Building Cities With People

Democratic Urban Design

Co-Creating Cities: the process of citizen involvement in urban design practice through innovative tools and new technologies

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Abstract: Arki_lab is an interdisciplinary urban design firm based in Copenhagen, Denmark. The office consists of people coming from various backgrounds, such as architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, communication, sociology and more. What brings these people together, beside their passion for better cities, is their frustration with the gap between designers and the users. Here, in arki_lab, we believe that cities should be constantly shaped and transformed by people. When designing urban spaces, the focus should be put on engaging people in all the design stages. The attention of the architects and urban planners has to be shifted towards the processes of urban formation instead of being stationed on the final product. Furthermore, the outcome of this process should be adaptable and responsive to the changing needs of the users. This is what we call Democratic Urban Design. Our focus at arki_lab is to promote the Democratic Urban Design through developing citizen involvement tools. Educating, activating and empowering local people and communities are the central goal in all of our projects, and those goals are only achievable through processes of co-creation.

In the following paper, we elaborate on the concept of Democratic Design. Also, we try to redefine the role of architects and urban planners in a way that falls in line with the above intentions. Furthermore, some of the tools that we are using to engage the users to a higher degree in the production of space will be introduced.

Keywords: Democratic design; Community building; Education; Physical change; Citizen involvement tools

Introduction

Ever since the height of the 1960s' functionalist approach to architecture and urban planning, praising architectural geniuses' such as Le Corbusier for their role as conductors of logical, aesthetic masterpieces, numerous different reactions have seen the light of day (Eiler Rasmussen, 1957). The emerging trends have tried to put the focus on the inhabitants of the

city and have tried to adapt evermore-inclusive approaches to urban design. This has happened in accordance with the democratic inspired processes of the 70s in almost all parts of society. In the field of architecture and urban planning critical urban theory, as one of the most prominent reactions to such rigid conception of cities, argues that "another, more democratic, socially just and sustainable form of urbanization is possible" (Brenner, 2009) Critical urban theory, while is very well discussed in theory, fails to live up to its full potential when applied in practice. (Brenner, 2009). In contrast to almost all other aesthetic and artistic industries, the architectural branch still clings to an elitist, closed off process of creating cities – the most fundamental sphere of our lives.

Whereas sustainable urban development agendas put a big emphasis on environmental and economic sustainability, they largely overlook the third equally important dimension of sustainable development: The social dimension. (Woodcraft et al., 2012) It is however true that citizen participation as one of the ways to reach higher levels of social cohesion has gained increasing importance during the last decades (McKenzie, 2004). In an attempt to put people at the center of the discourse, participatory planning focuses on involving the everyday people in urban processes. Nevertheless, the conventional participatory planning practices, limit the influence of the people to the very first stages of design, and exclude them from further stages. It is often seen as an irrelevant checkbox, to cross off before continuing with the actual work. Consequently, our cities remain to be the product of architects and urban planners, instead of being the outcome of an engaging process involving the users. It is this kind of thinking that arki_lab challenges in its attempt to make socially sustainable Democratic Urban Design focusing on building cities with people.

Our first concern at arki_lab is the communication gap between designers and users, which need our immediate attention. The role that architects and other designers take, should not be defined by isolated professionalism, but should instead look outwards the society. We want to redefine the role of the architect not as the genius of aesthetic forms and proportions, but as the *mediator* between the professional world of expert-groups of architects, engineers, stakeholders, municipalities, investors, etc. and the actual everyday users. The architect is not a conductor of rigid classic music, but a devisor of a spontaneous, creative jam session where everybody has an equal *democratic* voice.

Our second concern is best exemplified by the traditional utopian renderings of dreamscapes used to present architectural projects. Instead of the final building, space, or other physical products being the key measurement of success, the emphasis should be on the *process* as the key assessment method for the work. However, this may sound like a very radical take: Is the end product not what will be standing in the world in the future? We believe it is, but it is only a good process that leads to a good end product. Thus we envision a shift from the masterplan towards the masterproces.

In the following, we will expand the theoretical background for our approach and how our work-practice has been shaped into the 3 focus-areas. The first is the need for spatial education; creating a common language and shared understanding between experts and laypersons. The second is the need for community building, which secures that the interventions will be socially embedded in the local people as part of their everyday life. The third is the actual physical change, which should mirror the process and the people's involvement. Using examples from our different projects we will show how these focus-areas are intertwined in all parts of our daily practice. In the end we will present some of our concrete tools with which we facilitate our work reflecting these three dimensions of Democratic Urban Design.

