized in practice. The main difficulties come from the stringent institutional conditions where power remains with the executive politicians. The power relationships create tensions in operating collaborative practice that paradoxically “embeds values of cohesion, solidarity and inclusivity within a world that is socially fragmented”.⁷ The collaboration between the government, the private and public sector, and other professionals in architecture and urban place-making is now considered as a standardized practice. Public participation is highly questioned in its implications in practice as the dialogues generated are considered purely a form of governmentality.⁸ The central debate raises many questions about the effectiveness of public participation in undertaking a collaborative effort and whether there should be more of engagement exercises. Indeed, collaboration during the place-making process would only be effective and sustainable where genuine and inclusive dialogues among all stakeholders are enabled in the institutional framework.

Knowledge Collaboration in Hong Kong

In this paper, two case studies were selected for comparative analysis in identifying their commonalities in collaborative design and the effect of outcomes. The overall analysis aims to show that in addressing innovation in planning through introducing collaborative design. Theories that underlie social production of space that emphasized on the inclusive process which create a praxis that draws on trans-disciplinary knowledge in initiating change are examined as well.⁹

Figure 1: Map of Hong Kong and location of the two case studies



(Source: Author)

Case Study 1: District Urban Renewal Forum (DURF) - Local Experience of Civic Conscience

In Hong Kong, a prominent example where collaborative place-making process has taken a revolutionary turn away from traditional top-down planning is the pilot District Urban Renewal Forum (DURF) launched in 2011. The first pilot DURF selected Kowloon City as a focus urban development area, one of the oldest districts in Hong Kong. This piece of old urban fabric presents dilapidated housing stocks, high unemployment rates, lack of open green spaces, ailing infrastructure, which calls for immediate attention to urban revitalization (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Dilapidated buildings in the urban context of Kowloon City require urban revitalization



(Courtesy of Kowloon City District Urban Renewal Forum)

Contrary to traditional top-down urban planning, DURF can provide a platform for active dialogues with the community and operators to identify and implement measures in addressing people's needs and aspirations. The communication within the collaborative effort aimed to build up trust and collaboration and create innovation by local wisdom. The innovation derived from collaboration explores the potential to support differences in the overall design. In particular, public participation was only recently adopted in Hong Kong in the place-making process and the mechanism is far from holistic. This form of collaboration is relatively new, which corresponds to the political changes after the 1997 handover of sovereignty. The city attempts to carry out community engagement activities proactively so that citizens can be educated to voice their views regarding city planning. The goal is to establish and foster open discussions for more innovation and to facilitate inclusive urban place-making. Although the incorporation of public participation is important as a tool to involve locals in influencing decision-making, it still lacks a sound operational mechanism for genuine empowerment.

DURF was established to create an alternative to urban design and place-making approach. The result was reported in the Urban Renewal Strategy review, the first pilot DURF adopts a "People First, District-based, Public Participatory" approach to better address community's needs and aspirations in the urban development process. This approach was able to practice a genuine public engagement exercises, which could mitigate multiple social demands and devised an innovative urban renewal process (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Collaborative design workshop in DURF programme



(Courtesy of Kowloon City District Urban Renewal Forum)

Grounded in the theories and ideologies related to collaborative urban place-making, the proposed DURF attempted to strike a balance between top-down and bottom-up powers. As Kendig and Keast suggested in *Community Character: Principles for Design and Planning*, designing with the community has positive effects on the social, economic environmental, cultural and other physical attributes that create neighborhood characters. The overall sustainability is nested in the quality urban design and innovative architecture, vibrant public space, and culture of the city.¹⁰

Evaluation on Input from Public Engagement

In De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the 'everyday practice' and 'ways of operating' or 'doing things' no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity but are instead articulated.¹¹ The public engagement exercises include focus group discussions, workshops and public forums to raise important dialogues that focus on the urban design of the built environment. Citizens' aspirations of the district, the new innovative ideas related to economic, social and political considerations were presented to formulate a Social Impact Assessment (SIA).

