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Should alternatives become models?

Observing institutional experiments in citizens involvement in public spaces projects

Hello I'm Margaux, I'm a landscape architect beginning my third year of PhD, in the architecture school of Nantes in France. I apologize, I'm going to read my text cause my English is not so good, but I hope at least understandable. I also want to say I'm still in the heart of my research, so my presentation will focus more on fieldwork than on theory, and bringing more questions than answers.

My PhD research is studying the interaction between experimentation and institutionalization dynamics within citizens involvement in public spaces development projects, in two European cities : Nantes and Brussels. These projects use generally speaking alternative approaches, previously mainly initiated by civil society, and now seized by public stakeholders and progressively turning into real public policies. These approaches are not really new but are today reused in a totally different context where the participation of the citizens has become a generalized idea and even an injunction. What is new is their position and role in the urban transformation and I'm asking if they produce a transformative impact on urban fabric or not.

I do not have the time to go in details but I would like to introduce a little on each case.

In Brussels:

This is the Tour and Taxis site that is the former disused customs of Belgium, on the canal side, between the municipality of Brussels and the municipality of Molenbeek, I'm sure you heard about Molenbeek. Regional authorities wanted to develop a green spaces sequence from the Northwest to the historical center, but this hope was promptly in danger, as the biggest and central lot has been sold by the state to a private owner in 2000. Bruxelles Environnement, which is the administration in charge of green spaces development and management, decided to initiate two experiments on the plots they still control the property.

Parckdesign was a temporary festival, of which remain a few devices now managed by an association of inhabitants: a greenhouse; a chicken coop; some beehives; a vegetable garden; etc.

Allée du Kaai is a temporary occupation of former industrial sheds, set on a plot that is supposed to be transformed into a public park. The idea is to occupy the site for 4 years to initiate a social dynamic, and also to experiment uses in parallel of the programming and conception period of the future park. The place is running quite well, there is a strong appropriation, local associations are managing the site and leading various activities each week.

In Nantes:

This is the Île de Nantes; it is an island on the river Loire, in the center of the city. It is a well-know urban project in France since 20 years, on a former industrial area, and already quite well developed. The project is conducted by the SAMOA, which is a SPL société publique d'aménagement. Very briefly, a SPL is a society whose capitals are owned by public actors, and mandated for specific distric development on a given period. The SAMOA had previously some disappointing citizens participation experiences that they judged as too events oriented, not producing substantial impacts on the planning practice and attracting an insufficiently diverse population. Consequently they initiate a vast program of citizen's involvement. As of now, I'm currently following a specific project, just beginning. The idea is that the inhabitants become the sponsors of the future development, and also to reach the precarious people, quite numerous in the neighborhood.

Are these cases alternatives and alternatives to what? I did the exercise of taking the way you tried to define what made alternatives alternative in the call for paper and confront it to my cases, and finally combine the results in three topics: one about the socio-economical aspects, one about the governance questions, and one about the urban fabric issues.

1/ SOCIO-ECONOMICAL ASPECTS

My first answer is schizophrenia. In these popular neighborhoods, public authorities are trying to keep the disadvantaged people living there, and, at the same time, are trying to attract other social groups, in the name of the social mix, which became in urban politics in France an undisputed watchword. But it seems to be a declared issue more than a real issue, the projects are targeting disadvantaged groups, but the resources are not going along with the rhetoric.

Furthermore, the way public authorities mobilize social categories is quite caricatural, often polarizing on one side a real popular inhabitant, who is supposed to be the target through a condescending speech, and on the other side a middle class invasive, creative and active inhabitant towards whom they develop a suspicion discourse. They fantasize a kind of inhabitants who should be "only" inhabitant and really popular. This seek is for sure vain, but what is interesting is that it has brought them to focus interests and efforts on some specific disadvantaged populations, such as the youngsters, the black community or the homeless people, in a sort of positive discrimination approach which is quite unusual, at least in France.

2/ GOVERNANCE

At first sight, we can easily say that yes, urban society and disadvantaged groups are the driving force, but, the ways it is done is questioning.

- Bruxelles Environnement discourse is clear, they have more and more spaces and less and less funds to deal with. This led them to adopt two strategies, experimented in the cases studies: on one side to develop parks which are rough and low cost; on the other side to encourage citizens to appropriate green spaces and take responsibility of its management, most of the times without a real or a sufficient funds delegation. In Brussels, public authorities tend to settle in a position of "support" more than driving, as if their role could become only for example giving or lending spaces. Most of people are happy with it as they reclaim less control and less bureaucratic inertia from the institutions. People want spaces; for public authorities is it a way of saving money, and it is lived by both actors as a kind of win-win strategy. However, the increase of public spaces self management by small communities can be seen as quite closed to a neoliberal vision of a city where self organization can play the game of social segregation and public funds reduction.
- Compared to Belgium, France is characterized by a stronger municipal power, centralized and non-communitarian approaches, and civil society self-organization is less developed. This is strengthened in Nantes by a political unity and continuity since 20 years, so public authorities remain in a more controlling and driving force. The public developer wants to mobilize inhabitants in his frame, to transform his way of doing his daily job, to improve his projects. We can say it is a kind of manipulation of citizens participation, but we can also say in a less negative way, they want to use the citizen's participation to produce tangible effects and changes, which is maybe good. Unlike to Brussels, they don't want to support self-directed projects, but rather want to imply civil society in the public projects. The issue is that it is in a frame that is so constrained, on financial, temporal and procedural aspects, that the margin is really weak for inhabitants to find an interest in it.

