

# Negotiating matters - supporting agonistic pluralism in community planning

*Maja Frögård*

*maja.frogard@konstfack.se*

*Konstfack, Box 3601, SE-126 27 Stockholm, Sweden*

## Abstract

There is no goal for public consultation in community planning, there are several conflicting ones, using Chantal Mouffes model of democracy to acknowledge the conflictual nature of democratic politics, not striving for consensus but agonistic pluralism. Our work builds on experience from co-design workshops we held in Upplands Väsby concerning a conflict between politicians, civil servants and citizens. Seeing the workshop as a space of agonism, an arena for different positions to meet and negotiate, we as designers work with form and material to support the different interests. We suggest three categories to consider when crafting this agonistic space; perspectives, format and material. Acknowledging the complexity of planning, no longer striving for consensus but to keep the negotiation alive, is a starting-point for understanding the different conflicting interests and together create ways of working well with wickedness through making more sensible judgements.

**KEYWORDS:** negotiation, matter, agonistic pluralism, co-design, public consultation

## Background

The public consultation is demanded by law in planning processes and aim to obtain as good decision making foundation as possible and to provide the opportunity for insight and influence according to Boverkets webpage. The law for planning and building, PBL, was accepted in 1987 and aim to democratize the planning process, to strengthen the influence of the citizens and to move the decision making closer to the local residents (Tahvilzadeh et al., 2015). Rittel and Webber (1973) states that planning problems are inherently wicked i.e. vicious, tricky and aggressive, filled with political and material ambivalences. John Law (2014) argues that acknowledging the world as generally wicked is a reason not to focus on the wickedness, but to attend to the imperfect techniques for rendering its problems temporarily benign. For Law (2014) this implies holding together a series of opposites and suggests tactical and responsive strategies of situated interference.

Chantal Mouffe (2000) argues for a model of democracy in terms of “agonistic pluralism” to acknowledge the conflictual nature of democratic politics. She uses the concept of hegemony to explain this conflictual nature, how the dominant hegemony always exclude alternatives

that could be actualized through counter-hegemonic practices that aim to establish another form of hegemony. Agonism means seeing this struggle as not between enemies but adversaries who recognizes the legitimacy of the demands of their opponent, as a form of conflictual consensus. She emphasizes the need to keep the democratic contestation alive, to not erase the tension between liberalism and democracy but to make room for dissent and the institutions that this can be manifested through (Mouffe, 2013).

Carl DiSalvo (2010) criticizes design engaged with democracy for accepting democracy as a matter of pursuing consensus by not questioning the given structures of politics. He uses Mouffe's distinction between politics and the political to critique that too many design projects works with design for politics, with improving mechanisms that enable governing, but are not political in an agonistic sense. DiSalvo means that political design does the work of agonism, creating spaces of contest through revealing and confronting power relations. Political design according to DiSalvo articulates the elements that are constitutive of social conditions, identifying new terms and themes for contestation and action. He argues that design only focused on politics diverts potential attention away from the political by not engaging in the contestation necessary for democracy (DiSalvo, 2010).

## Decode and co-design workshops in Upplands Väsby

Decode is an on-going research project within the framework of Sweden's innovation agency Vinnova's call for challenge-driven innovation for sustainable cities. One of the approaches used is co-design, which can be seen as joint inquiry and imagination (Steen 2014, Sanders, 2012). The project's starting point is that collaboration with the public based on their different perspectives on social, environmental and cultural questions could help to better meet the complex challenges of sustainable urban development. To develop these different forms of collaborations the project is based on both artistic and scientific grounds through an interdisciplinary team with backgrounds in architecture, design, art, sociology, practical philosophy, economy and organization theory. Within the project we also collaborate with SGBC, Sweden Green Building Council, Upplands Väsby and Varberg.

This paper will focus on the co-design part of the project exploring and working with public consultation. With a co-design approach we focus on how to share different perspectives, respectfully negotiating the different standpoints, to co-create knowledge. In this paper we will focus on the first phase of our co-design explorations in Upplands Väsby.

We initiated the workshops in Upplands Väsby to get a sense of an already existing conflict, the planning of two roads and a "shared space" between apartment buildings in a traffic segregated area. Before the workshops we informally interviewed civil servants working with the planning and citizens living in the area, attended meetings were residents were protesting and looked at the detailed development plan amongst other things.

The workshops were announced in the local newspaper "Vi i Väsby" twice, on the municipalities' Facebook page and was put up in the blue apartment buildings by a resident of one of the blue houses who also added a commentary note to the invitation. We had about twenty participants at each workshop, one half citizens, mainly residents of the blue apartment buildings, and the other half consisted of politicians from different parties, civil servants with different competencies such as traffic planning, project leading, landscape architecture etc.

We divided the participants into two smaller groups of ten. First the participants were given activity sheets where they were encouraged to describe an activity they had done in the area recently as well as a imagined desired activity. When this was done we presented a printed, one square-meter big, aerial-photo of the area in question where we as facilitators mapped out the activities with coloured tape and pre-printed sketched symbols of activities. The different activities of the participants were presented and mapped on the aerial-photo one person at a time starting with the recent activities of the residents. The participants then had a short coffee break while we placed out half transparent sheets with drawings of the planned buildings and roads on top of the mapped activities.