What do we talk about when we talk about "Democratic Urban Design"

Henri Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city is a widespread concept today. The right to the city, as David Harvey (2008) argues following in Lefebvre's footsteps, is not only the 'individual liberty to access urban resources'; it is also 'a right to change ourselves by changing the city.' The freedom to remake one's city after one's 'heart's desire' (Park, 1967) is thus a common right of exercising 'collective power to reshape processes of urbanization' (Harvey, 2008). To put it in simpler words, the right to the city is a call to collectively search for an alternative city in which urban dwellers actively create and recreate their everyday spaces in resonance with their needs and aspirations. We build ourselves in relation to our material surroundings and vice versa. Or as Robert Park coins it: "In making the city man has remade himself" (Park in Harvey, 2008).

This stand is in sharp contrast to how building processes are organized today. In the system, which surrounds the creation of new places, exists an alienation. The places are ordered, planned, determined and constructed by a huge apparatus of developers, clients, architects, engineers, etc., and those are people who in all likelihood don't have a relation to the place being created nor are future users of the place. The everyday people only play a minor role in this rigid machine-like system. The thought of seeing a group of teachers building their own school seems absurd. To build have become an expert function in our society (Giddens, 1990). The consequence of this mismatch between the right (and need) to co-create your city and the large degree of professionalism alienating the everyday citizen from urban planning and building processes results in an extremely low degree of social sustainability.

The Social Life report defines social sustainability as "a process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world – infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve." (Woodcraft et al., 2012) In order to achieve social sustainability, users' needs should be fully understood by the designers and the optimal way to gain such understanding is involving the users as much as possible in all design stages.

The other important factor when talking about Democratic Urban Design, which is also tightly linked to the right to the city as well as social equity, is best illustrated in Agger & Hoffman (2008) writing on the democratic process:

"A criterion for a democratic process is — in a representative understanding of democracy — that those, who wish to make their influence count, should have the possibility to do so. In this light user-involvement should in principle be open and reach out to everyone. In practice however it is seen, that there are certain groups which it can be hard to reach, for example young, ethnic minorities, children families, elderly and socially marginalized groups, but also resourceful actors, who choose not to participate. It is therefore important how the groups viewpoints are captured and handled" (Agger & Hoffman, 2008)

The Democratic Urban Design process, is not only a design process that is fully oriented towards people's need by way of involving them in all design stages as much as possible, it is a design process that put a maximum effort into reaching out to those vulnerable social groups whose voice is difficult to hear.

The need for a new way of working

In line with the above discussed concerns and in order to achieve a quotidian dynamic adaptation of urban spaces, Lefebvre attributes two central rights to the inhabitants: The right to appropriate urban spaces and the right to actively participate in their production. The right to appropriate urban spaces involves the right to occupy, access, represent, characterize and create spaces based on everyday needs of the inhabitants, while the right to participate ensures that inhabitants are central to all the processes of decision-making concerning the production of urban spaces. What we usually fail to notice is that the right to participate has further implications than sending out formal questioners or information pamphlets to the users about the changes that are going to occur to an urban space. Stephen Bass et al. (1995) identify six levels of participation:

- Participants listening only
- Participants listening and giving information
- Participants being consulted
- Participation in analysis and agenda setting
- Participation in reaching consensus on the main strategy levels
- Participants involved in decision-making on the policy, strategy or its components

While in the first three levels participation is seen as a checkbox that should be crossed off before continuing with the actual work, the last three levels put a stronger emphasis on the actual users being involved throughout the entire process. It is however argued that the last level is a function of national decision-making processes that ensure the participation outcomes are being implemented. (Bass et al., 1995) Hence, the highest degree of participation during the design process is reached in fifth level, where all the users have to reach consensus before any decision is made.

