

Article

Community participation – hope and reality

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Introduction

The arguments presented here centre on attempts to forge local architectures that are appropriate. These efforts are rooted in the view that buildings do not simply reflect the societies in which they are produced; that they are not necessarily passive images of what is, of how people live presently. To the contrary, via its material presence as embodied human action, architecture can and does speak of what could be, of how people might live. Appropriate architectures must, then, help to shape, to educate social desire. They can, by virtue of their substantive existence, be read as indicators of possible futures.

This is far from being solely a matter of formal style, of architectural aesthetics. In the 19th century, engineers and architects were called on to accommodate new social relationships in the new building types they designed – factories, railway stations, public libraries. So, South African designers are now summoned to apply their knowledge and skills to the new spatial demands of their irrevocably transforming society. Both social content and physical form are at stake.

In confronting these expectations, designers are pressed to work closely with the immediate users of the buildings they design; with, in the instances discussed in this paper, local communities. In short, the new spatial forms that professionals propose are to be embedded in the participatory processes – perfunctory or otherwise – by which they must be produced.

The term 'community' has come to permeate everyday talk in South Africa. Like the frequently associated, also oft-used, terms 'development' and 'participation', the notion of community can seldom be defined readily. Depictions are characteristically diffuse, imprecise (eg Williams 1988:75-6 and 102-104). The meanings attributed to them, while commonly acknowledged, are not necessarily agreed on widely, let alone universally.

On one issue, however, there appears to be a considerable degree of consensus: an urgent need, in South African developmental activities since 1994, for community, for public, for people's participation.

Under the apartheid regime, development – or, more accurately, the impoverished simulation of those distorted decades – was imposed directly or via leaders who had been chosen by official, usually government, agencies. Consulting with, let alone inviting, 'the people' to participate in their futures was scarcely part of the reigning perspective. Development focused principally on providing minimal services and facilities from above; it was an exercise in engineered, in tightly manipulated consent. Community participation via appointed 'leaders,' usually black, was a thinly veiled guise for white political, economic, social and individual domination.

At least in the current rhetoric that has changed: negotiation – often via community leaders – is advocated as a prerequisite. Even direct involvement – ie, not necessarily mediated through leaders – is upheld. Now, the argument runs, development should enable people to enhance their autonomy, to exercise their abilities to act independently in social and productive life.

So, in architectural and planning projects that deal with health, housing, education and similar welfare matters, community involvement is said no longer to be optional. It is posited as a founding constituent of building programmes. Indeed, institutions funded by central government – like the recently revamped Independent Development Trust (IDT) – have made financial support conditional on participatory practices.

Dilemmas encountered in implementing practices of this type on large-scale projects have been reported in, for example, Friedman's study (1993) of community engagement in what he referred to as 'the politics of negotiated development' and in Bremner's analogous account (1994) of 'development and resistance' at Phola Park, near Johannesburg. A research colleague and I have presented analyses of the more limited enterprises with which we were involved (Lipman and Harris 1998). Our attention centred on the then IDT-funded Aha Setjaba Primary School at Tumahole, near Parys, and, later, on the Workers' Library in Newtown, Johannesburg. This paper reports a further instance, the new premises for the Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies at Somkhele in northern Kwa-Zulu Natal. Before that, however, I shall touch briefly on three related notions, each of which is central to my overall argument.

Participation, experts and communicative action

When interviewed as prospective architects to the primary school project, my associate and I were not informed as to what was expected of us vis-à-vis designer participation with the local community or, indeed, with the teaching staff, parents and pupils.

After our appointment had been confirmed, we learnt from the tersely formulated eight 'criteria for the selection of professionals' prepared by the IDT that we were required to be 'willing ... to engage in the community empowerment process', to 'bear the community's interest at heart', to have had 'experience of ... community involvement' (IDT undated: 1). We did not query these somewhat pious generalities. Having studied and worked abroad in this field, mostly in Europe, we assumed – wholly erroneously as it turned out – that our experience would transfer aptly to the seemingly similar circumstances in which we were now to operate.

Development, we learnt, should be about creating social environments in which people can make informed choices. Effective community involvement is crucial because, it is claimed, people are enabled, via participation, to make choices that will improve their lives. Communities must, as a necessity for this shared involvement, be informed about their options and the anticipated consequences of their decisions. Successful participation results in 'capacity building', in 'people empowerment'. The beneficiaries of such projects become active in planning, implementing and managing their continuing, increasingly effective development. They become active participating subjects rather than passive regulated objects. Such a process should result in a sense of group and individual ownership, self-reliance and enhanced dignity. These admirable, wholesome, goals are predicated on the specialist expertise which some – not least, the experts themselves – are held to place at the service of potentially participating communities.

