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Modell of the Viva-housing project in Gothenburg presented by the cooperative Housing provider Riksbyggen.
Photo: Sten Gromark.

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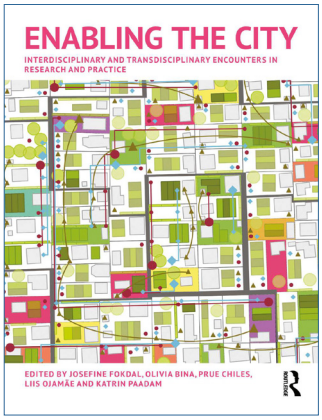
REVIEWER: PEHR MIKAEL SÄLLSTRÖM[1]



An individualist turn in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies?

Given the importance of integration of different knowledge for the sustainable development projected by Agenda 2030, a new profession of integration experts is on the rise. There is now a momentum to present models of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary (ITD) projects to professionalize education and practice.[2]

Enabling the city covers several aspects of ITD project management and introduces a philosophical reflection on the epistemology of the field. The core of the book is constituted by 9 theoretical case studies and 7 stories from practice that ground a theoretical framing of ITD projects. In total, 39 researchers primarily in architecture and urban design from 27 institutions in 11 countries have contributed to the report in 13 different projects (some overlap between the cases and the stories). 6 sociologists, 3 geographers and 2 philosophers also contributed. The book is one result from the European network INTREPID funded by EU Horizon 2020 during the years 2015–2019.

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2 This was for example argued at the webinar "Professionalising Inter- and Transdisciplinary Research Expertise" organized by SHAPE-ID (Shaping interdisciplinary practices in Europe) on December 10 in 2020.

This book is a useful text to support the planning of ITD projects. The 314 pages are filled with flowing writing with colour photos of project settings and includes many valuable references to theories in the field.

The theoretical propositions in the book have arisen from a series of transnational conferences between the researchers responsible for the case studies.

The main transcultural reflection from the network experience is that it is a fundamental, enabling condition that a general disposition to learning is embedded in the context of the project. But after reading the book, I have some doubts about the completeness of this conclusion.

The enabling conditions agreed on in the group are the significance of words, time, context and competence to manage processes. This includes a general disposition of openness to listen and learn from others through introspective reflection on the individual and team levels – and in the society in which the project is embedded. The experience of the group of researchers indicates that there are seldom sufficient resources for the socializing and reflection on the meaning of ITD needed to build trust between disciplines and stakeholders to enable integrated approaches. They advise that their provisional model will be helpful to build trustful relations if it is introduced already during the planning of an ITD project. They argue that apart from the normal consideration of the phases of co-design, co-production and dissemination an ITD project can also benefit from a consideration of continuation of the process after the closure of the project.

The cases demonstrate the significance of discussions on the meaning of words. For example, in the traffic regulation project for Tallinn managed by the sociologists and co-editors Katrin Paadam and Liis Ojamäe, the city commissioned separate research reports with a multidisciplinary approach. This approach left the planners with different disciplinary representations of the situation that were not integrated, as assumed in an interdisciplinary approach. A transdisciplinary project would also assume that “knowledge, values and interests from professionals, practitioners, decisionmakers and/or stakeholders” pragmatically guide the theorizing (Fokdal et al., 2021, p. 44). A similar bias to disciplinary separation, or lack of understanding of the concept of ITD, is also characteristic in the cases from Ljubljana and Plovdiv. This implies a connection with the specific condition in the former communist countries in east Europe that combine an authoritative planning system with market-economic, neoliberal approaches. The case of the Stuttgart Parklet project testifies to the contrary of the mandate of science in the German democracy to initiate structured discussions on a project with citizens, negotiate relations between different administrative layers and empower a local community.

A conspicuous absence in the theoretical framing is the role of visual and material mediators. For example, in the case of regeneration of public space and community values in Ljubljana, the objective to introduce more participatory planning methods in the city administration are supported by the invention of a broad register of material staging that succeeds in mobilizing the local community (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
A material staging of public space called the "public picnic" to gather data and mobilize the local community in the neighbourhood Ruski Car *in Ljubljana, Slovenia.*
PHOTO: BLAŽ JAMŠEK / UIRS PHOTO ARCHIVE HUMAN CITIES LJUBLJANA. FIGURE II.9.3, P. 174.

In a case study on housing for dementia, human geographer Hans Thor Andersen and architect Inge Mette Kirkeby argue that ITD knowledge is prevented by what they refer to as "mental barriers" that must be lowered or removed. They argue with the sociologist Bruno Latour (1986) that the transfer of knowledge between disciplines is always mediated and that "each time content is translated into another mediator, the content undergoes change" (Andersen & Kirkeby in Fokdal et al., 2021, p. 159) similar to how metaphors are used to transfer some features from one object to describe another. However, they do not present what the specific misinterpretations are, nor the more specific role of the mediators,

in their case. But this points at the general significance of mediators in interdisciplinary knowledge production as a condition for the exchange of knowledge. Other examples from the book can be used to add understanding to the significance of mediators.

