

DESIGN FOR LIVING

WE TALK A LOT ABOUT PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING, AND IT TAKES MANY FORMS - BUT WHAT ABOUT CO-DESIGN - THE PRINCIPLE OF WORKING EQUALLY WITH CITIZENS ON THE DESIGN OF BUILDINGS AND PLACES? NICOLA HOMER RUNS THE RULE OVER CO-DESIGN IN THE UK



Ty Pawb in Wrexham brings together arts and markets

Consider showing an image of cool architecture in a face-to-face engagement. When you talk with your audience, people give opinions based on their own backgrounds and perspectives. Yet do they know the answer to how the building works?

This is where co-designing with communities can make a difference to planners in a consultation, by facilitating a knowledge-sharing process.

“When we do a normal engagement, we show images of buildings, we get feedback on them, but nobody actually knows how it is going to work. Co-design goes that one step further and starts to explore that,” says Sue Manns, the president of the RTPI for 2020.

Although there is not one defined principle of co-design, in a planning context it refers to the joint design of buildings and places by professionals and the people who will use them, usually through charrettes, workshops and seminars. It is a participatory process that acknowledges that users – members of

the community – have an expertise drawn from experience that complements that of trained professionals.

“In essence, what a community in a very interactive way can do is shape the brief,” explains Kevin Murray, past president of the RTPI and founding director of The Academy of Urbanism. “They then can evaluate different schemes, maybe by developers or designers, or other players, and they can assess the schemes against their brief.”

Key to the success of co-designing with communities is having a skilled facilitator to make sure that all voices are given equal weight and space. “When we are planning co-design we need to make sure that we involve people with very different

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backgrounds, very different approaches, very different ages, “because diversity of the group and diversity of thinking within that group is absolutely critical”, says Manns.

Tools have been developed that can aid the process. In Scotland, every council in Scotland has used the RTPI Award-winning Place Standard tool, which identifies priorities in areas for communities. It was produced through a collaboration of Architecture + Design Scotland, NHS Health Scotland and the national government.

In his experience of using the tool within health settings, says Jim MacDonald, chief executive of Architecture + Design Scotland, co-design has genuinely produced places that function better for the community. Its approach, which provides a simple – and visual – framework around which to structure conversations about place, can be applied as easily to strategic place planning as it can to planning better health services or decarbonisation in response to climate change.

MacDonald says that, through the new

Planning Act and forthcoming revisions to the National Planning Framework, the Scottish Government is encouraging all planning authorities to work in a participatory way. There are practical obstacles to overcome, including skills deficits and the reduction in the numbers of public sector planners over the past 10 years, yet MacDonald is very positive about potential outcomes.

“From our perspective as a national champion for good design in the built environment we don't think there's any other way than working closely with users, because all the evidence that we have got from our work, that's where you get the best outcomes in terms of the design quality, the support that the users get, and the outcomes that the money is being invested to achieve,” he says.

“So, if you want better learning environments, don't speak purely to clients, contractors and engineers, speak to the teachers and the pupils, and the parents and the community in which the school is.

“Similarly for a health environment, for a whole town, that's where you begin to

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understand how things work, and that's how you can use design to respond to those [people's] needs in creative and imaginative ways.”

James Davies, chief executive of Planning Aid Wales (PAW), agrees that it is important to engage with the users of spaces and places. “For me, planning is about *people* as much as it is about places. We should be planning *with* rather than *for* communities.”

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, places a legal duty on all public bodies to deliver sustainable

development and to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Welsh citizens. The act has established the Future Generations Commissioner's Office, which holds public bodies to account in relation to its requirements.

Alongside its well-being goals, the act requires public sector service providers to work collaboratively with communities.

“Requiring earlier community involvement could go some way to ensuring meaningful input into scheme design,” Davies observes. PAW itself recognises the potential benefits that digital engagement can bring to a planning system with limited resources. This month (April) it plans to launch an online video training platform for communities wishing to engage with the planning system.

Meaningful participation

In *Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City*, urbanists Richard Sennett and Pablo Sendra contend that co-design offers local authority planners a radical opportunity to change public space

for the better. But it's an approach that is not without risk – for both citizens and professionals.

“There is a window of opportunity here,” they write. “Local authorities and other institutions are starting to consider ‘co-design processes’ in creating public spaces. Although one must be cautious with the branding of participatory processes, since many of them imply forms of tokenism, some local authorities are exploring innovative forms of co-design and are starting to accept the risk of uncertainty.”

For the public sector the risk is in a loss of influence through a transfer of power from local authorities to local people. Such risk – of an imbalance of power either way – is perhaps magnified where participatory processes are not codified within planning systems.

As Angela Koch at Imagine Places says: “Communities and neighbourhood planning groups are very keen to participate in co-design processes concerned with important planning applications in their locality. However, the current planning system [in England] does not legally require applicants to facilitate meaningful co-design work throughout the application process.”

Those who have experienced effective co-design approaches are keen to see them used as a matter of course.