In his sceptical, not to say irreverent, booklet *Strip the Experts*, Brian Martin (1991:11) notes that all powerful groups have experts at hand to justify the power they exercise. Most experts – architects included – are servants of power (Hoare and Smith 1976:3-23). By virtue of their social positions, specialised education and, particularly, the specialist knowledge on which they call, professional designers wield power. They take decisive decisions for others.

Schmidt (2000) presents instances of these phenomena that range across the professional occupations active in contemporary science, industry,

commerce and public life. His examples exemplify Johnson's (1979) theoretically grounded explications – expressly, in the context of this discussion, the latter's notions of collegiate control of and/or by professionals. In short, both these studies fly in the face of Mannheim's (1966) ideal of 'free-floating intellectuals' as applied to modern professional groupings or of Halmos's claims for a pervasively benign 'ideology of the personal service professions' (1970). In similar vein, they do not endorse Arnstein's (1969) message that 'citizen participation is citizen power'; her contention that 'it is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future'.

That is hope indeed: a vision of community participation in building design and construction as an engine of more equitable power distributions than those prevailing currently. It is a vision that colours much of the literature on the subject – from, for example, Fathy's pioneering work in Egypt (1973), to Relph's persistent advocacy (eg, 1986) and the implicit or explicit prospects in the material on which Sommer (1979) and, later, Sanoff (2000) founded their respective analyses.

In his challenging argument, Martin (1991:6) urges that decisions be made directly by those concerned and, of crucial significance, on the basis of free and open dialogue. Knowledge is vital, it should be accessible to all. Yet much expertise is so specialised, so esoteric, that it is primarily, or only, useful to fellow experts and, possibly, some of their patrons. For would-be community architects, tensions between potential participatory involvement and privileged societal location is, I contend, inherent and frequently disabling. In South Africa, some relief may lie in seeking directly to confront the gaps – principally the alienating cultural fissures of race, gender and class – that stand between hope-filled practitioners and the often romanticised, the frequently patronised, 'community'.

In this context, critical social theorists (eg, Gouldner 1976 and Habermas 1979) have, for over 20 and more years, furnished conceptual frameworks within which to confront the issues surrounding public participation. Habermas, indeed, offered normative objectives against which to gauge actions. In doing so, he referred to the 'background consensus' under which participants can 'rely on a shared definition of the situation and thereupon act consensually'.

Briefly, he argued that rational discourse, meaningful dialogue – the *sine qua non* of participation – presupposes a shared understanding of the

various roles played by the participants. It is underpinned by a mutuality of interest that is rooted in a common desire to resolve relevant issues. These arise from differing expectations, opposing interpretations, contending demands. Such a discourse is, ideally, to be grounded in the unprivileged character of speech acts: all statements from all participants are to be weighed using the same, mutually understood conditions of adequacy and claims of validity – 'there is a common conviction that any validity claims raised are either ... already vindicated or ... could be vindicated because the ... utterances satisfy corresponding adequacy conditions' (Habermas 1979:4). Idealistic though they patently are, these exacting conditions offer a template for social analysis. At Aha Setjaba the participatory project failed – the community was profoundly partitioned by entrenched warring political factions. Even minimal consensus was, and remained, absent. Rational discourse had been pre-empted. The school buildings now stand as relics of an unresolved set of design ideas, expectations, hopes. At the Workers' Library, an impressive degree of mutual understanding existed. This reworked historic building – a crumbling remnant of racist exploitation – became a functioning entity as well as a legible record of those shameful, apartheid-conditioned times.

In what follows, I report another, possibly more enduring, instance of that, but having a partially hopeful outcome – the Somkhele project in the Hlabisa area of northern KwaZulu-Natal. In doing so, I shall draw extensively on the data recorded in the regular three-monthly reports which I submitted to my research sponsor, the director of the centre. Throughout the enterprise, he was or he represented the authority – the financial and intellectual power – that governed the project.

The centre – funded since 1998 by the Wellcome Trust in London – was instituted to conduct and co-ordinate demographic research in the surrounding district. It is a joint venture of the South African Medical Research Council and the two universities in the city of Durban. Work at the centre focuses on gathering longitudinal information about the 80,000 people who live in this distinctly rural area. Its intricate surveillance systems provide a platform for logging health and social change in that population.

