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# TEMPORAL SCALES OF PARTICIPATION: A RIFT BETWEEN ACTORS AND SPECTATORS

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## ABSTRACT

Participatory design is a future-oriented discipline, but there is an imbalance in agency between those who produce future imaginations, and those who consume them. This paper argues that we, as designers and producers of future-oriented design interventions, hold responsibilities towards third party “spectators”. The paper departs from an incident that took place two years *after* a Future Workshop had taken place between public sector workers and citizens in Malmö, Sweden, when a concerned third party mistook the workshop’s potential and preferred imaginations of the future for truths. In the light of Hannah Arendt’s writings on imagination the paper separates actors from spectators, marking a difference in agency but also a difference in temporality. For the *actors’* imagination is directed towards the *future*, while it for the *spectators* is directed towards the *past*, or present at best.

## INTRODUCTION

The discipline of Participatory Design holds a commitment to furthering representation and to navigating the slippery slopes of democratic negotiations (e.g. Binder et al 2015; Björgvinsson et al 2010). When participatory design takes place within the public sector (as in this case) which by its very nature is intrinsically tied to the public sphere/realm (Arendt, 1958), we must be conscious of the politics we partake in as we enter into or create new *agoras*

(Huybrecht et al, 2018). We must care for our imaginations, as they entangle participants both today and tomorrow.

This paper seeks to unfold an anecdote from a participatory planning project, in order to discuss the contrasting tensions that presented themselves in the aftermath of a *Future Workshop* (Jungk and Müller, 1987). The paper argues, in the light of Hannah Arendt (1958; 2005), that imagination(s) is a quintessential part of political action. To make something new, and perhaps even something better, we have to be able to step outside the known present. While this paper departs from Participatory Design the need to predict, forecast, and imagine the future for better or for worse is something most contemporary design scholars are well versed with. In fact, many would argue, as Herbert Simon (1988) famously wrote, that *to design is to device courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones*. What designers in general, and participatory designers in particular, can learn from Hannah Arendt’s thoughts about imagination is twofold: Firstly, Imagination is always bounded to reality; Secondly, imagination is tied to both judgement and action and hence performed differently for different actors. In Arendt’s terms imagination separates actors from spectators, marking a difference in agency but also a difference in temporality. For the *actors’* imagination is directed towards the *future*, while it for the spectators is directed towards the *past*, or present at best (Arendt, 2005; Tyner, 2017). It is therefore imperative that we, the dreamers, do not forget to bind our imaginations.

## A GREY MORNING IN EARLY SPRING

*It is a grey morning in early spring, and I am queuing for a coffee when the phone rings. On the other end of the connection is a colleague, a casual acquaintance. Audibly stressed, she is asking what I know about the plans for the new development plans for her residential area. ‘Nothing’ I say but as the conversation went on it became clear that I did, in fact, know these plans. As it*

turns out, I was one the original creators of these plans. Now my colleague on the phone is asking me when the proposed construction work is set to start, and if it is too late to register a complaint. She can't live like this, she says, the new houses will be much too close to her home. She will have to move.

Unknowingly to me, this story began two years earlier, at a workshop. As part of a broader innovation project initiated by the municipality we were encouraging local residents to imagine new futures, to leave behind the known present and imagine the area as they wished for it to be in 30 years' time. The result of the workshop enumerated to several interesting conversations about the current state of things; strengthened relationships between the public sector workers and the local residents; a few visualisations and some concrete suggestions on how the area might be improved. As a Ph.D. researcher attached to the project, I wrote a quick summary and a reflection of the events and handed them over to the project's communication manager who added them to the project's website on the municipality website. And there they remained until a year later when the project finished: reports were written and presentations were delivered to the municipality where we accounted for the strengths and weaknesses of our work.