“I think we’re going to be seeing more of this as the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission report comes through,” notes Vanessa Gregory, chair of Look St Albans, which worked with the local planning authority on a consultation about the historic city’s civic centre. “The look and the feel of the development will play a large part in getting the community to accept new development.”

Despite the potential for co-design to give citizens a more positive role in planning there remains a formidable obstacle: as a 2019 survey by property group Grosvenor revealed, there is a significant lack of public trust in developers and the planning system.

It is at least partly up to planners to overcome this hurdle, says Sendra, who teaches a co-design continuing professional development course at UCL’s Bartlett School of Planning. “Most importantly, you need to gain the trust of people that are participating,” he stresses. “The best way to do this is through carefully listening to them and incorporating their ideas in the design. They need to be genuinely participating in the design.”

THE POLICY POSITION

England

Chapter 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework – ‘Achieving well-designed places’ – says, in paragraph 129: “Local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community...”

Wales

Planning Policy Wales 10 (2018) and the draft National Development Framework (2019) each recognise the role of community involvement in Place Plans. A range of tools facilitates a growing culture of co-design for planners, including the Design Commission for Wales’s ‘Shape my Town’ toolkit and Planning Aid Wales’s ‘Place Plans Toolkit’.

Scotland

The 2020 Planning Act promotes active community engagement through local place plans; a revised National Planning Framework is in process. In addition, community participation in planning is strengthened by the Community Empowerment Act (2015), the Place Standard tool and a Place Principle adopted by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.



[Above] The setting of The New Wimbledon Theatre in South London has been re-envisioned

[Below] Tŷ Pawb cultural centre in Wrexham

Communities and the organisations that represent them need to be treated with respect by professionals, insists Eileen Conn, coordinator of Peckham Vision.

The group has been heavily involved in co-design of several projects in the South London suburb, which has twice been named one of the coolest neighbourhoods globally by *Time Out* magazine.

In particular Peckham Vision took a role in shaping the redevelopment of the historic Peckham Rye Station between 2013 and 2016.

After initial enthusiasm, however, Conn is critical of the results and says opportunities were missed in exploring ways that the space could be used.

“Co-design must not be seen as a quick fix by adding the letters ‘co’ before all the other processes. It needs a transformative shift in the institutions’ and the professionals’ understanding of how to work with people who live and work in neighbourhoods,” she concludes. **P**

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Co-design across the UK

England: Play Wimbledon

London, England

Pablo Sendra of Seville-based Legadero led a process looking at how two public spaces in the town centre could be improved: a cul-de-sac running alongside the popular pub Alexandra pub and a road junction beside New Wimbledon Theatre.

Sendra’s approach was twofold, employing co-design workshops with residents and businesses and creating playful activities and installations *in situ* to test potential uses of the spaces.

Preliminary designs, following feedback from residents, were presented to Merton Council and informed the Future Wimbledon masterplan. “Our co-design process has influenced the masterplan, through doing a type of engagement that goes beyond the formal consultation,” says Sendra (see bit.ly/planner0520-Wimbledon)



Wales: Tŷ Pawb (Everyone’s House)

Wrexham, Wales

Tŷ Pawb is the name given to a new model for art spaces, which involved relocating the town’s Oriel Gallery into an existing building that already housed a multistorey car park and a market hall. By mingling arts, including exhibitions and live performance, with the building’s everyday use, Tŷ Pawb aims to make the arts more accessible and relevant to people’s lives.

The co-design process took two routes: artist



Tim Denton led community workshops to create furniture for the food court, and architecture practice Featherstone and Young worked with residents on the concept of ‘baggy space’, in which designers “do as little as they need to do in order for other people to take ownership”.

“From a planning perspective, this is a project that helps to regenerate the town centre,” says architect Sarah Featherstone. “You can just work with what is there and make it better.”

Scotland: Queens Quay Clydebank, Scotland

Regeneration of the derelict former John Brown shipyard is being supported by West Dunbartonshire Council’s Place & Design Panel, a pool of built environment professionals plus artists, historians, accessibility experts and others with local knowledge.

The council convened the panel to raise the standard of design of buildings and places by offering objective and professional advice to designers, developers and other council services”. A young placemakers panel also brought young people’s perspectives into the process.

“Quality design is not only just about the buildings,” says Pamela Clifford, the council’s chief planning officer. “It is also about the landscaping and that is something that has come out of the panel, the importance of the environment surrounding buildings.”

Heaney HomePlace Bellaghy, Northern Ireland

The RTPI Award-winning Seamus Heaney HomePlace houses an exhibition space, a performance space, a community meeting space and a gateway for tourists to the wetlands and mountains.

Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK, promotes pre-application community consultation. But in this case the council, as the owner and developer, was able to offer full participation in the planning process. Early in the design process, architects and planners worked with members of the Heaney family, the Bellaghy village community, and user groups from the arts, education and tourism sector, as well as statutory consultees.

This process was integral to developing the building’s character. For example, the council worked with Heaney’s family to ensure that personal items belonging to Seamus Heaney were respectfully housed, the performance space was designed to house a large audience while maintaining an intimacy, and the design respected the historic form of this plantation village.