This largely demographic kernel of study depends on continued participation by members of the neighbouring communities and, not least, the councillors who serve under iNkosi Mkhwanazi, the regional chief. Their support has been as essential to the centre's existence as it was in

securing the extensive tribal land for and agreement to build the complex. People, particularly the 100 or so women drawn from the local administrative zones, have served as the field workers without whom the project could not have survived. Their pragmatic work is the basis of the analytical enquiries carried out by the scientific staff.

Participation as open dialogue

The signs were not auspicious. My spell as designated observer in the processes of building the new Africa Centre was marked by actual and potential threats to consensus. A central example: in mid-1999 the newly appointed director, on being asked for his views of the then building plans, described them as symbolising the 'social pathology' of the institution. That was possibly – no, probably – too forthright a response to the pre-construction sketches that he was shown. They constituted the architects' drawings that were, at the time, the agreed basis for signing the building contract and proceeding immediately with the imminent building complex.

Where the sketches indicated an entrenched division of research fields in weakly linked, self-sufficient blocks of cellular accommodation, the director argued for a spatially open yet compact layout; one in which the staff of this quasi-academic centre would be encouraged to mingle, to coagulate as a 'community of scholars'. Where the plans were rooted in functional separation, he sought contingent integration. Where the drawings suggested discrete sets of research operations, he pressed for interspersed, freely communicating scientific and administrative personnel. All were to be assigned work-stations in so-called open-plan office layouts; a proposal that gave rise to searching discussion and, on many occasions, hotly outspoken disagreement. Chiefly on the director's forcefully sustained initiative, the initial plans were abandoned.

Later, when the staff had moved into the now completed, freshly designed accommodation, the furore of 'validity claims' stirred by the misnomer 'open plan', was demonstrated to have been baseless, or an expression of other, unarticulated, fears. At Somkhele, the senior research personnel who had been the most vociferous in their opposition to the re-planned project, found themselves located among no more than 25 others. Moreover, each of these groups was subdivided by inner, heavily planted courtyards. A far cry, as a newly convinced researcher said, from the envisaged open spaces containing regimented rows of desks to which she and her co-workers had objected.

The director's, and similarly freely expressed often directly opposing, views were incompatible with those who did not share his firmly interactive vision; expressly, perhaps, to those who had steered the intricate, time-consuming processes of acquiring a site, briefing the architects and, eventually, accepting their design. Their project – the now abandoned plans – had been on the brink of fulfilment; indeed, the completed construction documents had gone to contractual tender and the recommended contractor was ready to start on site. The meetings at which these views were debated, and then re-debated, were occasionally gusty with dissent from many, but not all, senior members of staff; who, given the entrenched biases of apartheid, were mostly white. Their predominantly black, usually subaltern, co-workers were silent or simply did not attend. Three centuries of South African history had not been, could not be, casually expunged.

Nor could a number of other impediments to Habermas's portrayal of rational discourse. These ranged from difficulties in understanding fellow participants in a country that has 11 official languages, to the pronounced cultural gaps between urban and rural, between so-called 'western' and 'tribal', between more and less technically sophisticated personnel, and between practised administrators and lower echelon staff for whom managerial responsibilities were and remain alien.

That, in summary, was the situation in the internal community of the Africa Centre: an often tense state of contending interpretations of the preferred organisation structure and future. Outside, in the communities of the district, similar, and other possibly more exacting, conditions prevailed. They were characterised by similar barriers to 'rational discourse' but with an additional, over-riding factor. That centred on the hard-pressed indigence of a rural population in a district significantly without employment opportunities and struck by disease, including the terminal illnesses associated with the HIV/AIDS pandemic which had gripped the area. In these circumstances 'background consensus' and 'shared definitions of the situation' were necessarily channelled through the local tribal authorities.

The projected move from temporary accommodation in nearby Mtubatuba town to the marginally distant, still embryonic, Somkhele village was, not surprisingly, unwelcome to the mainly white citizenry, especially the traders of the town. On the other hand, the traditional leaders of the area, iNkosi Mkhwanazi and his councillors, were eager to house the centre – as a matter of prestige perhaps, but certainly as a promise of employment in a territory scarred by harsh, persisting destitution. Nor was it eased by the

delays that flowed from the decision to jettison the former building plans and start design work afresh.