Another year later and I'm standing with my phone in one hand and a coffee in the other, as my colleague explains to me how she has found these plans, and how she has searched for days, without luck, for someone within the municipality to speak to. Seeing as we worked at the same university, she managed to get hold of my contact details, and was now on the phone asking how long before she had to leave her home. Of course, none of the imaginations that the workshop produced two years back were designed to be built. At least not without proper consultation, without meeting the regulations in the municipality's detailed development plan, or without the approval of concerned authorities. But without the context of the project the intentions of the drawings were unclear. Left as they were in the municipality's cluttered digital archives the imaginations that we had produced were open to interpretation by anyone who happened upon them. While I managed to convince my colleague that she would not have to move, I couldn't help but wonder how many people, like her, had found the plans - and been terrified? People who did not work at the university, and no internal phonebook to consult who did not have anyone to ask. People who may even have made plans based on our imaginations, perhaps some of them had already moved?

## ACTORS, IMAGINATION AND THE FUTURE

A key issue in this anecdote is that imaginations behave differently depending on how you relate to them. That is, their performance and significance is dependent on whether you are a producer of imaginations, or if you are a consumer of them. In Hannah Arendt's terms imagination separates actors from spectators, marking a difference in agency but also a matter of temporal scales. For the *actors'* imagination is directed towards the *future*, while it for the spectators is directed towards the past, or present at best (Arendt, 2005; Tyner, 2017). This will almost inevitably cause a rift, such as the one seen above, where we had asked the actors engaged in the Future Workshop to leave the past behind. Unconstrained by the known issues of their present they would imagine a, in their minds, preferable future world. By doing so we - the designers and city planners who were also active participants in the imagination process - were told much about what was lacking in the area today. We were told, for example that the area had insufficient childcare, and that the day-care centres would benefit from better outdoor playgrounds. In the workshop we discussed potential solutions such as if a public park could be a common solution that would benefit both new and old day-care centres. We were also told that the public transport in the area was poor, and that flying cars would certainly be an improvement - but if flying cars was not an option, perhaps we could work with cable cars? The sky was the limit.

Including the city planners and other public sector workers was an important part of the workshop. By doing so we facilitated a dialogue with local citizens that they themselves had expressed a wish for. By working alongside the city planners the local citizens were afforded a window of insight into the city planning process. It was a space for mutual learning. But it was a limited opportunity, and a temporal connection when the majority of the group only meeting for a day and a small number of core participants working together for a few months. Hannah Arendt, in her essay *Truth and Politics* (Arendt, 2006) stresses that imaginations must be bound. This means that to produce a vision for the future we must anchor it in the constrictions that are shared truths to us all "Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us" (Arendt, 2006., p.259). The meeting between citizens and public sector workers served to do this: it helped create a common ground, and identify common issues between the two groups. It was used as a way of *grounding imagination* (Büscher et al, 2004), and may also be viewed as a situating action.

The future-oriented approach to Participatory Design that was used in the case above is far from novel. And while there are surprisingly few articles written on the traditional format of the Future Workshop (see, for

example, Jungk and Müller, 1987), there has been no shortage of critical discussions around neither the benefits or challenges of future-oriented Participatory Design (Neumann and Star, 1996; Halse et al., 2010; Ehn et al., 2014; Suchman et al, 2009; Storni, 2013; and Hyysalo et al, 2014 to mention a few). The issue of temporal scales is integral also in the practices of infrastructuring: “an ongoing, long-term and emergent designerly effort aimed at aligning humans and non-humans (technologies, resources, spaces) for the emergence of new practices” (Seravalli, 2018., p.3). In fact, it is often described as one of the cornerstones of participatory practices: “Local knowledge production and collaborative prototyping are still fundamental to participatory design, but now, typically, this mundane future making [...] takes place as design in use, not before use, and is often staged to deal constructively with controversies” (Ehn et al., 2014, p.7).