If we accept Lefebvre's suggestion of the right to the city and if we admit that the users should actively participate in all stages of space production, one crucial question arises: what would be then the role of an architecture office, a rather homogeneous group of people in the space production? The realm of the everyday is the streets, the parks, the rooms, buildings and spaces of the city ranging from the public, via the semi-public and semi-private to the private. Much of this space is a seemingly chaotic mix of more or less everything imaginable. The city contains endless individual ideas of 'the good life, and 'the good city'. That is why the street is conflicting in many ways, chaotic, dirty and constantly changing (Sennet, 1992). On the other hand there is the office of the classical architecture firm: clean and functional. There is a miscommunication between these two realms: One of them is so overwhelmingly complex; the other is almost too easy to read. If all spaces should be produced through citizen involvement, shouldn't we simply eliminate the architects and planners from the process and leave the job entirely in the users' hands? Not at all. Exactly because of the professionalization of the processes, with the rapid growth of the cities and increasing number of actors who play a role in forming our cities, architects and planners are needed more than ever before. That is the main reason why we, at arki lab, had to rethink our role and reconceive our working methods. Instead of being the master-planners who make definite decisions for people, we see ourselves as mediators, negotiating between the different stakeholders of the everyday. This is especially important, as "between equal rights force decides' (Marx, 1867). Hence, our mission is to level the scales, so that the ordinary citizen stands a chance against the overwhelming system of construction and urban development.

The citizens as active co-creators

As stated before, architects and planners' goal must be the *people of the everyday*. With this is meant the everyday users of spaces who are not professionally involved in the building-system and thus not have officially acknowledged position to affect change. Citizens are thus not defined by their official national or municipality status, but by their right to the city as dwellers and users of a certain domain. The involvement of the everyday citizens is not only ethical principle but also a major creative resource: "The right to the city involves building capabilities, creating active publics capable of engaging in the production of

knowledge and transformative engagement with the world and public matters." (Farias, 2011) Besides transmitting peoples' voice to the other involving actors, we activate the built-in knowledge and productive potential of the everyday people. This is where we separate our methods from the conventional participatory planning methods. Where they view themselves as subjects and the citizens as objects of study, we envision the citizen as an active subject who is co-creating with us.

What we have learned from experience is that people are not always consciously aware of their own perceptions of their city, their actual needs or what they want in their urban spaces (Seamon, 1980, Merleau-Ponty, 1945). To access the phenomenological life-world of the citizens we need carefully constructed tools. Therefore we can't simply ask, but "rather, we shall have to tease the information from the subject, using whatever means psychology can offer to inspect the contents of the mind" (Milgram, 1976). This information is of course discussed with the subjects opening their own perception in reciprocal learning situations. If the citizens discover an ice-skating ring would brighten their city's winter slumber, we as urban planners discover this to. Therefore, at arki_lab, a central part of our everyday work is developing tools that on one hand help people to learn more about their living environment and the ways that they can improve it; and on the other hand, help us to understand what people need in their cities.

Our Design Trio

Arki_lab started out with a genuine curiosity for how we could develop tools for our concept of democratic design, hence the name: We are an 'architectural laboratory'. We wanted to activate people, and to let their knowledge, their individual ideas of 'a good design' for a specific site shine through. After years of experience and experimenting with citizen involvement, we have realized that there are three areas towards which we have to direct our focus in order to make socially sustainable democratic urban design: education, community building and physical change. Our ideal design process, or the master process, as opposed to master plan, is the one that brings these three focus-areas together. These three areas always

overlap in our projects and it is challenging to completely separate them. In spite of that, the three following sections use three of arki lab projects to exemplify the three mentioned areas.

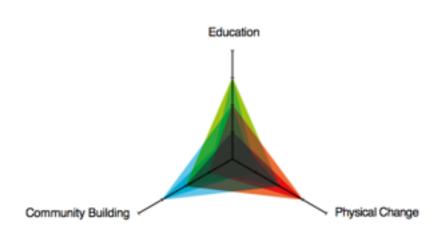


Figure 1: arki_lab's design trio

Education:

The German Sociologist Axel Honneth criticize the stratification of contemporary society arguing that the views of the lower, less educated classes are ignored in the public debate, because they fail to refer to broadly recognized coherent moral systems (Honneth 2003, 2001). This however doesn't mean they don't have access to a kind of intuitive ad hoc morale concerning most things in society – including city space and architecture (Honneth, 2003). This corresponds to our experience working with all kinds of people; they do care about their physical surroundings, but they either aren't given the chance or lack the resources to articulate their views in ways that will carry weight and have an impact. Because of this our work involves a translation of this intuitive ethic or ad hoc opinions on physical space into a common language which can be discussed in the public debate and thus integrated into the building-system (Honneth, 2003). This involves giving the people the tools to express their opinions. Thus we reach the first major element of our approach: *Education*.

