The architect and the other

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The word participation has recently become as overused as that other catchphrase of contemporary politics, sustainability. The two meet in the notion of "sustainable communities" which, according to the rhetoric, are founded on the principles of democratic participation in their own formation processes. The trouble is that in their overuse "participation", "community" and "sustainable" have become more or less meaningless. The words create a veneer of worthiness, but scratch the surface and one discovers a striking absence of critical interrogation of what is at stake. Too often participation becomes an expedient method of placation rather than a real process of transformation.

In architecture, participation is now a necessary part of most public planning processes, but much of it remains token. The mere taking part is seen to be enough; endless sticky notes with handwritten exhortations plastered over architectural drawings to create a sense of activity, but at the end of the day those notes are literally and
metaphorically peeled off, leaving the barest trace of the voices of others.

**Lift New Parliament**
The Lift New Parliament is a transportable meeting and performance space *preview* the designs then *vote online* for your favourite to pick the team who will develop the building

This emasculated version of participation is not unique to architecture. In her classic work *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Carole Pateman contrasts the position of "classical" democratic theory, most notably Rousseau's, with that of contemporary democratic theory. The participation of the individual citizen in political decision-making is a central tenet of Rousseau's political theory, while in contemporary politics Pateman argues that "participation, as far as the majority is concerned, is participation in the choice of the decision makers. Thus the function of participation is solely a protective one."

Protecting, placating, participation is really no more than a placebo.

The tokenism of so much participation generally suits the architect. Participation confronts architecture's comfort zone head-on, bringing uncertainty in place of purity. Architects cling to a perfected model of practice, neatly and simplistically summarised in an idealised version of the Vitruvian triad commodity, firmness and delight. Idealised commodity solve the "problem" of function in as efficient a manner as possible. Idealised firmness advance on technical fronts as a sign of progress.
Idealised delight: a polishing of forms in accordance with prevailing aesthetic sensibilities.
The problem arises when these ideals meet the reality of the contingent world which first, upsets the carefully laid plans of utility (users can be so annoyingly unpredictable); second, ignores many of the values held high by architectural culture, for example, the public hardly share architects' obsession with the refined detail; and third, brings into play issues that are overlooked by the Vitruvian triad, most notably issues of the social and political world. So the architect will do everything possible to delay the fateful moment when reality bites; participation brings forward the moment of reality better than for it to remain token. The participative process, as a signal of the reality to come, confronts architects with issues that they may otherwise have chosen to hide from, or delay dealing with, for as long as possible. Most obviously this happens by bringing forward and prioritising the desires of the users.

Misrepresentations
However, even when users are brought to the design table, they often remain in the thrall of the expertise of the architect. The exchanges are not on equal terms, as is required in a true model of participation, because the means of communication are controlled by the architect. Technical drawings are notoriously opaque to lay people; computer renderings are more transparent, but privilege a limited value system of form and style. How can lay people judge architectural imagery except at the level of aesthetics and taste? And in those judgments of
aesthetics and taste, the central issues of the social occupation of space are completely bypassed, mainly because they are invisible in standard methods of architectural representation. The public vote for selecting a design for the Lift New Parliament a new kind of meeting and performance space skates close to the danger of participation at this reduced level, with bright colours, seductive shapes and technical gadgets potentially distracting from the intention of the project, namely the formation of a democratic, politicised, space.

For the past 25 years, Lift, London International Festival of Theatre, has been at the forefront of innovation in the presentation of arts. Now it has a new vision. The Lift New Parliament is a performance space where artists from around the world and the people of London will gather to share stories, exchange knowledge and imagine and rehearse new futures.

