In touch with place

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Introducing the theme Tools for interaction in urban planning, Björn Malbert focused attention on approaches in planning practice that explore new tools for interaction. One of these is called local action approach. The intention of the local action approach is to develop tools able to empower the users to act and take an active part in development projects concerning their own place. The cases described in this article are examples of this approach.

The first example is about a regeneration scheme for an industrial estate in Göteborg. The objective of this scheme was to initiate a course of rehabilitation taking into account the experience and points of view of the businesses and their employees. In this way, it was anticipated the limited resources of the local authority would be supplemented by what the businesses could do. The second example is how a former mill at Tollered, a rural textile community 30 km east of Göteborg, was transformed to a centre for small businesses. Also, in this case, the approach demanded the businesses to take an active part in the development process.

Both are examples of experiments – with links to research – of how to get users to collaborate with local authorities. They were carried out during the first half of the 1980s. Looking at these cases today, the important aspects are how the users developed shared meaning and action. This in turn supports the practice of the users, but not always the results expected by the local authority, or the researchers. To shed light on these aspects, in this article perspectives and terms from design theory are used.

If the aim is to support the development of practice at a specific place, the built environment becomes important as a tool for interaction. The built environment is an arena for practice to take place. It is also an artefact that can gradually be formed to support and stabilise the shared meaning and action framing the place. In addition, the built environment and its construction may be used as a mediator of intentions from the global level downwards, and from the local level upwards. As such it can be seen as a tool for mutual learning between practices at different places, and at different planning levels, necessary for sustainable development.

Three decades of attempts to broaden participation in planning

During the 1970s, people gathered on the streets and squares and at their workplaces to protest against changes affecting their conditions. Residents tried to stop the demolition of old established housing areas. City dwellers fought to preserve green corridors, and stop the development of motorways. Employees criticised inhuman production environments. Citizens protested against the development of nuclear energy, and other strategic decisions they perceived as being threatening to the eco-cycle that they themselves were part of. The common environment became both an important issue, as well as a scene for protesting against decisions on the part of both the authorities and companies, and to formulate alternative solutions.

In Sweden, these actions resulted in changed legislation. Tenants are now able to voice their opinions in connection with the refurbishment of their flats. Town plans are exhibited for public consultation. Employees must approve changes in their working environment etc. Parallel in time, research was developed in conjunction with the introduction of new methods and processes in local authorities and private companies.

This Swedish research tradition has continually broadened its focus:

– During the 1970s, research was focused on supporting the users of the built environment as new actors in the planning process. The relevant issue was how the citizen could articulate his/hers views, and be able to express them in dealings with the local authority and companies. It was a way of working related to what in international planning literature might be termed as 'advocacy planning'.[1]

– During the 1980s, the task was expanded to test methods and processes able to integrate citizens' experience with the planning actors in local government departments and private companies. The objective was to produce broad and 'well-rooted' bases for decision-making. The development work was often carried out in the form of pilot projects. This task is often described in the planning discourse as a legitimating decision-centred approach.[2]

– During the 1990s, opportunities for creating learning processes came into the foreground. The objectives were now to by-pass one-off experiments and make the broadened processes a part of everyday planning tasks, and in the long-term practical sustainable action. These objectives can be seen as part of the broad international discourse attending communication and interaction to promote shared actions in situations when no one is in charge.[3]

My own research has been part of this history. I have worked with the careful renewal of industrial areas in conjunction with local authorities. This task has been carried out together with fellow researchers in the fields of business development and urban planning.[4] In this paper, I present two examples of research projects typical of the 1980s. These are based on the experience from the 1970s, and discussed here from the perspective of the 1990s.

Example one: Kungssten

During a two-year period, between 1985–87, a regeneration scheme for the Kungssten Industrial Estate in Göteborg was implemented. The objective of this scheme was to initiate a course of rehabilitation taking into account the experience and points of view of the businesses and their employees. This scheme was planned and carried out as a mutual development project between researchers at the School of Architecture at Chalmers, and local council officials from the Urban Planning Department.[5]

The main implement used in the process for improving Kungssten was the so-called work-book method, which had been developed earlier by the Norwegian Institute for Building Research. This method is so named because it is based on a series of illustrated manuals. To start with, all users in an area are asked to give their views of its problems and assets, and to present ideas for improvements. Because everything expressed by everyone participating is compiled and handed back to everyone concerned in several turns of reflection, a common picture of the area gradually emerge. The idea is that the dialogues shall involve the users in such a way that they are prepared to negotiate, and if possible also to take an active part in any chan-

ges that are decided upon. During the two years this experimental scheme was being carried out in Kungssten, a large proportion of the firms in the area became involved.