To realize participation as the practices, public debates helped generate innovative schema and mitigation measures to solve the incompatible problems (Figure 6). Findings from focus group research and public engagement are quite in line with aspirations and needs as discussed in public consultations. The public engagement exercise provides countless opportunities to explore sensitive issues both at the micro and macro-level. Different from typical procedures in planning, the open-ended questions provide

participants a sense of ownership in the place-making process. This helps understand in detail how district-based and place-specific problems affect the lives of ordinary citizens. The importance of a community-based approach shows innovation that are required to future sustainably of the city's development.

Figure 6: Fierce debates during participatory planning in a Hong Kong community hall



(Courtesy of Kowloon City District Urban Renewal Forum)

In relation to participation, there is a strong trend in articulating practices to move away from discussions of levels of participating and legitimacy towards an understating of the organizing, productive and reproductive work that is done when participating in the production of the built environment is a part of ongoing process of social change.¹² Moving from the background of participation, there is a paradigm shift in motivation, skills and access to resources that make up participatory practices. In this case, the comments derived from public engagement dialogues concentrate on the nuisances which can drive new ideas and innovative planning concepts.

DURF participants acknowledged their aspirations for green spaces enhancement, traffic improvement, pedestrian linkage, and street vibrancy enhancement, while recognizing the significance of pedestrian-friendly environment with attractive streetscape and urban greening. DURF architects' primary methodology was to gather first-hand stakeholder's opinion to develop a collaborative design applicable to the city's context. The possibilities offered to DURF architects were tremendous but challenges were also prominent, which

included effective mechanisms, legitimacy, clear directions and role of design professionals in engaging grassroots effort.

Figure 7 Urban Renewal Plan as a result of DURF consultation



(Courtesy of Kowloon City District Urban Renewal Forum)

Case Study 2: Kowloon East – Innovation in Urban Branding

To demonstrate how collaborative design can be cultivated in the city's sustainable planning process, Kowloon East was chosen as another case study in exemplifying the possibilities and constraints of collaborative place-making and design process in Hong Kong. The Kowloon East area is identified as a strategic growth area in transforming into the second Central Business District in Hong Kong. The area served an important manufacturing function in Hong Kong during 1960s-1980s industrialization (Figure 8). With gradual relocation of factories to Mainland China, these factories became obsolete and have gradually transformed into non-industrial uses by local artists. Within the developed neighborhood, there is insufficient green space, poor walkability and street connectivity with frequent competition of road usage among pedestrians and road traffic. The waterfront is also not enjoyable for public usage with its previous use as loading and unloading area. To promote better land utilization within the neighborhood, the Energizing Kowloon East Office (EKEO) was set up in 2012 to steer, supervise and monitor the transformation of Kowloon East into a strategic district that supports commercial need via urban planning and design strategies (Figure 9).

Figure 8 Manufacturing industries were the economic pillar in Hong Kong during the 1960s – 1980s. Most factories were located in Kowloon East



(Source: Author)

Figure 9 Energizing Kowloon East Office (EKEO) was set up to activate urban transformation in Kowloon East



(Courtesy of EKEO)

Taking advantage of existing industrial heritage and past economic success from previous industrial development, this new EKEO set up provides an important design direction in continuing the city's unique identity in urban place-making and sustainable development. Few innovative design approaches were adopted to ensure the city development is economically viable, diversified and sustainable. Some of the key factors that are attributed to innovative sustainable development are highlighted below:

- Connectivity – to apply green transportation mode that links up the area and enhance pedestrian connectivity. Extensive environmentally friendly circulation between inland and waterfront areas should be provided;
- Branding – to transform citizen's perception of an old industrial area into a new image through urban design. The land uses is restructured for streetscape enhancement. As a result, the area is branded as a new premier Central Business District or an international hub for offices creation;
- Design – to promote more greening of landscape and incorporate place-making urban design elements to enhance identity and walkability, such as logos, signage directions as well as create more street furniture;
- Diversity – to develop the area into a multi-purpose urban area accommodating diversified functional uses catered for day time and night time activities among urban dwellers, including businesses, tourism, leisure and culture purposes;

Since the inauguration 2012, EKEO has been taking a leading role in gathering stakeholders across different sectors to express their views and organizing a series of events to raise public's involvement in promoting sustainable development. The role of EKEO is not only to coordinate different community sectors to direct financial and manual input in fostering district transformation in face of complicated land use characteristics to

generate innovative ideas that will make the best rational use of public space that maximizes the need of public and private sectors. Through its effort as a coordinator, it fosters a sense of partnership and develops a platform for all community actors to get a chance in steering the project to move onwards through collective knowledge, wisdom and effort.