Education of people is also a prerequisite of participation as professor in social work Golam M. Mathbor states: "[E]ducating people about the development initiatives and outlining a plan of action is critical in generating a process of participation" (Mathbor, 2008). The people need to be kept in the loop to participate and contribute to any given project. When we

engage with the citizens we thus seek to create *communities of practice* - a collective of people who share a passion about a place and try to understand it better - where we join forces with the citizens to develop places together and learn from each other in participatory processes¹ (Wenger, 2000). Our position thus aligns itself with new views in actor-network-theory realigning the relation between the experts and layperson. As Ignacio Farias argues insights needs to be made 'known' and "'known' means here that they are shared, socially accessible, discussable, open. This involves a symmetrization of knowledge positions between experts and laypersons [and] the redefinition of their identities, valuation criteria and languages" (Farias, 2011). In this was we seek to return knowledge to the people by the creation of a common language.

Our starting point was the schools of Copenhagen. How could we engage people in architecture, when the architectural language is so far from the everyday language? We needed a language that was accessible to all, even kids. Our school projects focus is to use architectural methods to create learning projects across the disciplines in school, and over a longer-term project introduce various concepts, tasks and activities. In this way our different projects range from teaching choice subjects to government founded research projects, where the students had to participate in Park(ing) Day, create their own perfect classroom, redefine their school yard, identify areas they wanted to change in their local area, solve professional architectural design tasks, create exhibitions and build temporary installations.

The project's grip on education differs from the traditional didactic classroom-based teaching according to the structure and tools that we use. We want to make sure, that the students get an understanding of the relevance and importance of the learning process rather than focusing on the results, and rather than let the project being based on fictitious issues, it is the students' own local environment that are brought into consideration. By using the city, which provides the framework of the students' everyday life, we break down the typically sharp distinction between schools and self, which may be a barrier to student's engagement in learning.

Our own experience has also shown us that involving young people in the urban design process has the potential to teach them new skills and competences, or it shows them how

¹ These communities are not only made with citizens but are also a central way our office works, with wide open doors we're we continuously invite architectural students, pupils, interns, locals and experts inside to partake in our work. The work culture at arki_lab is constructed around this kind of thinking

Figure 2: Workshop with students in front of arki_lab



knowledge gained in the more traditional school setting can be applied to 'real life' situations. While each of these school projects stimulates project-based learning, it also encourages the young designers to look outside the school and begin to consider aspects of their local urban setting and community, leading to a greater understanding of the relationship between space, place and the people that inhabit it.

Figure 3: prototyping workshop with students



Figure 4: building workshop with students



Community Building:

We put a lot of emphasis on the empowerment of the people involved in order to identify needs and reach solutions that will be of direct benefit to the community. In this way the communities of practice that we seek to create are not only educational but also community building for example by empowering the citizen's relation to the place and their feeling of identity. Democratic design is an investment in a community, creating community value (Wenger, 2000). The reasons stated above all contribute to creating a social value that is incredibly important for a successful and vibrant city but very difficult to generate - especially from 'top-down' initiatives. Educating people and giving them new skills but also giving them a motivation to reflect on their neighborhood, generating knowledge from local communities on what they need and want, are all part and product of a process that empowers those involved and has a unique potential to boost the community values.

To exemplify some of the main aspects of community building we can turn to our intergenerational research project for the Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs. The project addresses the increasing problem of age-segregation in the Danish society, where we from birth are divided into nurseries, kindergartens, schools, universities, workplaces and retirement homes (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). Therefore, community cohesion in our urban and residential areas is the main task of the overall project, with a special emphasis on the integration of elderly citizen groups.

arki_lab's aim in the project was to foster interaction across generations in urban space in order to increase community cohesion and decrease side effects of age-segregation such as loneliness. We think that the best scientific results are shown in real change, so we've devised the project positioning itself between action and design-based research intervening in the local community (Majgaard, 2011). In one of the case areas of Sydhavn in Copenhagen facilitated the establishment of an intergenerational urban garden. In close relation with the area renewal of the municipality in the neighborhood, we brought the different interested actors; a public school, the local senior organization, the local university branch and local activists together around the table and mixed them with the needed professional expertise of urban garden planners and municipality workers to fertilize the development of a common plan and application. Again being the mediator between the average citizen and the system creating a common community of practice with the shared goal of creating the garden.

Our work was characterized by lengthily involvement with the different groups, countless cups of coffee, mediating cultural differences, bridging gaps of reciprocal understanding, small degrees of conflict solving and a continuous exposure of the different groups to each other, activating and empowering the local community to take matters into their own hands. In this way our engagement process in itself was designed to have an age-integrating aspect leading to a lot of laughs when kids and seniors interacted at our workshops.