Some of the proposed measures wanted by the firms at Kungssten were implemented; others were not. Generally speaking, the improvements carried out were of a traditional kind. They were primarily solutions aimed at increasing access and mobility. These are conventional in the sense of being commonplace in other renewal schemes, without the kind of involvement of the businesses practised in the Kungssten project. The more socially oriented step-by-step solutions proposed by the businesses could not be catered for within the framework of the local authority planning procedures. It is however important to point out that a number of measures normally implemented in connection with the renewal of industrial zones were not carried out if they were against the wishes of the business firms. This resulted in increased respect for the work of the local authority by the businesses in the area, despite the disappointment over the fact that few concrete measures had come about.

As a tool for the users to express a common picture of the area and a strategy for what and how changes should be carried out, the work-book method functioned well. What was not solved in the Kungssten case was how this type of dialogue can be absorbed in practice and effect actions even after the one-off experiment. The dialogue in Kungssten ended up between two different practices – that of the small enterprises and that of the local authority. The former knew what they wanted, but had no means of carrying out the work themselves; the latter could not fit these wishes into its practice.

The decision-making process in a local authority is based on political representation. The councillors themselves were not directly involved in the development process. They supported the experiment and allocated resources, but only wanted to support changes that could be applied elsewhere in the city. Thus, the politicians' commitment to represent all the citizens in their community prevented them from supporting the upgrading of the area according to the local firms' intentions. This dilemma was solved in the next case presented.

Example two: Nääs
At the beginning of the 1980s, the Nääs Mill at Tollered, a rural textile community 30 km east of Göteborg, closed down. What could be done with 14–15000 sq. m of redundant floorspace in such a location? With the aim of broadening the local council's industrial and commercial base, as well as reducing its dependence on Göteborg, the local council at that time was in the process of formulating a business development programme. This programme became linked to the empty mill at Nääs when the idea was coined that the mill premises could be refurbished for small businesses. This concept was suggested by a team of researchers at the School of Architecture. Backed up by this idea, the local authority business development officer formulated a vision for how the cotton mill could be transformed into a business centre over a period of 5 years. When this vision gradually gained the support of the councillors the business development officer opened an on-site office at the mill.

The refurbishment and letting-out of the premises did not follow a conventional course. The emphasis was on developing enterprise at the mill, and the creation of a business environment. For this purpose the site and the refurbishment works became useful tools. The normally separated processes of design, construction, letting-out and management were fully integrated and carried out in small stages. In this way the refurbishment could be formed according to the needs of each tenant. The persons that had time and skill could also do work on their own unit and as a result get a low rent.

The development officer and his team started off from a rudimentary, and at the same time somewhat vague vision as to what constituted a business centre, and a complex of old mill buildings. Externally this simple vision was easy to advertise. The historical built environment was used to promote the vision in a concrete way. Internally the vagueness and uncertainty as to the 'end result' became a positive challenge. The vision had to be brought about by the combined efforts

of the individual tenant enterprises together with the development team.

Tenants turned up from the region around. They became enthusiastic initially relating themselves to the historic setting, then to the way the business centre gradually took shape. Especially the events that were organised at the mill and the artists that moved in, together with the jumble sales and small shops that were set up, kept up the interest for visiting the mill to see what was happening there. As the development team was based in the mill buildings, it could canalise the enthusiasm to new ventures. A large proportion of the small firms that established themselves in the mill were newly started.

In this case, the local authority allowed the site-based 'free' process to take place independently of the normal planning procedures. This was accomplished by means of what I now term as 'boundary regulating instruments'. These stipulated, for example, how regulations that applied generally within the area of its jurisdiction, such as public safety factors and what was democratically acceptable, were to be applied within the project, without demanding detailed drawings and calculations in connection with each stage of the refurbishment works. Examples of such 'bridging instruments' were the politically elected executive group and a working party of council officials. The task of the latter throughout the course of the project was to discuss priorities and uncertainties with the development team at the mill. Another such boundary-regulating instrument was the basic 'letting-out' plan formulated at the beginning of the project. In this, certain principles were set out as to how the two divergent rationalities of action – within the mill and within the local authority administration – should co-operate.