In the event, none of these was irrevocably damaging. Fears that the centre would not come to Somkhele were probably diminished by displays and detailed explanations of the now re-cast building plans. Further, and of telling import, they seemed insubstantial in the face of discussions of how much construction work was to be carried out by members of the surrounding community. This was affirmed when the appointed building contractor moved onto the site, when construction became visible and, reportedly, widely discussed in the communities of the district.

Dissent among the senior staff at the centre dissipated less directly; indeed remnants persisted late into construction operations. Here, among others, the architects played a consistently key role. They were tireless in their explanations of the proposed plans, in offering additional clarity by producing scaled models of the intended spaces, the range of feasible furniture layouts and the items of office furniture that they were designing.

Much of this was consolidated when the site works had advanced to the point at which staff visits became practicable. These indicated that a well-founded agreement about the project, about its functional efficacy and comfortable working conditions had now developed. In Habermas's words, 'a shared definition of the situation', an interpretation of the new potential on which one might 'act consensually' was emerging – however haltingly and, for some, painfully.

Participation as community affirmation

But, as I noted earlier, community involvement in a project of this nature is not expected to be limited to instrumental acts of the type I have described here. It is also intended to enhance the capacities, self-reliance and sense of dignity of those who share in its associated practices. This was principally manifested in the activities of members of the Community Advisory Board. That body comprised elected representatives from the 'wards' in the area of the Mpukonyoni Tribal Authority. Its members – all volunteers – collaborated closely with the centre's Community Liaison Office (CLO).

This can probably be illustrated most strikingly by citing a study which members of the board carried out. The proposal was mooted at a weekend workshop in June 2000 when they responded to a list of matters on which the architects had asked for assistance. Board members did this by

undertaking collaboratively to collect the required information. That dealt largely with identifying local sources of labour, building skills and materials. A managing sub-committee was appointed and mandated to arrange the necessary distribution of research tasks. It was community participation at work on the very level that the delegates represented.

The meeting had agreed that, when its survey data had been gathered, they were to be analysed in conjunction with staff in the CLO and then presented to relevant parties as a written report. That, they said, would help ensure an equitable supply of locally based labour and materials from all wards. In addition, a verbal presentation was made at one of the centre's regular seminars. The director recorded his enthusiastic response in a note circulated among all personnel,

... we had a very rewarding scientific colloquium today in which the Community Advisory Board members presented the process by which they identified local capacity to work on the building, and results of that survey. It is clear that there is substantial local capacity to assist the Africa Centre with the building construction. Equally satisfying was to see this group of persons from the local community up in front of a large group of persons, speaking confidently (and with the use of overheads – and in two languages) about what they had accomplished.

This was, of course, a uniquely visible instance. It is, though, but one of numerous parallel, day-to-day practices. While these are probably less vivid, none is thereby necessarily less effective. To date, they have ranged wide: embracing, for example, sustained efforts to mediate in a protracted and, at times, worryingly disruptive wage dispute between the contractor and the overwhelmingly local workforce; and, to cite another instance, detailed procedures for ward support and, when called for, monitored protection for the fieldworkers attached to each of the research projects at the centre. They also include reciprocal offers from the liaison office: for instance, special workshops on education courses, on business management, on programmes that provide training in employable skills. Though these have been confined to members of the board, the information has spread via their reports to the constituents they represent.

Given these and the numerous other, perhaps more far-reaching, areas of participatory co-operation between the board and liaison office, the centre looks to become a long-term, integrated presence in the district. However, one ought not to indulge in what might be construed as undue praise of participatory action. A revolutionary transfer of power at the centre or elsewhere is, assuredly, not imminent, nor is widespread

empowerment likely to be speedy. The events at Somkhele cannot be solely characterised by smooth, unperturbed collaboration or relaxed, readily realised integration. Quite the contrary.

Consider, a case in point, the fate of the exciting labour survey proposed and executed by members of the Community Advisory Board. In the event, the opportunity for all but a minority of respondents/applicants to engage in, to be engaged for, the tasks that they had specified earlier only materialised partially. There are a number of possible explanations for this disappointing failure, each of which impinges on the 'conditions of adequacy and claims of validity' highlighted by Habermas's notion of communicative action:

- a) many respondents, when specifically approached to undertake the work they had stipulated, did not possess the experience to which they had previously laid claim: long-term unemployment throughout the district, and province, may well have induced them to state otherwise;
- b) the wages offered by the building contractor were markedly lower, building workers argued, than those that prevailed at the time in Durban: the workers sought a parity which the contractor held he could not afford;
- c) neither the contractor nor the staff of the CLO possessed the administrative resources to call effectively on respondents to appear at Somkhele on the required dates: rapid travel in the area was and remains confined to the few who can call on private transport;
- d) the contractor was, he emphasised, bound by the low prices for which he had originally tendered on the recently abandoned plans. He was, additionally, due to forfeit financial penalties should he fail to complete the works by an agreed date. Pressed for money, time and immediately accessible labour, he employed such local applicants who were available in and around the site as and when he considered that necessary;
- e) largely as a result of a prior wage dispute, relations between the local communities and the contractor were not especially cordial: in consequence, continued subtle and, on occasion, not so subtle negotiations were needed to ease that most potentially explosive of issues.