*Citizen A*                    *And these are the roads that we are protesting against because we think it's better to drive around this area.*

*Citizen B*                    *But why do we need so many roads?*

*Citizen C*                    *Yes, that's what we're also wondering...*

*Civil servant D*            *This discussion is bound to happen, should we have it now, or do you want?*

*Researcher E*              *Either way.*

*Citizen C*                    *Whatever suits...*

*Citizen B*                    *Who's idea was this? (referring to the roads)*

*Citizen F*                    *Who's idea it was doesn't matter, but the goal with this is to explain to me why we need so many roads?*

*Civil servant A*            *I can start by explaining from a community planning perspective ...*

*Citizen B*                    *Eehm, could there be any other solution for safety, for the people living in the area, people with walkers and all, without being reactionary, but to find another solution for safety than roads, that's the core of the issue for me personally.*

*Civil servant A*            *I don't think, I am not here to convince you but in some way we should agree on what we disagree on.*

*Politician G*              *The reason why we have public consultation and audits are to get perspectives and to see how we can do things in a better way and how we can make things in a way that all, all feel that they can accept and feel "ok, this could work, this will probably be pretty good".*

*(Author's translation of transcript from discussion during workshop in Upplands Väsby)*

The participants then presented and mapped their second desired activity considering the new buildings and roads. The participants were encouraged to one at a time map out areas of conflict on transparent paper to put on top of the map and to discuss why. As a final task they together proposed what activities the planning of the space should support on a new transparent sheet.

## Negotiating matters

We had two main aims with the workshops; to better understand the current conflict and to propose ways of working with negotiating different interests. To understand the conflict we invited people with different interests to together make sense of the reasons, structure and scope of the conflict. To propose ways of working supporting negotiation of the conflicting interests we considered the perspectives, material and format present at the workshop in relation to the conflict and power dynamics. Not only designing for governance as critiqued by DiSalvo, we wanted to consider the opinions of citizens, civil servants and politicians to be of equal legitimacy and importance. We used Chantal Mouffe's critical view on democracy and her concept of agonistic space, not to strive for consensus but to make room for critique and to get a better chance at understanding the different perspectives as well as the matters of conflict. This way of working can be seen as a responsive strategy of situated interference i.e. a strategy for working well with wickedness (Law 2014).

Considering the workshop as agonistic space means that we provide an arena for different positions to meet and negotiate, not as enemies but as adversaries. To meet as adversaries means to acknowledge the legitimacy of your opponents argument even when not agreeing. Mouffe (2000) argues there can be no consensus without exclusion. Instead of suppressing the current conflict in a strive for consensus, we should engage the participants as active subjects, keeping the negotiation alive! We can arrive at a compromise but this should be seen as "temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation" (Mouffe, 2000). Creating space for criticality, not aiming for all to agree upon one set solution, we can start to better understand the different interests.

## Perspectives, material and format

Being a designer I work with formgiving. In this context however, what is of importance is not only shaped through object and material, but focus is on the situation and how it can be formed responsibly. When designing this space for negotiation and critique I want to suggest three categories to consider; perspectives, material and format. What and who are invited and what we bring are part of setting the framework of the workshop. The perspectives present are different ideas and competencies present through people and material.

Important perspectives for setting up an agonistic space for this particular conflict were representatives from different parties, the chair of the city council, civil servants that were part of the planning, citizens that were residents in the area and the planning documents for the roads. Having the different conflicting aims and agendas present made the plans possible to negotiate.

The material was based on the planning documents but also supported the materialization of other perspectives. As the citizens mapped out their activities on the map before the other participants, this was then already present when we layered on the planned roads and buildings. This created a form of material evidence and reference of this agonistic space through layering and overlapping the different desired activities. This material evidence, used as a point of reference, then prompted discussions and negotiations among the participants.

Important aspects of the format were small mixed groups, turn taking and a clear division between individual and common activities. The workshop was structured so that everybody first worked with their own activities and then presented these on the common table. This is

important since it puts a value on each participant's contribution, striving for agonistic pluralism rather than consensus. Having a moment for everyone to formulate their thoughts and then taking turns presenting their activities made everyone participate and listen to each other, letting different perspectives be presented and negotiated. The small mixed group let us be flexible so that questions could be raised as the material was presented and the mix meant that there were often several different responses.

## Discussion

To work in this way, articulating and sensing the situation simultaneously as negotiating it, is dependent on the perspectives present. Being present and meeting creates an engagement but also comes with limitations such as number of participants, organisation of the event, possibilities to travel and sensitivity to group dynamics. As designers we are part of setting the framework for the negotiation through the material, format and perspectives we invite. Seeing the designer not as designing for politics, enabling governing, but political, as argued by DiSalvo (2010), puts focus on what perspectives and values we as designers make present and absent. Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl (2014) write about how the invitation frames the expectations for the gathering, what issues that are dealt with, who will take part and how. They argue for co-articulating not only solutions but also issues. What we see as important to consider for the upcoming workshops are the presence and absence of different perspectives when working on forms for inviting and negotiating the framing of issues together.

The material in the workshop makes it possible to explore and understand the situation in other ways. Another crucial part to look into is what happens after the workshop, how the understanding travels. Not being able to share the experience of the workshop, the material has a potential role as reference when arguing for decisions based on the embodied experience of being part of the workshop negotiating different interests.

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