In the case studies Gagliato and Stocksbridge, co-editor Prue Chiles, professor of architecture at Newcastle University, makes strong arguments for the significance of visualizations. In the workshop with the local community in Gagliato, the "visual props" made by the students enabled the development of a workable relationship with the "townsfolk" beyond the language barrier. In the case of transformation to renewable energy in the town of Stocksbridge near Sheffield, the "visioning work", enacted by a physical topographic model of the valley, the spatial relations of existing houses and possible locations for renewable energy installations like windmills for power supply, made by her students is a centrepiece. Chiles argues that this implies that collaborative visioning enhanced social learning and developed the social capital of the community, by giving the citizens an overview of spatial relations that embodied power (see Figure 2).

Another observation is that the concept of transdisciplinary knowledge production ambiguously refers both to the outcome of research and practice. This requires a discussion on the ontological distinction between different kinds of knowledge objects and their different purposes (Dunin-Woyseth & Nilsson, 2012). In the report this distinction is only hinted at in the comment by the philosophers Erik Weber and Julie Mennes from Ghent university. They make a commendable framing of the ontological issue with the concept of the "scenario", but the investigation does not reach all the way to clarify this difference.

In a post-reflection on the collaborative experience, co-editor Olivia Bina, a researcher in geography at the University of Lisbon, together with Christoph Woiwode, professor in economic geography at RWTH Aachen university, argue that the ideological dimensions embodied in national ITD practices are not sufficiently discussed in the case studies, and they propose that it could be a theme for a follow-up to strengthen the field.

I agree with Bina and Woiwode that the significance of the political and institutional context could have been given more attention in the theoretical discussion. Several of the case studies testify to the significance of political support from the local, regional and national levels of governance to realize ITD projects.

In general, the ITD projects are often motivated by the political/practical objective to mobilize citizens to give them a voice in the discourse on the city and to demonstrate the democratic, informative and community values and potentials embedded in citizen participation. This embodi-

ment of a democratic tendency in combined ITD research and practice is only marginally discussed in the cases observed by Bina and Woiwode. Depending on which actors in practice that are included in the ITD project, the logic of knowledge production will also vary as indicated by the case studies.

Figure 2
Participants discussing around the landscape model of the valley at Stocksbridge with wind power installations. FIGURE II.1.3, p. 55.
PHOTO: PRUE CHILES.

The practice purpose of including researchers in the cases that are initiated by actors from practice is often to get new knowledge that can transform the understanding of a local problem and identify new possibilities. The purpose can also be to facilitate the resolution of conflicts that arise from different disciplinary claims on the project, by getting access to the most advanced knowledge in the field. Professor emeritus in architecture Sten Gromark, from Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, argues that the case of Brf Viva, a housing cooperative in Gothenburg produced by the cooperative housing provider Riksbyggen, succeeded in making both social and technical innovations through collaboration with researchers from Chalmers University of Technology. The case of the development of the small town of Gagliato in the undeveloped region of Calabria in southern Italy is one of the most inspiring examples of political support in the book. They have an annual international science festival centred on nanotechnology, which vitalizes the local economy. This organization initiated the ITD project. This enabled the researchers and students to work in very close collaboration with the local government and the citizens, celebrated as “citizen science”.

The case study of Brf Viva in Gothenburg instead highlights the enabling significance of the cooperative and their ambitious socio-ecological policy, as the main condition for the success of the ITD project. The contrary

is the case in the project Human Cities in Ljubljana, the traffic regulation in Tallinn or the regeneration of an old town district in Plovdiv. In these cases, the public initiators disregard or underestimate the significance of the project results.

The cases that are initiated by research instead demonstrate a tendency to emphasize the purpose to understand how knowledge can be better integrated in local development projects, through interaction of stakeholders, experts and researchers, and how students can be educated in ITD practice.

The successful experimenting with the removal of parklets in Stuttgart, managed by Raphael Dietz with co-editor Josefine Fokdal, both in urban design, implies the advantage when the disciplinary actors have developed an interdisciplinary culture before the start of the project. In this case, an existing interdisciplinary research group of architects, landscape architects and urban designers, organized in a Real World Laboratory at the local university, initiated the citizens' mobilization. They succeeded in transforming the public perception of public spaces in the local community to allow for the removal of parking lots. This case implies that from the pedagogical point of view there must be a differentiation between disciplinary and interdisciplinary training. Many studies of ITD argue that participation in ITD requires a disciplinary identity. That allows for a focus on the interaction between research and practice and to engage fully with the complexities of practice instead of research, as demonstrated by the Stuttgart case.

A general reflection from reading the inspiring examples included in *Enabling the city* is that the theoretical focus on individual dispositions of the participants, rather than the condition of context and mediators for the knowledge production, implies a paradoxical, epistemological bias for individualist subjectivity embodied in the theoretical framing of ITD proposed by the collaborative. Could it be that this reflects the domination of educators in the group? Or does it possibly represent a more fundamental change in ITD studies, to focus more on individual dispositions and less on relations?

The conclusion implied by this theorizing, which is also explicitly stated in the text, is that participation in ITD projects is a competency which requires attention in the curriculum of architectural and urban studies, not only on a group level but also on the individual level of subject formation. This book is a strong argument for the need of preparatory training in interdisciplinary co-production of knowledge before engaging in ITD projects.

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