As anticipated, it took roughly five years to fully transform the complex into a business centre with about 65 different firms. The project attracted quite a lot of attention, and many visited the centre. Those of us who were involved from the beginning became increasingly confounded by how difficult it was to communicate what we consider to be the most significant factors in a project of this kind.[6]

What can be learnt from these examples?

I was involved in both cases described above as a researcher. As a result of the Kungssten case I anticipated refurbishment works to upgrade the area. As a result of the Nääs case I expected a business centre that could provide a basis for a new way of working in the region. The aim of my research was to show how the methods used could be used again with similar results. In this way, I would be able to contribute to the discussion of tools able to empower the tenants/users to take an active part in developing their own places of work.

However, neither of these cases could be described as I had anticipated. The methods used did not relate directly to the anticipated results. And for this reason I have continued to study and write about these projects. I have been searching for both a good way of describing these examples, and to find the concepts that can carry my experience forward.

The important result as I see it today, looking back again at the process at Kungssten, was not the refurbishment work as such. It was the shared view or meaning of the place itself that the dialogue created. The excitement of getting to know each others views probably also generated the interest that carried the people in Kungssten through the work needed to fill in the workbooks and attend all the meetings. Kungssten became more appreciated as a working area than before, both because the workbooks showed that it functioned well for most firms, and because the people involved came to know each other better. Moreover, the programme they came to an agreement about made them confident about the future. They knew what they wanted, and they formed a business association to manage negotiations with the local authority and further dialogues within the area.

The important results of the Nääs example, as I see it today, is how shared actions could establish a new practice and thus create a new place – in this case a business centre for small firms – in a village that for 150 years had been dominated by one single company. The local authority provided the conditions and resources needed to initiate this development process. It could eventually run by its own, and after 5 years 'break even'. The development team, situated in the mill, used the

resources of the historic place, and the new vision to gradually build up the networks that established a new local entrepreneurial culture. The networks of civic involvement in the local area became at the same time means and outcomes of the project. The representative decision-making processes in the local authority were thus both able to frame and encourage the up of relationships building needed for such a venture.

In both the Kungssten and the Nääs cases the relevant task was not to make knowledge or visions as such explicit, but to make them accessible in such a way that they could function as tools for interaction, which in turn would be able to generate practice. This way of working is characteristic of design. Designers explicitly make something that will, at its best, directly and implicitly be used. Design theory both describes the way of working when designing, and the development of its methods. Here I shall briefly present design theory, and use some of its terms to highlight my examples.

Design theory as a tool for creating practice.

The word design refers to the act of creating; giving shape to something, and the notion that moves this act forward. In an action where something is changed, the intention is displayed in what is created, in the artefact. The artefact may be a product or something else created by a human being. Research on and for design has its origins in the post World War II period with its increased manufacture of products. It is based on a desire to both rationalise the design work and propagate for the creative element.[7]

To start with work was concentrated on developing systematic methods for a logical design process (1st generation). Later a new generation of design theorists evolved where the focus was on the issue of managing diffuse, complicated and value-loaded problems, so called 'wicked problems' (2nd generation). A later generation primarily drew attention to the way of working and the competence of the designer, and that design may be regarded as a specific way of thinking (3rd generation).[8]

How does design come about? Donald Schön has in a well-known example monitored how an architectural student sets about the task of designing a school. To assist her she has an experienced architect in the studio.[9] With this example Schön shows how the architect tries out different solutions by sketching on paper, it is like a reflective conversation with the situation. The task is to get involved in and be able to deal with a complicated and value-loaded situation. The example shows how the architect as a designer tries to find an organisational principal to provide the situation in question with a meaning, and to make the problem manageable. In this manner the situation becomes framed, and it becomes possible to test various principle solutions within the framework of a certain rationality, a means of seeing the situation as if... The solutions are tested in the form of sketches. Every such enables the architect to take a step back and allow the expression of the new situation to answer back. In this manner the architect is able to judge if the situation must be re-interpreted, and the search for new principles and solutions carried further, or if the solution in question is able to provide a basis for further work.