As in many, if not all participatory building projects, the gaps between hope - expectation - reality seem often to be unbridgeable. The mutually understood conditions of adequacy and the associated claims of validity to which Habermas referred so cogently seem, at worst, beyond reach; at best,

they might be perceived as maintaining an uncertain balance between hope and reality. This may be most conveniently illustrated by the differing circumstances of two newly appointed members of the centre's staff, Vusi Khoza and the person known solely to me as Mr Nkosi.

The former, a young devotee of indigenous plant life who answered the advisory board's call for landscape work, is now heading the newly formed garden maintenance team at the centre, as well as encouraging people in the neighbourhood to cultivate local plants and other marketable produce, mainly vegetables. Among the plants, he includes those used for herbal remedies by the many active *sangomas*, traditional healers, who have encountered increasing difficulty obtaining them in the ever-expanding urban areas of KwaZulu-Natal. His is a success story.

The latter, Mr Nkosi, is a carpenter who, in collaboration with a local metal-work entrepreneur, was invited to manufacture the office and other furniture the architects had designed for the centre. His sample products having been approved, arrangements were made for him to undergo further training at the Durban-based shop-fitting firm which had, until then, contracted to make and supply them. Unfortunately, he and his colleague will have to wait for this opportunity. A complex range of issues arising from local capacities – or rather incapacities – during the prolonged run-up to the move, meant that the shopfitters' contract had to be continued. Mr Nkosi, currently one of the motor-car drivers at the centre, still lives in that promise.

Regional architecture?

For some two or more decades Kenneth Frampton (1985) – one among a minority of contemporary architectural theorists who warrant serious social notice – has grappled with his periodically redefined notion of 'critical regionalism'. Architecture, he argues, is being debased to bland, corporate, international homogeneity. Downtown anywhere is much like downtown everywhere; as are the office parks, the shopping malls, medical precincts and other relative newcomers to suburbia. Architecture is being reduced to a packaged commodity. Once optimal rentals have been ensured – in the main by means of standardised building plans – design becomes a matter of choosing facade patterns from an approved range of fashionable, and thus marketable, images.

Frampton advocates resistance. He describes a variety of instances, drawn from numerous locations, in which architects and clients have sought to identify and acknowledge regional, local, often parochial forms

of expression. These designers, while remaining committed to the now world-wide processes of technological modernisation, seek to resist the consumerist uniformity commonly associated with those same processes. They seek to deploy contemporary building procedures, techniques and materials while, simultaneously, addressing localised cultures – in Frampton's phrase, 'indigenous architectures of place'. They seek, in other words, to engage critically with modern technology; to do so via self-conscious, deliberately cultivated regionalisms.

If efforts of this order are not to rest mainly in the hands of a few outstanding 'stars' in the firmament of international architectural journals – with which Frampton may all too readily be read to let matters rest – they need soon to come to earth. Given the advanced stage of individualism now regnant in industrialised societies, at least some hope of finding ways that leap beyond this impasse appears partially to lie in participatory architectural work. How that might be helped to occur is, I submit, hinted at in projects such as the Africa Centre, where the designers – EastCoast Architects – have sought to integrate local building materials, techniques and processes with contemporary methods of construction. However superficially, they have attempted to move toward participatory involvement where they have reached far, further than the mainly perfunctory gestures made by their design colleagues.

Like the technologically intricate social and epidemiological studies conducted in them, the new premises are 'western,' up-to-date, even avant-garde. They are part of a distinctive urban, worldwide continuum. In this, they contrast markedly with the rural, languid, supposedly bucolic life about them. The buildings, their concrete-framed construction and 'machined' finishes, their sophisticated electronic equipment, the precise skills which their occupants deploy, exemplify the constantly shifting flux of contemporary urban experience. Yet they sit in undeniably rustic, sylvan surroundings.

