

## ***Participatory Design Research adopted by public Space Design***

### abstract

Nowadays, many design researchers conduct user-centre design research. By collecting ideas from the targeted users', they claim the problems of a design project can be solved more efficiently. Some scholars begin to question the uncritical consideration of 'users'. They think that the goal of conventional 'user research' is in fact to motivate and control users' consumption behaviours. As we position our research in the context of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which 'insists upon the importance of democratizing social inquiry by actively engaging the subject in the design and conduct of research' (Krimerman 2001), we want to know if the design practice can act as devices and process of democratic discussion on the design of public environment. In this paper, we will present a participatory project which enables older people, living in the new town Tseung Kwan O, to be involved in the design processes of a hiking route in their neighbourhood. We will see how the participants, equipped with 'locally produced knowledge', are able to propose suggestions for the landscape design of the route. For the workshop, we have designed a set of visual tool, acting as communication tool for participants of different backgrounds. During the workshop, the participants handled the tools with ease and discussed democratically. Their design suggestions show that they are in fact defining the route as a public place which allows easy access for all and enables diverse activities to take place, interrelated with social and cultural values and perceptions. The workshop we design has enabled the participants, being non design experts, to give design suggestions of the landscape in a democratic way. This project thus shows that design tools and methods are not just for making 'things' happen, but more radically, devices for making public action happens.

### keywords

participatory design research, democratic action, public space design, public action

### Introduction

#### 1.1 From user research to participatory action research

Recently, 'User research', "participation" and 'inclusion' become the buzzwords in the design discipline. Many design researchers have claimed the effectiveness of involving 'users' in the design process. They employ methods to collect information from targeted users in order to 'solve' more efficiently the problems of a particular design project. Such approach reveals the researchers see 'participation as a tool for achieving better project outcomes' (Cooke and Kothari, 37, 2001).

Many scholars begin to question the uncritical consideration of 'users' in user-centre design research.

Redstorm (2006) states the hegemonic positions of the designer. Their job is in reality to turn people into submissive users of the designed objects:

We, as designers, turn people into users by means of our designs, by presenting a thing to be used. By making the desired interpretation of the objects obvious and impossible to resist, we aim to design not only the object itself but also the perception, and even the experience, of it.

Almquist and Lupton (2010) also put forward a critical reflection on the manipulative nature of 'user-centred design':

The 'subject' who emerges from user-centered design, however, is not a humanist subject; he or she is an 'engineered subject', who responds correctly to stimuli and thus can be shaped into reliable member of mass society, whether conceived on consumerist or social progressive grounds.

Such critical comments urge us to question the conventional 'user research' whose goal is in fact to motivate and control users' consumption behaviour.

For over ten years, we have been working on participatory design research. Contrary to the 'user oriented research', we position our research in the context of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which 'insists upon the importance of democratizing social inquiry by actively engaging the subject in the design and conduct of research' (Krimmerman 2001).

Our research observes closely the definitions of 'participant' and 'researcher' stated by Kesby (2000):

First, participants... are regarded as 'knowers' and their knowledge and experiences are valorised. Second, researchers temper their own 'expert' status, while not dismissing their own specialist skills; do not presume to have a superior perspective. Third, the agency of participants is recognized and encouraged (to recognize their own agency) and researchers and participants enter into a reciprocal relationship in the research process.

In this paper, we will present a participatory project which enables elders to be involved in the design processes of a hiking route in their neighbourhood. We will see how the participants, equipped with 'locally produced knowledge' regarding their everyday life environment, are capable of proposing suggestions for the landscape design of the route.

## 2. The project

### 2.1 Background

The Duckling Hill hiking route is situated in the neighbourhood of a new town Tseung Kwan O, 16-18 kilometres from the Central district in Hong Kong. In 2011, 9% (33094 people) of the residents were older than 65. The Duckling Hill is a public space enjoyed by the neighbourhood. Since the 1980s, some elderly neighbours have been constructing 'informal' facilities such as pavilion, rain shelters, and flower planters on the route to make it into an agreeable place. With their actions, they have endowed the public collective values to the route by expressing their ideas of leisure space and using it for their own purposes (Goheen, 1998). In 2000, the Government, considering building informal structures an offensive act against the land ordinance, started to demolish the 'illegal structures.' In 2006-2007, some frequent hikers initiated a petition campaign to demand

halt to the destruction. The action was in vain. In 2011, the social workers from the 'SKW Tseung Kwan O Elderly Services Building' supported the neighbours to launch a campaign advocating user participation in the landscape design of the route. The social workers invited our research team to initiate a participatory workshop to enable frequent users to give design suggestions of the route. The workshop findings would be used as references to negotiate design ideas with relevant government institutions (e.g. the district council), after the destructions of the 'informal' faculties.

## 2.2 Research Method

Our research group agrees with the reflective standpoints of PAR. We aim 'to make research democratic, to make it 'with the people rather than on people' (Lambert, 2005). We also agree with Krishnaswamy (2004), the PAR process is also intended to build capacity among the research participants.

Our aim is to design communicative instruments to work with the participants from different background. We agree with Kodmany and King (1999) that 'visualization is the key to effective participation because it is the only common language to which all participants--- technical and non-technical--- can relate.

Our research is therefore engaged in a double (design) tasks: (1) designing appropriate tools for *communication* among participants; (2) establishing an appropriate design process which enables the local habitants to be engaged in the *design* of a particular living environment.