Figure 5: workshop with different age groups for the intergenerational project

By focusing on community building as part of our research we made sure our interventions had anchoring, the plans where embedded in the social structure and the project would continue without our continual engagement.

Physical Change:

Of course physical impact is one of our focus-points in arki_lab, because as architects and urban planners physical change is our job, but it never comes in the first stages of a project. We always start be designing the complex involvement processes which will then lead to physical change. The physical space is never designed without a thorough socio-cultural study of the area, and no permanent structure is ever erected without making sure it bears the imprint of the citizens involved. In this way education and community building is always a prerequisite of physical change. Arki_lab's Marseille project 'Plan d'Aou', a neighborhood revitalization plan, is one of the best examples of a project that was launched with the goal of having a large-scale physical impact. The proposal suggests a rethinking of the traditional historic French Village, known worldwide for its community building abilities as well as its celebration of the natural setting.

In the Plan d'Aou project it was crucial for arki_lab to involve and activate the knowledge of local inhabitants and stakeholders. As Plan d'Aou is a neighborhood with an infamous reputation, reaching the point where taxi drivers won't even take you there, it was especially necessary for us to place as much of our work out in the area. Being on site was a key element in breaking this bad reputation. The workshops with the local stakeholders and inhabitants have so far created an understanding of the social and physical context of which Plan d'Aou is a part. This knowledge has been processed and analyzed to build a cornerstone for the rest of the process.

The proposed holistic process of participation and involvement aims to give citizens a sense of ownership and 'place' in Plan d'Aou. Its community focus establishes a firm social foundation for the future development, which insures both interests in the site and social sustainability as well as addressing social issues by empowering the people involved. After the social life and structure is secured and heavily rooted in the design process, the

Figure 6: First stage planning workshop with citizens, Marseille



infrastructure of this life must be carefully organized. This is where the prototypes, temporary models and the outcome of the workshops are translated into buildings. As well as the design of the public spaces and the social aspects, the physical infrastructure is also done in a participatory way, where arki_lab qualifies the knowledge created, and 'translates' it into a comprehensive plan with a toolbox that architects must refer to and use when detailing the future buildings and spaces. It's important to emphasize this critical point, where most traditional participation processes missteps. The design needs not only to reflect the citizens' ideas, but also needs to be based on them and qualified by our professional skills and knowhow. This is the important point where the architect and urban planners role shift from being a mediator to also involve being an interpreter making a 'translation' of inputs from the citizens into fully fledged professional designs. It is further important that the citizens of Plan D'Aou are continuously involved to maintain the feedback-loops and also in embedding the physical changes in the existing social structure of the neighborhood. In this way there is no traditional 'end-product' in our work in Plan D'aou, but a continuation of the process already started, with ongoing implementation of both social and physical change.

Finally, through the dimension of learning and community building in our projects, we reach the solution for the physical product, it being a public space, a building, or redesigning of an existing physical form. In a nutshell, using such processes we not only create and empower communities and individuals, but we also reach the true 'good design', sustainable to the ever so complex needs and wishes of the everyday.



Figure 7: arki nopoly workshop with citizens, Marseille

Tools To Get There

To make the most out of our design trio, we need a set of methods to facilitate our design process and to help us co-create the city with the citizens. As we matured as an office and learned more about the different ways of involving the citizens in all planning stages, we developed this set of tools to tackle the issues at hand. As we move on with our projects and gain more experience, we improve our tools accordingly. Our toolbox is a universal one, where the tools, when adapted and adjusted, could be used in different context. Below are some of our tools that we have used in many of our projects.

Arki_nopoly: The board-game arki_nopoly was developed as a tool to facilitate both purely educational projects but also for citizen involvement in projects with a physical outcome. The game therefore is centered on a specific site, of which the participants have a daily knowledge. The aim of the game is to activate this 'silent' knowledge' of the participants; broaden it by means of discussion, analysis and debate; developing new ideas based on this

knowledge and analysis; and finally to assess and gather this knowledge for further use. It is basically the steps in a design process translated into a board-game format.