The Lift New Parliament will be a portable and transportable structure hosting events and activities curated by an international team who will engage with local communities on major issues of the 21st century. The imbalance of power imposed by standard architectural processes was the target of the community activists of the 1960s and 1970s who resolved to strip experts of their authority and reduce them to being technical facilitators, there to deliver the desires of the community without imposing on them. The problem, as Lars Lerup identifies, is that participation becomes largely a "managerial
solution there is a 'symmetry of ignorance' between the user and professional neither knows the user's needs". On the one hand, in the enforced relinquishment of power, the expert professionals also relinquish their knowledge (because in the well-worn formulation reduced from Foucault, knowledge is power). As mere facilitators the architects are unable to re-imagine their knowledge from the perspective of the user; their knowledge is not used transformatively, rather their skills are used instrumentally. On the other hand, the technical know-how of the expert is not enough to help users to develop new spatial visions; the user is given nothing to enable them to expand on their nascent but unarticulated desires, and so these remain at the level of the lowest common denominator. In Gillian Rose's memorable phrase, "the architect is demoted; the people do not accede to power". If the unfettered imposition of the architect's expertise is unacceptable then so too is its complete withdrawal. The former suppresses the voice of the citizen, the latter gives it no means to be heard. Another way has to be found, operating in what Rose calls the "Broken Middle", a place where users and architects alike "confront themselves and each other as particular and as universal". This is especially important in the Lift New Parliament, one of those rare projects that stand outside either state or market control. The central issue is how to spatialise this alternative democracy. I use the word "spatialise" knowingly here, because the aim should not be to
"represent" this other parliament, but to understand it spatially as a set of new social dynamics. The representation of democracy through architecture is often thuddingly naïve. If a building is transparent, the story goes (or at least Norman Foster's story) then the processes within are equally deemed to be transparent. But seeing is not hearing is not participating. It is a fake transparency that demeans the notion of democracy. The prime example is London's new City Hall. The initial imagery, through which the project was sold to the client, showed a glass building that miraculously one could see straight through. The final carapace of a building is a slightly threatening opaque building that suggests an assault on the citizen.

The impure space
So if the aspirations of the Lift New Parliament should not, and cannot, be represented through analogy or symbol, one has to consider it spatially, and to do this one needs to consider the community of potential users. Where state democracy so often attempts to soothe us though false notions of consensus, the democratic space of the Lift New Parliament will need to accept the tensions of difference if it is to be truly representative. Users do not come in the ordered classifications of modernity; they are multiple, difficult and diverse. Whilst the neo-Aristotelians such as Alasdair Macintyre yearn for the return to a purified model of community, the reality is that of the very impurity of a community of users.
This impure community thwarts not only the hope of consensus, but also challenges architectural conceptions of purity. Conceptually, architects are still modernists at heart, though this condition is covered up by the excesses of post-modern form. There is still a will to order, to control, to banish ambivalence and in this to treat the user as an abstraction. Against this, the Lift New Parliament demands the acceptance of the other, of contingency, of difference, and with this a relinquishing of architecture's obsessions with stable form and technique. It is by definition a political project and architects are generally wary of dealing with politicised space because it is beyond their direct control. For participation to work properly in the design of the Lift New Parliament, architects will have to reassess their values, to accept the losing of some control whilst maintaining their ability to envision. This will be vital in Lift's consultation with the community. No sticky notes, no getting people to draw like children, no token participation. Where do you go to meet? Is your favourite meeting place real or virtual? Join the discussion in our forums.

In transformative participation, it is not a matter of attempting to find a consensus among competing positions, but of using one's judgment to make best sense of them. This inevitably leads to the acceptance of difference rather than the imposition of a false equality, even if this might grate with accepted liberal norms of participation, in which the search for a solution acceptable to all is paramount. The spaces that might arise out of the
contingency of participation in the Lift process are thus not necessarily those of static harmony, and for this reason it is difficult to point to previous examples in the designed canon. The Greek agora is often held up as the shining example of a democratic space, supported by the fact that it was the size of the throw of a human voice so any citizen could engage in the debate but a small matter of class and gender exclusion dismisses it for me. Perhaps the medieval moot hall, but that too somehow institutionalises something that wants to be beyond the institution.

Maybe, then, the answer lies in those un-designed spaces of democratic interaction. My suggestion therefore is to look beyond form and aesthetics. When judging the designs do not be seduced by shape and colour, but look for the potentials of social dynamics. Think of the times that you have felt empowered to talk, to gather, and see if the proposals could possibly accommodate them. And if in the end the space is like no other ever encountered, then it is probably right, because so is the brief.

**Read on**
Carol Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge University Press, 1970) (US) (UK)
M. Crawford, "Can architects be socially responsible?" in DY Ghirardo (ed.), Out of Site: a social criticism of architecture (Bay Press, 1991) (US) (UK)
Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt, Community Architecture: how people are creating their own environment (Penguin, 1987) (US) (UK)
Lars Lerup, Building the Unfinished: architecture and human action (Sage, 1977) (US) (UK)