3/ URBAN FABRIC

The term itself of neoliberal city is not so shared by the actors, so it's hard to say if they seek to redirect urban development away from the neoliberal model. But factually these projects do seek to establish political or "social" regulations:

- In Brussels, the projects have become ways for public authorities and local communities to get stronger in the power relationship with the private actor landowner of the main central T&T site. They were both fighting against him for years for not building the entire site in a market oriented strategy, for not ending with a gated community for rich people in a popular and immigrated background neighborhood, and for having there a park of a sufficient size with respects to the green spaces needs of the surrounding district. These negotiations were difficult and didn't give any results for a long time. The two experiments we study here are situated on both sides of the

private plot. This was quite clever, Bruxelles Environnement refuse to admit publicly that it was a strategy but it really seems that it was. As most inhabitants are practicing both places, they get used to cross this open wasteland, despite the fences, despite the mud and despite the ongoing building works. As there is almost no other way to get from one side to another, the landowner let it open, as a temporary situation but now during for years. The possibility of re-enclose the site, was for a long time a threat the landowner used in the negotiations (to give an idea, it was something like "I will not open the park to the neighborhood if you don't let me do the offices square meters I want", etc). This routine of using this space that the inhabitants took, made that the landowner is today in a quasi impossibility to re-enclose the site.

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- On another side the civil society also implemented by itself these experiments to gain a most important role in the game. Several associations and inhabitants created what they called "Plateforme T&T", which aim to be a force for bringing proposals and weigh in on the balance in front of the landowner. They positioned themselves as a third actor in the negotiation process, trying to go further than the public authorities, and at the same time supporting their action. The role played in these dynamics by the two first small experiments we are talking about was really important. It has been physical places to meet and to organize, and also first experiences where people get observations and know-hows. The detour by the physical use of space allowed to return on the institutional struggle ground with a renewed power balance.
- In Nantes, the project is not so advanced, so I cannot do so precise observations. Also, the context is different, as private actors are not so strong. The public developer is the main leader and so we kind of observe both opposite dynamics inside this only one institutional actor. To explain, the project is lead on a district that is said to be the last popular neighborhood in the city center, and the last neighborhood "untouched" by the urban project in the île de Nantes. To involve the inhabitants, and especially the precarious ones, is seen as a way to « regulate » the development which is finally soon arriving. They even say that the aim is to « strengthen » the neighborhood and his social dynamics, so it will be able to resist to the upcoming "surge" of the urban project. Urban project that they are also the leader. Here we see the schizophrenia and above all the limits of such an approach. The project seems to be only an attempt to limit damage, kind of a palliative regulation.

OPEN QUESTIONS

I will conclude finish with two open questions that are more methodological ones.

The first one is the issue of studying tools or devices when doing research from and for the urban fabric world.

Let's take the example of a so-called alternative which is temporary occupation: in Brussels, in 3 years it became a new recipe, meeting civil society needs (associations reclaiming spaces), public authorities needs (how to deal with waiting and empty spaces) and issues and complexities of the urban development in Brussels (how to better anticipate urban development and deal with long term planning and uncertainty). For some actors it implies social objectives, but for others it is only a pragmatic answer of space management. Temporary occupations projects blossomed, each time lead by different institutional actors. Furthermore, several institutions in Brussels are actually trying to work together on a new public tool that provide possibility to set temporary occupations more easily and systematically. Broadly, we observe that it became a new dominant trend, most of the time catched up by public authorities or private stakeholders to valorize their plots. Besides of playing the game of property speculation, these projects are also accused to target a mainly middle class creative audience.

At the same time "occupation" stays a tool for alternatives and social movements, all around the world. In Brussels, the occupation, even if it is only for a few years, produces real alternatives, in public spaces uses, in politicization processes, and in the ways protagonists self-organize. People experiment alternatives more in the "doing", through the daily running of the collectively managed space. Even if it will maybe not have a direct impact on the layout of the future public space, the occupied space have already been for 3 years a support for individual and collective emancipation and a resource for social groups and movements as diverse as illegal immigrants, climate activists, squatter networks, campaigns against wasting food, activities with psychiatric disorder people, etc.

So, the question for me is, behind some “design” convergences is there always “content” convergences, or political project convergences? And if it’s not, what is the sense of analyzing urban tools such as temporary occupation? What is the utility of criticize, praise or design some alternative devices if they can be used in any context and serving any political and social orientation? This is saying that devices are not good or bad on their own, are not inherently oriented for or against neoliberalism or any political or economical system but are always contingent and depend on the context in which they are set and on the way they are conducted.

The last question concerns the action scale and the observation and analysis scale.

As Max Rousseau wrote, there is two opposed trends, the francophone research urban fields, which promotes micro observation at the local scale; and the Anglophone urban studies, more characterized by macro analysis on urban capitalism changes. I’m clearly more situated in the first case, but this session was precisely for me the opportunity to confront to the second one, and maybe to participate to seek a third way.

But I’m still and always asking myself if it is really judicious to observe these kinds of small spatial experiments.

Indeed, these experiences stay marginal ones, small scale, small budget and small issues projects, not touching the heart of urban production. Furthermore, it seems sometimes that creating news spaces, even “better spaces” is not sufficient, and that alternatives like these ones should engage more in the institutional redesign.

But, the survey show that it is even hard to talk about institution as an entity, as the projects are always supported by individuals, led by their personal engagements and convictions. We observe in all the cases coalitions around a common “cause”, forms of alliances between institutional and non-institutional actors, and also forms of internal fights between institutional actors and their own hierarchy or the elected representatives they depend on. However, it most of the time get to a dead-end because issues were not really clearly discussed or not really shared. Is it really possible to change public action from the inside and if it does not want to? Or is it better to try to build independent alternatives, which are maybe condemned to stay experimental and not having any implementation on institutional routines?

Thanks for your attention