Such dialogues with the situation and different design proposals involve changing between steering a proposal and being open for all the aspects, between a deliberate reasoning and an interpretation based on observation with all senses. By allowing the proposal to answer back, the non-intended and the non-controlled can be brought forth. Indeed, one might say that it is first when the proposed idea answers back that the originator of the idea knows what he/she has achieved and is working towards.[10]

Schön regards the dialogue with the situation as an 'art of practice' common to professions. Through such dialogues knowledge-in-action is created. When changes occur or when new routines are being implemented, the knowledge and routines in use will have to become more explicit in the form of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. In this way, the art of practice can be seen as a theory of knowledge in which design practice and design theory are useful tools in a consciously effort to develop practice.

Practice as a mutual design process

I have above given design a broad meaning. I have connected it to the art of practice. I try to use it as a means

of describing and developing practice. Practice is not a creation of one man. It is generated inter-subjectively in action between people and objects within reach of each other. It can, using design terms, be described as a situated mutual design process. Reflections are used in such a design process as inner indicators to help direct the process.Apart from cognitive reflections, there are also reflections around aesthetical and ethical questions.[11]

The Kungssten example in this perspective may be seen as a design process that created a mutual picture of the area, that supported the existing users and strengthened their relationships. The Nääs example may be conceived as a design process for new users, knowledge and objectives being developed along the road. It involved communication in its broadest sense, everything from legislative agreements to what the individual is able to experience with all senses and as a part of a cultural community. Reflections were carried out in the form of series of dialogues, each 'seeing the situation as if…' and each focusing on artefacts that could transform the situation to a new one. Such artefacts were the buildings themselves, their refurbishment and entrepreneurship as a cultural form. After being in focus for the design stage, they became implicit tools in the following stages, holding the meaning and relationships together.

As the development team was based in the mill itself, its deliberate steps to steer the process could be combined with openness for new ideas and for the opportunities any new situation could bring about. Deliberate reasoning existed besides observations with all senses. Relationships between people and objects were constantly being constructed and reconstructed around aesthetic experiences, in meetings of neighbours and colleagues and the ongoing creation of the business centre. Intended actions were allowed time and space to listen to the reflexive answers of people and objects. Reflections were thus situated in practice. Practice in turn is reflexive: it needs reciprocal nearness between people and artefacts to create the knowledge and meaning necessary to constitute itself.

Such learning was also built into the way the practice of the local authority framed and encouraged the developing practice of the small business at the mill

through the regulating instruments. The local authority was both able to control that general standards and democratic demands were fulfilled, and at the same time able to support an open and locally based development process. The bridging instruments framed time and space in such a way that trust and respect for each other's actions was generated.

I consider these instruments, if tried out for a longer period, could have been developed as regular tools for interaction and transition of the practices involved. They can be regarded as good examples on how to plan processes that generate practice. They show how time and space may be provided for building relationships at specific places where people and objects regularly come into touch by each other. They show how such every day practice can interact with overall structures regulating shared meaning and actions with broader ranges in time and space. Such interaction is a key element in the building of a sustainable society.

Buildings as tools for transactions

Ecological changes sometimes become manifest – for example, when seals or birds die – but often need to be transformed from vague abstract global tendencies down through several levels to the local level in order to become comprehensible and possible to be considered in terms of concrete action. Often we think of written words and figures as mediators affecting our practice. However, a very strong influence on our every day actions comes from artefacts, especially the built environment. In the Nääs project, the level of communication that took place through the restructuring of walls in the mill was very strong. Very few formal papers and plans were produced for communicative purposes in this case, but there was a lot of talking about what to do next to transform the environment. This created shared meaning and action. Moreover, the built environment can be said to have conveyed intentions backwards and forwards between the authority and the local place.

Lena Falkheden, in a study of three Danish examples, highlights the importance of expressing intentions in the built environment in order to influence and inspire more sustainable actions at the local level.[12] She points to the possibilities of a strategy that departs from the local situation, but that at the same time

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extends over it, and connects global and local courses of events by means of bridging links. Falkheden argues that the transmission of generally recognised knowledge to concrete situations should not be regarded as a form of general technology to be impressed on the landscape, but as an artistic task. The creation of new artefacts, for example, a new purification plant, constitutes a tangible medium for new actions. They can make tangible what is beyond our reach in time and space. Such artefacts can be designed in order to encourage further design activities. If the sustainable dimensions are clearly manifest in the new artefact, they can be reinforced still further in subsequent transforming actions.