Sustainable Outcome from Innovative Engagement Activities

Figure 10: Collaborative community workshop for urban branding and place-making



(Courtesy of EKEO)

Figure 11: Conceptual Master Plan – a branding vision for Energizing Kowloon East



(Courtesy of EKEO)

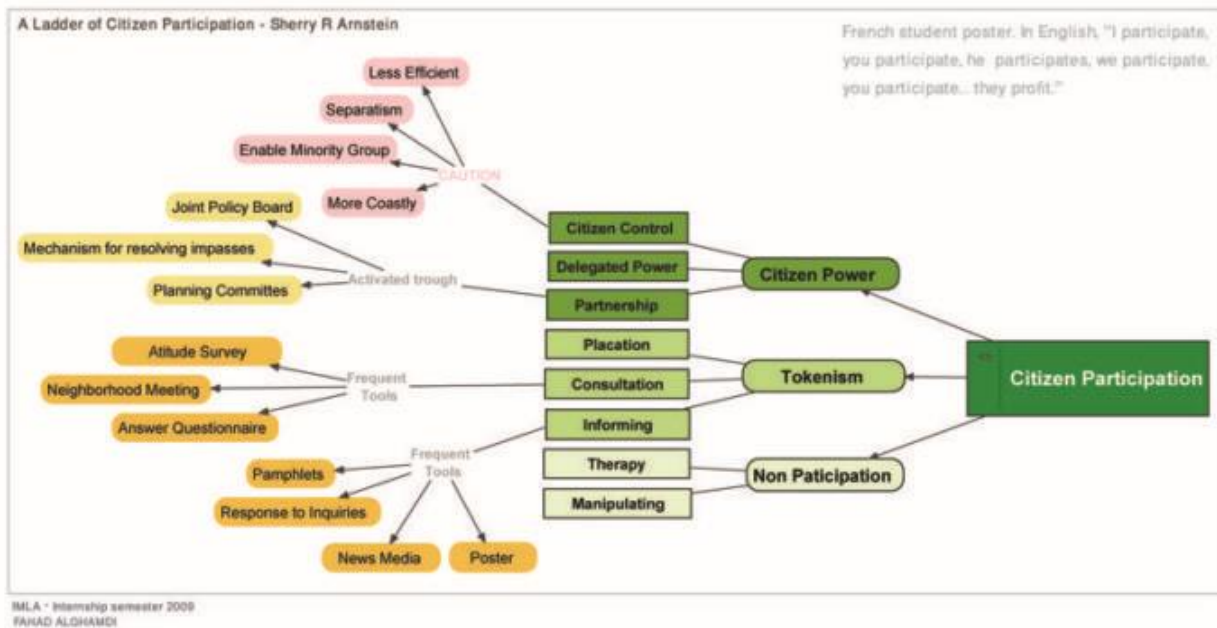
Through a series of public participation activities and attempts to encourage broad base involvement of local community sectors, innovative inputs offered feedback on the design direction, branding and urban development proposals. Collaborative synergy is gathered through public forums, workshops, seminars and exhibitions. Participants included residents, business parties, architects, surveyors, engineers and planners had all identified district branding as the key to establish urban identity. Some specific implementation included a conceptual Master Plan for the districts which already received multiple revisions since launched (Figure 11). Other place-making innovation included branded open spaces into a pioneer Industrial Heritage Park showcasing Hong Kong's history through landscaping, encouraging public arts, artifacts having industrial characteristics or displaying physical products related to industrial businesses (Figure 12). The collaborative planning visions transformed unattractive urban spaces underneath the flyover along the promenade into an active cultural performance venue (Figure 13). The notion of urban branding becomes a new innovation in this urban regeneration generating unattractive community into future sustainable leisure hubs.