So, the architects have attempted to juxtapose 'smooth' mechanically produced, international building materials with, for instance, the 'rough' natural gum poles of the locality. They have underscored – rather than bypassed – the split inherent in the centre's chosen site; a choice that springs, of course, from the necessary propinquity of the research personnel and the rural populations they are studying. They have sought – via thoughtful, detailed building design – to make the centre recognisably local, a readily acknowledgeable part of that population's built environs.

This is consistent with the director, his senior colleagues' and the architects' predilection for community participation. That has been as evident through the months of construction as it is in the landscaping and art/decorative work, and likely to remain current over the next decade. It ranges from the building workers who were overwhelmingly drawn from the locality, to the muralists, tilers, basket weavers, carver-sculptors and others who have contributed to the project. Some, a few, have honed their new-found skills to the point of being invited to join the centre's full-time staff. Others, the majority, find themselves positioned to win employment elsewhere in Mpukonyoni or a perhaps less stricken district.

Prior to the art/decorative works I mentioned above, women and men from the neighbouring villages bore the bulk of the construction work for the centre. They, of course, benefited from employment, and the local economy from the monies – though scarcely munificent – that then circulated. The contractor's records indicate that, throughout his operations on site, 100 per cent of the unskilled labour force was drawn from the locality, as was 63 per cent of the skilled staff. Benefits in the economic sphere were, in some measure, matched by those of experience on a large building project. Having been employed for much of the 18 months of construction, skilled and unskilled workers gained, improved, consolidated their capabilities and their standards of workmanship. A handful have been appointed to permanent posts at the centre. Others are now equipped for employment elsewhere. Community participation has, in this unspectacular but concrete manner, succeeded. Insofar as the architecture matches the desired goal of enhanced, employable skills, it too will have contributed to a viable regional style, a characteristic manner of working and of building.

Concluding comment

A mention, first, of Habermas's notion of communicative action. His four-point framework and axiomatic corollaries vis-a-vis 'the validity basis of speech' (1979:2) have, throughout the 30 months of this study, provided a useful basis for categorising the diffuse data that was generated. The categories have facilitated detailed cross analyses. They have enabled one to postulate, with a measure of participant observer-like confidence (Becker 1972:189-201), the operational extent of 'background consensus' and 'vindicated validity claims' that have, or have not, prevailed among the participating actors.

Small-scale exercises – ie, sharing such data during workshop discussions with participants – indicate that they help to sharpen individual and group

understanding. As yet, this awaits testing pre-publication analyses. Commonly, it is those without social power – the poor, the dispossessed, the historically excluded – who are intended to benefit from participatory architectural practice. Participation is thus bound up with what has become yet another vogue word, 'empowerment' – see, for specific examples, the documents listed in Lipman and Harris (1998). I take that term to encompass efforts to enable people who were previously refused the space to speak, now to do so and to engage in rational dialogue.

A key facet of this is the apparently non-problematic manner in which groups and individuals who have been denied a hearing are suddenly invited to speak. They are expected immediately to articulate their needs, wishes, desires. The very idea of being 'invited' is symptomatic. It is, inevitably, an act initiated by those who order events on behalf of others. That top-down, power-dominated condition has, undeniably, been the case at Somkhele, where participatory intentions notwithstanding, 'the community' has responded to, rather than triggered, the process.

Access to specialist knowledge is, of course, a facet of social power (Mills 1963), as is control by those who exercise such authority. Neither dissolves in the face of good intentions. Nor does long-imposed discrimination disappear when formal structures have been changed. Inequitably distributed knowledge is especially resilient. In everyday life, all are schooled in the ways of power and knowledge – those who exercise these linked entities and those who do not. Social life disposes people to perceive knowledge as being value neutral, as factual information, as instrumental technique, while, simultaneously, encouraging deference to those held to embody such power. Power speaks, its practitioners need not listen.

So, architects who attempt to engage in participatory design are often thrust into maelstroms of unspoken, frequently unacknowledged social disjuncture. They are expected – and expect – to speak, to inform. They are assumed also to be speaking, and acting, for others. They may wish to listen, but are held to know. They are expected disinterestedly to dispense specialist knowledge.

Western industrial societies seldom afford designers, or their publics, the resources for listening and speaking, each being an essential component of democratic design. Customarily, designated 'others' speak for others – the role of expert is perceived to be socially prestigious, desirable, perhaps inescapable. Our world, meanwhile, is littered with the social and technical

debris of expert advisers, specialist consultants. The experiences recorded here suggest that such realities may, even if but peripherally, be tempered by the hope that inheres in participatory action.

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