The game's structure is much similar to 'monopoly', and therefore easily accessible. It has a huge versatility, as the different slots around the edges can be changed to involve questions or steps crucial to the exact project. A group often consists of people from many different ages, occupations and interest. Therefore it is designed to be a collaborative process within the groups, where all members have to participate and help each other in order to 'win' against the other groups. The element of winning or loosing is only a secondary feature of the game, which in our experience especially helps in activating and focusing the children and youth who might be participating.



Figure 8: Kids playing arki_nopoly

The main outcomes of playing the game are insights into the everyday practice of the participants, their concrete problems, and ideas for solutions.

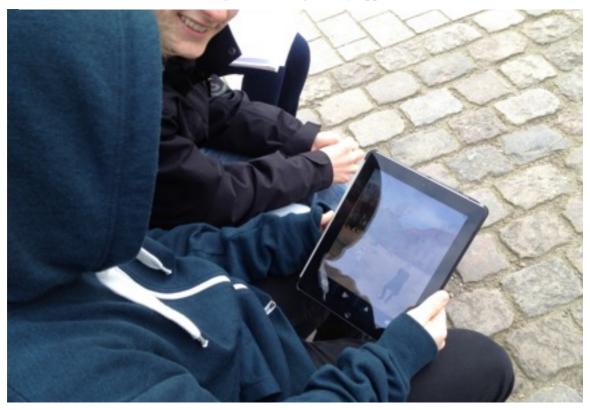
Figure 9: An exhibition of the arki_nopoly results



CoCityApp: CoCityApp is a smartphone application which allows everyone to engage in the transformation of the city. The steps are very simple. You take a picture of your interest area, make a collage that illustrates your vision for the area, and upload it on the web. The outcome would be a collection of collages that is accessible to all citizens and municipalities.

Figure 10: Using CoCityApp

Figure 11: Using CoCityApp



The CoCityApp is an important tool for all facets of the community. It is a source of community empowerment. Simple, fast and easy to use, the CoCityApp encourages citizen involvement on the go by allowing people to share visions and dreams concerning their urban environment. On the other hand, the CoCityApp enables decision makers to get a real-time image of their city through the eyes of its citizens. This data is invaluable for the development of any municipal-driven project or planning strategy, and much more meaningful than the typical, outdated approach to community engagement such as a questionnaire or online survey. The CoCityApp can be used either by individuals or groups as a useful tool for co-creating your city.

Arki probes

The arki_probes is a development of the idea of cultural-probes (Gaver, 1999). They address the problem that you can't follow people around in their everyday life to document their behavior and use of spaces - instead we send a probe with them. arki_probes can take many forms, some simply being a postcard with a question or a map to draw on, others being small kits of multiple probes ranging from maps, urban diaries and disposable cameras to full

scale digital platforms. The probe-kits can be themed in different ways to engage specific user-groups, for example as an urban scavenger hunt aimed at families with kids. The point of the probes is that they are easy to deploy [hand out to people] and have an inbuilt return mechanism [by mail, by delivery to a certain place, by uploading].

One of our very successful probes are the memory-diary aimed at very old people, where they gain the possibility to tell about they life, experiences of living in their neighborhood and their wishes. These gave a unique insight into the everyday life of a user group, who are very hard to engage by normal approaches.



Figure 12: arki probes used in the intergenerational project

Conclusion

In this paper we have framed the two main changes in contemporary architecture that arki_lab tries to promote. The first being the change of the conception of architect as a closed off elitist professional working as an artistic genius designing cities for people, to the architect as a mediator between the ideas of the ordinary people and a complex urban development system designing cities with people. The second change is the shift in focus from a master-plan ending in a concrete easily rendered utopian end-product. Instead we choose to focus on a master-process, where the involvement and engagement of the future user groups is the most central goal. These are the main prerequisites to move towards a social sustainable democratic urban design ensuring the citizen's right to the city.

Embracing these democratic values in our work demands some drastic changes in the way we go about 'doing architecture'. We focus on 3 elements in devising our engagement processes: 1) Education of the ordinary citizen building a common language of architecture in the process, 2) building community and relations between the citizens and the cities they inhabit through engagement and participation, 3) making physical changes in close cooperation with the end-users and based on their needs and ideas.

In the different projects that arki_lab has been part of during the last couple of years, we have experimented with developing this approach. This has led to the use of different arki_tools, a set of easily adaptable tools for user engagement and participatory design processes. It is our hope that these tools, as consequences of our collaborative approach to urban design and architecture can be an inspiration for all to how we can change our perception of architecture to something living we do together. We hope this can be a first step towards a global movement of building cities *with* people.

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