Figure 12: Proposed Industrial Heritage Park featuring artifacts related to urban industries



(Courtesy of CPW)

Figure 13: Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation



Comparative Analysis and Critique – How Collaborative Design Sustains Urban Development

While critically evaluating the two case studies, questions emerged on the effectiveness of collaborative planning. While some existing urban problems can be addressed through collaborative design, new concerns associated with the collaboration process arise. In DURF, the proposals have provided broad imagination and measures. With reference to Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Fig.13), despite government's effort, it is easy to realize that Hong Kong's public participation continues to remain at the tokenistic stage. Initially, the DURF is responsible to carry out people-centered urban renewal, but its role in the process remains ambivalent. The pilot DURF program conducted lengthy outreach exercises, which includes questionnaire surveys, neighborhood meetings and public engagement generated an overwhelming amount of information that are not all necessarily considered in the place-making process.¹³

The lag produced from the excessive time spent to consult the public has placed enormous time-cost in the design process. The DURF Masterplan, guided by appointed officials in every place-making stage, is submitted to the Government only for consideration. The lack of implementation power easily characterized the program as ill-defined and time-consuming, while actual implementation still relies on the private sector. Even though the dialogues generated from public engagement exercise has helped officials better understand people's needs, but oftentimes, the local knowledge inputs are neglected in the final decision-making processes. The genuine empowerment of local

knowledge is challenged and professional knowledge still overrides the subjective knowledge of the layman in the place-making process. Power remains with government officials and professional knowledge helps legitimize the hegemony of the executive-led government.

Second, the wealth of knowledge generated from dialogues of public engagement exercises is not amplified to unleash the potential of the pilot DURF framework. Community participation in outreach activities often fails to meet initial aspirations and the local community has often been a very subordinate partner in the process.¹⁴ In reality, satisfying all stakeholders and reaching a consensus in the place-making process is difficult, the case of DURF demonstrated that key citizen needs and aspirations were ignored in the Masterplan.¹⁵ For example, the mitigation measures only provide broad indicative proposals that do not address the needs of related businesses from the residential neighborhood, demonstrating insincere efforts to truly foster a people-centered model for urban renewal in the city.

A holistic sustainable development requires a comprehensive plan to carry out social renewal in urban regeneration. The mitigation measures should focus on the physical redevelopment, while balancing existing social conditions of the community. Another critique on DURF was the paradox between the top-down place-making process and the “People First, District-based, Public Participatory” renewal. Public engagement provides an important platform for stakeholders to voice their viewpoints; however, the process of engaging is “productive in defending exclusionary groups than in promoting the public good”.¹⁶ Citizen participation “is often used to satisfy mandated requirements and is not intended to fully engage the public”.¹⁷ Hence, DURF’s public participation exercises display the bureaucratic nature of the Government, which is, to an extent, arguably a form of governmentality to govern its citizens.

In the second case study, the urban branding as social innovation approach employs managerial based place marketing for image building, communication and identity construction. It is common to use visual aids and public events to create competitive advantage of a city over the others. Though the case paid much effort in enhancing the spatial components of branding through providing landscaping and infrastructural support, however, non-spatial components on civic enrichment of social structure are clearly lacking. The CBD2 brand is being defined and confined in initial stage, instead of being built up through a collaborative process. Place brand is a network of associations in customers’ minds based on verbal, visual and behavioral expression of a place, which embodies through aims, communication, values, culture of stakeholders.¹⁸ Branding is a nonlinear process which consisted of complex web of intertwined, simultaneous processes through coordination.¹⁹ Clearly, EKEO engagement activities were passive acts in participatory place branding, which were held after planning directions were established. Without genuine adaptation of local knowledge in initial stage, it defines

which interest groups are prone to be benefited while displaces existing social practices through branding existing neighborhood characteristics superficially. Despite the plan is said to be subjected to modification, ideas are only selectively endorsed by officials without face to face negotiation with residents.