Falkheden's examples, and my own examples, all show the importance of artefacts that touch us in our daily practice.[13] The built environment constitutes a room and a medium for the building up of new patterns of action and ways of life. Continuous construction, as we saw in the case of Nääs, can be an asset supporting the building up or strengthening of practices at the local level. Buildings and their constructions can also mediate intentions from the global level downwards, and from the local level upwards. This mediating ability was used in the Nääs case. It is strongly emphasised in Lena Falkheden's interpretations of the three Danish examples.

Richard Sennett, as early as the 1970s, criticised the urban planners' fixation on the homogeneous neighbourhood, which had a tendency to obscure the view of the unique opportunity of the city as regards to the development of community life. He belongs to those that today maintain the importance of rejecting the concept of 'the whole', both when it comes to the individual and urban planning. Uncertainty,and the incomplete, should constitute tha rule. He means that these differences should overlap each other – as dissonances in a collage. The built environment should be able to stand continuous change, and various ways of life.[14]

I should like to end this article in support of this view. The built environment seen as an incomplete and diffuse expression is a tool for interaction able to encourage and stabilise the building of practices and places. It can also be seen as a tool for mutual learning between practices at different places, and at different planning levels. The task is to design the collage in such a way that there is sufficient time and space for interpreting and reacting on each other's expressions in order to create shared meaning and action.

Notes

1. See, for example, John Friedmann, Planning in the Public Domain – From Knowledge to Action, Oxford: Princeton University Press 1987.
2. See, for example, Andreas Faludi, A Decision-Centred View of Environmental Planning, Oxford: Pregamon Press 1987
3. See, for example, Patsy Healey, 1997, Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies, Hong Kong: Macmillan press LTD 1997.
4. The unit of research has been called Industrial architecture and planning, and Workplace design. Now research connected to workplaces is found under the unit Space and process at the School of Architecture.
5. The research project 'Regeneration of older industrial areas' was carried out during the period 1982–88, and financed by the Swedish Council for Building Research. This project is documented in 13 reports, an information brochure and a videotape. A more detail description of the methods used and a summary of the research findings may be found in Lisbeth Birgersson, Att bygga mening och rum – om processer för utveckling av verksamhetsmiljöer (Diss, Industriplanering, Arkitektur) Göteborg: Chalmers tekniska högskola 1996.
6. The local authority's business development officer, Bo Öhrström, at a later date became attached to the School of Arhitecture as a researcher. Since 1987, none have

had any part in the development of Nääs, but we have attempted to describe what we believe to be the model content of the process. See for example Birgersson 1996 and Bo Öhrström, Att bygga företagsamhet – planering, projektering, byggande och fastighetsdrift som stöder företagsutveckling (Lic, Arbetslivets bebyggelse, Arkitektur) Göteborg: Chalmers tekniska högskola 1997.

7. Jerker Lundequist, Design och produktutveckling: Metoder och begrepp, Lund: Studentlitteratur 1995, p 67.

8. See further in Nigel Cross (ed.), Developments in Design Methodology, UK: John Wiley 1984, Jerker Lundequist,"Om designteorins uppkomst" in Nordisk Arkitekturforskning Vol. 5, nr 4, 1992, p 7–18 and Lundequist 1995 for reviews of the history of design theory.

9. This case is described in Donald Schön, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action, USA: Basic Books 1983.

10. See further a discussion about this in Molander 1993, p 153.

11. Reflection as an inner indicator in practice is further discussed in Molander 1993, p 83 & 87, in José Luis Ramirez, Skapande mening: En begreppsgenealogisk undersökning om rationalitet, vetenskap och planering (Dissertation 13:2) Stockholm: Nordplan 1995 and by Scott Lash in Ulrich Beck; Anthony Giddens, & Scott Lash, Reflexive Modernization, Cambridge: Polity Press 1994.

12. Lena Falkheden, Lokalområdet som strategi för en hållbar stadsutveckling. Fallstudier av tre danska exempel. Göteborg: Chalmers tekniska högskola 1999.

13. The French sociologist Bruno Latour is searching for a practical general theory of action that attempts to understand the interaction between man and the surrounding materia and that makes it possible to redefine the conditions for taking action. See further in Bruno Latour, Artefaktens återkomst. Ett möte mellan organisationsteori och tingens sociologi, Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus Förlag 1998.

14. Richard Sennett, The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities, New York: W.W.Norton & Company 1990.