#### SHARED PUBLIC TIME AND SPACE

The notion of the public space as an agnostic space has a temporal element has been discussed by Hernberg and Mazé (2018). Agonism in Participatory Design is often discussed as a way of allowing controversial issues or matters of concern to co-exist, rather than aiming for consensus. Hernberg and Mazé suggest that paying attention to temporality - or temporal use (TU) - can be a way of uncovering agonism over time. They elaborate that “The problem is also identified by critics of formal participatory planning, who argue that official, legally required forms of participation are often “tokenistic” and aim for consensus and legitimization of already made decisions. Thus, if participation is disguised as democratic, it is used in fact as a means of control and a way to depoliticize planning” (Hernberg and Mazé, 2018.,p.3). The future workshop, in the anecdote that this paper rests upon, did take place as part of a formal participatory planning project, and it did indeed strive towards democratising a process that conventionally is gatewayed by formal institutions of power (such as, in this case, the municipality or the university). To do this the Future Workshop was forced to challenge the bureaucratic structures that would otherwise govern the planning process. Bureaucracy has a dual nature: it is both a means to fair treatment, a standardisation, *and* a restrictive measure that prevents actions outside the framework, limiting agency (Mukhtar-Landgren, Nyberg and Paulsson, 2019). It falls outside the scope of this paper to provide a satisfactory discussion of how the bureaucratic duality was visible in the municipal archival practices. It is nonetheless worth mentioning that the standardisation of all municipal documents demonstrated both a “democratic” open-to-all ideology, while simultaneously being stripped of its situated history and personal accountability. The archival traces that the workshop left behind - read by actors as “visions” and read by at least one spectator as a policy

document – came to be the infrastructural breakdown that illuminated the rift between those with agency to act and those without.

The group that participated in the Future Workshop was granted more agency to move and act in the planning process, but it also meant letting go of those procedures of equality that bureaucracy strives to uphold. The ethical strategy that many Participatory Designers apply in such situations is a raw, tentative Ethics of Care (Toronto, 1994; Bellacasa, 2017) which would suggest that we hold obligations to those in our immediate surroundings, as they are the ones that will be most acutely affected by our actions. This begs the question: What about those outside our immediate surroundings? What responsibility do we - as Participatory Designers - hold towards them when we attempt democratisation?

#### THE SPECTATORS AND THE WORLD AS IT IS

Indeed, I argue that in Arendt’s understanding of imaginations the Future Workshop could be seen as a democratisation. Arendt, in a text entitled *Imaginations* (1970) draws upon Emmanuel Kant’s distinction between intuition and concepts as the two twin pillars of knowledge “Intuition gives us something particular; the concept makes this particular known to us” (Arendt, 2020., p. 157). Coming to the table of the Future Workshop, the participants shared their intuitions through the means of imaginations, and left the table with common concepts. Through the political act of sharing ideas they set something in motion. After all, we must talk to others to be able to include their perspectives in our imaginations (Benhabib 1988). The participants become, as mentioned above, actors who change the world. But while we - as participatory designers - can seek to include many in our workshops, and can pay particular mind to those marginalised voices who are often otherwise excluded, we can never include *everyone*. Those who view and judge the actions and imaginations of the actors are referred to as *Spectators* within Arendt’s reasoning around judgment (2006). Spectators view and judge the actions and imaginations of the actors - who attempt to change the world - based on *the world as it is*.

The woman who called me two years after the workshop had taken place did not view the actors’ imaginations in the light of their envisioned future, but viewed it in the light of her lived present. While it was a bounded imagination of the world that the Future Workshop had produced, it failed to generate meaning to her. The visions in themselves could not, in this case, make up for the division between participants and non-participants. Between actors and spectators. It is perhaps a good time to remember one of Arendt’s most cited phrases:

“The world and the people who inhabit it are not the same. The world lies between people, and this in-between [...] is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe.” (Arendt, 1995., p.4)

#### SUMMARY

This paper has sought to discuss the imbalance of agency between actors and spectators within future-oriented participatory design interventions. The paper has suggested that this imbalance can be understood as a temporal rift, and that this, in turn effects the longevity of our visions. Misunderstandings could be said to be inevitable when working with large and/or disparate groups, and this is an issue that transcends both time and space.

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