Though the EKEO stressed that CBD2 development is different from London Canary Wharf development in which a single authority has complete control over the development process, it admits the process is wholly market driven through timely input and facilitation by government infrastructure provision and policy support. It also claims its community engagement events were comprehensive enough which enabled gauging a mix of knowledge and experience to develop Kowloon East holistically and competently. However, in reality there were only a handful of place-making workshops for residents in brainstorming visions and ideas on a predetermined concept plan. Other forums or sharing sessions mostly target professionals like architects, planners, designers and engineers of business parties to join, which focuses on forward planning about future place-making strategies in branding a commercial hub, instead of learning experience from others to cater existing urban fabric at the same time. In this context, local knowledge therefore is being disregarded at initial stage in developing broad planning principles.

While participatory efforts gather public momentum in hoping to innovate changes and serve as a driving force in creating sustainable development, current fragmented views in the society revealed social discontent and distrust towards the government. Therefore, in the theoretical review, the dichotomy in achieving need, contribution to common good and merit does not often results in the emergent of crisis management. In the case of EKEO, it is undoubtedly to a certain extent streetscape improvement, accessibility enhancement, with the beautification of promenade and playground can enhance environmental and social benefits for the general public, there are also concerns on a more regulated environment on future public open space usage. For example, though the underneath flyover space is allocated for performance, the cultural groups complained the complicated administrative procedures, incomprehensive supportive structures and stringent performance restrictions had undermined freedom of space usage. The Kowloon East transformation mostly benefits business sectors as job opportunities created by upper class commercial offices might not be suitable for surrounding residents depending on the education level or skills required. The industrial heritage identity being symbolized by putting historical machinery artifacts along the waterfront loosely creates connection with local collective memory. Together with local cultural groups claiming the erosion of surviving space brought by a planned environment, the above three aspects are likely to be challenged for any genuine move for sustainable urban development.

Conclusion

For Hong Kong, the new way for sustainable urban planning and urban place-making sees a new paradigm shift in the practice of participation. Participatory place-making encourages different stakeholders to voice their concerns, needs and aspirations in the final design. However, such strategy tends to neglect the latent problems within a place. The city now lacks an authentic system of local governance that truly responds to the needs of a sustainable development. The participation in place-making practices in Hong Kong will not work until an effective institutional mechanism at the local level is introduced to allow room for genuine collaboration between stakeholders and decision-makers.

Degree of planning collaboration in Hong Kong remains at consultative level. It is designed not to facilitate real dialogue exchange but to play a significant role in legitimizing policy process especially when governance is dominated from a top-down perspective. The consultative process is usually featured with publicity campaigns that involve in-print or electronic announcement, leaflet dissemination or publication as well as talks, roving exhibitions and public forums organization. Nonetheless, the collaboration process is carefully staged by relevant officials who have set out all agendas and policy plans while incorporating community's feedback selectively. Notwithstanding how the public sees the effectiveness of the actions, the collaboration process is undeniably becoming the norm of practice with the policy environment indicating that it will be a risky political act to continue exercising decision making from a top-down perspective.

The above two cases only illustrate community involvement in Hong Kong's place-making is an emerging praxis in architectural practice while the government begins to provide multiple platforms for public to innovate as an urban planning process. This learning, therefore, not only applies to other governments in initiating changes to move away from elitism at the starting point of planning process, but also to awaken community's role in voicing their concern logically and systematically. Not only the governments should learn from other countries in urban branding, but also ways of conducting bottom-up collaborative planning. On the hand, rather than taking a hostile attitude to confront or boycott against a government, more productive result could be achieved when locals contribute their knowledge into the design process. Professionals are facilitators to build up arguments and ideas by identifying commonalities and differences from both sides. While trying to expand design innovativeness on agreeable issues, more efforts should be played in breaching the planning and design gap among conflicting ideas. New solutions formed under mutual negotiation and idea exchange would undeniably a product of common learning process to address most peoples' concerns. Though there might still be imperfections and it is a time consuming process in every stage, however, this would be a fundamental action to rebuild community's confidence towards the local government regarding how it views innovation in sustainable development and that

collaborative methodologies can become the new design rubric to ensure future sustainability.

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