In order to become familiar with the place, our initial stage was to observe the actual everyday life experiences taking place on the route. We then discussed with the active participants of the petition campaign. After acquiring sufficient information of the route, we started to design a set of visual tool. The active participants indicated there were 22 representative 'locations of interests' on the route. According to their description, the team transformed the topographic map of the route into a pictorial map linking the 22 'locations of interests' represented in photographs (figure 1). We also designed two sets of stickers in green and red colours. The icons in green represented different facilities while those in red represented frequently practiced activities (figure 2).



Figure 1. 22 'locations of interests' of the Duckling Hill hiking route (above) and charts on different types of facilities (green coloured logos) and frequently practiced activities (red coloured logos)

During the workshop, participants would be divided into groups. Each group would receive an A3 size map and the two sets of stickers. The groups would identify collectively the activities frequently happening on each location, then discuss and choose preferable facilities. They would then attach the representational icons underneath the appropriate photograph representing each location. On the map sheet, blank spaces were reserved to allow participants to add extra comments. With this simple tool, the research group hoped to facilitate the group to conduct democratic discussions in the workshop.

### 2.3 Implementation

In one month the social workers had recruited 112 participants. No age restriction was set for the workshop, but most people interested were elders. The workshop was held on 25 May 2013. Members of the District Council and political parties came as observers. It was divided in three sessions. Firstly, the 112 participants were divided into 8 groups. There were one facilitator and one note keeper in each group. The facilitator introduced the aims and the procedure. As an icebreaker and to gauge interest of the participants, the facilitator requested the group to discuss the 22 locations of interests collectively for 10 minutes.

In the following 60 minutes, the facilitator indicated the locations of interest one by one, and encouraged the participants to discuss which were the most frequently practiced activities happened and the most preferable facilities to be installed on each location. If the decision was made, the note keeper would attach the relevant stickers of activities and facilities underneath the specified location on the map (figure 3).

If disagreements arose in discussion, the group would vote to decide collectively which sticker of activity, and/or facility should be put on a location (figure 3). The note keepers would record the arguments and put the relevant stickers of activities and/or facilities according to the vote result.

Finally, each group would then present publicly its design suggestions. With an enlarged map, a facilitator organized the collective suggestions and attached the enlarged stickers onto the big map. All the comments of the 8 groups would thus be integrated and shown on the big map (figure 4).

**Figure 2.** Group voting for collective decision (above) and the collective views on the design of the route (below).



### 2.4 Research Result

In Figure 3, we have summarized the suggestions of activities taking place on the route, as well as the preferred facilities<sup>1</sup>.

Categories of suggestions	Activities	Facilities
Functional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical exercise: hiking, aerobic dance, jogging</li> <li>Enjoying fresh air</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Route direction indicators</li> <li>Handrails</li> <li>Barrier free access</li> <li>Fitness equipments</li> <li>Emergency call system</li> <li>Toilets</li> <li>Drinking Fountain</li> <li>Dust bin</li> </ul>
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tree Appreciation walks</li> <li>Preservation of historical sites</li> <li>Chess, Mahjong games</li> <li>Preservation of informal facilities built by neighbors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Description tag indicating information on trees and historical sites</li> <li>Repairing the informally built facilities</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Casual gathering</li> <li>Tea Drinking</li> <li>Chess/Mahjong playing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sears and Tables</li> <li>Pavilions</li> </ul>

Figure 3.

After the workshop, the government agents and political party members revealed they were much impressed by the workshop and they promised they would continue to discuss with the stake holders regarding the design project of the Duckling Hill hiking route.

### 3. Analyses

The Duckling Hill has always been a successful neighbourhood public place. It fulfils the general defining requirements of urban public space: proximity, diversity and accessibility (Zukin,1995). Moreover, it facilitates chance encounter of the neighbours, provides spaces for diverse action, as well as allows temporary claim and ownership (Francis & al. 2012). The majority of the workshop participants were older frequent users of the route. They had built up a community upon this place. Their enthusiasm to participate in the workshop showed they attached great importance to the route and considered it as a favourable public place for everyday life.

The participants handled the visual tools with ease. The tools facilitated the discussion in a democratic manner. The design suggestions of the participants showed they considered the route as a place for leisure, social gathering, cultural activities and even a ground for creativity. The participants confirmed in fact the route being a public place which allowed easy access for all and enabled diverse activities to take place, interrelated with social and cultural values and perceptions.

<sup>1</sup> Viewing that our discussion focuses on the strength of Participatory design but not the content of the research. We have omitted to report on the lists of locations on which preferred activities and facilities were mapped.

#### 4. Conclusion

We agree with Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hilligen (2010) that 'Design is ... increasingly seen as a process for radical change in developing services, systems and environments, which supports more sustainable lifestyles and consumption habit.' The participatory design workshop for the Duckling Hill hiking route, generated from a neighbourhood movement advocating citizens' participation in public space design, is in itself a democratic process: it has enabled the participants who were non-design experts to contribute their own knowledge to the making of a place of their everyday life.

As participatory action researchers, we have designed a set of visual tool to enable the participants to express themselves and communicate their ideas with each other. Together with the social workers, we have acted as facilitators to motivate democratic discussions among the participants. Our role was not a design collaborator, but only a facilitator to a democratic movement initiated by the people.

The aim of this project is not just to motivate citizens to use their creativity to make new things, our aim of conducting participatory design is to put 'publicness' back into the public. We regard design tools and methods as devices, not for making 'things' happen, but, more radically, making public action happen.

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