

Presentation notes for workshop 4

To promote deeper involvement of regional stakeholders and the population.

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Context/Introduction

First, I'll site my presentation in context. So much can be said about stakeholder engagement. But here we have 20 minutes, and a set of very challenging questions to respond to.

1. **Regions:** Huge questions in themselves, as the briefing notes stress! For all of us, a region, and therefore the stakeholders and population under discussion, may be quite a different thing. My region is London: a city. (Although I'm not involved in the SAUL London projects.) I am however a member of the Saarland JPG, where they are experimenting with involving population on a regional scale, and that gives me another perspective.
2. **My personal experience:** Largely local - I work for a Groundwork Trust in just 2 London local authorities, and often run projects focusing on just one housing estate. It's an interesting challenge for me to think regionally - to see how accepted practices and philosophies scale up to a regional level. How successfully they can do that.
3. **The current socio-political climate:** Increasingly about stakeholder participation, in rhetoric and hopefully also in practice! There's a phrase I like from Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen - 'from patients to agents'. Meaning that people are not just having things done to them, but actively participating in creating their future. Another buzzword is 'governance', with state and civil society working in partnership together to increase the common good.
4. **Population:** The focus of my presentation, rather than 'official' regional stakeholders. This interests me more - how to engage people who aren't already networked in. But in talking about 'the population' it is important to remember this means us too. Not talking about alien masses, but ourselves and the others around us. I heard a policeman on the radio yesterday, who stressed that he didn't just nobly 'serve the public' but was part of the 'public', serving himself and the rest of his community. It occurred to me how surprisingly easy it can be to forget that.

My presentation is in 3 parts, creating a useful structure for thinking about the major 'how's' and 'what's' of community involvement:

1. The first part considers 'Space', the 'where's' of a project
2. Next, Time, or the 'when's' of a project.
3. Then, I look at considering Space and Time together to make Narrative - or Story: the 'what's' and 'how's' of a project- explaining why to me this is a key concept when planning engagement initiatives.

Space

Two sets of issues to consider here. First, more 'philosophical' questions of: 'Where is the consultation about?' and "Where is the population under discussion?" And then the practical matter of: 'Where are you actually doing this thing - involving people?'

Where is the consultation about? Considerations at a regional level...

1. **One advantage of consultation about a landscape is that there is a material reality under discussion, with which stakeholders can have material bodily engagement.** No matter what their level of education or intellectual confidence, everyone experiences place and has the ability to articulate that experience in some way, even if just to say that a place 'feels good' or 'feels bad.' And a place is a thing we can be in, point at, map things out on.

2. **However, thinking about space on a regional scale potentially makes it more abstract.** Is the space under discussion even understood by the populace as a distinct Place?

Compare my experiences of responding to the draft London Spatial Development Strategy and responding to plans for redevelopment of King's Cross (2 recent high profile consultations). A Londoner all my life, I nonetheless found it hard to engage intelligently with the former – the issue just seemed so huge - whereas King's Cross is small enough in scale, although a huge project, for me to hold the place in my head and feel my responses could have some impact. Is it inevitably harder to engage people in regional projects, as opposed to localised ones? Or ones in their immediate locality?

Could one begin by engaging people specifically about their local landscapes, or local elements of a regional spatial plan, but give them links/paths into the regional project? One could make info. about a regional project available at each of a series of local events, so participants can see what their localised contribution is feeding into; what the local project is part of. And make people aware of opportunities to feed in opinions on a regional scale, or to participate in regional planning events or discussions.

Doesn't mean they have to think about the whole 'map': as Rainer K said to me last night, we do not live local lives, but regional, national, even international ones, inhabiting a patchwork of spaces stitched together by our experiences. As contributors, we must not feel we have to address or understand the whole. No-one can, or planners would have planned a perfect world by now. But we have a valid contribution to make about elements we do experience.

3. **How might a Planning for Real exercise work on a giant scale?** This process, designed by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, involves creating a scale model of a site where participants add comments by attaching little flags. Conversations can develop in non-confrontationally, while people's ideas and feelings are mapped out. Imagine an enormous model of the whole of Saarland used in this way. What reactions might that generate?



4. **Does engagement of wider population, as opposed to official stakeholders become harder at a regional scale** because likely to be less grass-roots activity - unofficial groups and networks - to tap into? When I start a local consultation I look for every social or community group or 'club', formal and informal, in the area as conduits into people's everyday lives. Groups operating at a regional level perhaps tend to be semi-officialised?

Where are you involving people? Some 'rules' of engagement...

5. One of our most important jobs is **facilitating 'space' for ideas to develop**: an environment where people feel stimulated to imagine and to contribute opinions, but also have the opportunity to consider connections and the bigger picture.
6. **It is normal practice at Groundwork that you try to go to people, rather than expecting them to come to you.** Only the already committed and/or interested are likely to turn up to a public meeting. But if you place yourself in the middle of a shopping mall, or erect a tent in the centre of an estate, you can draw people in as they go about everyday business. What would be the equivalent for a regional initiative? A major station or other transport node? Or focus on local events to feed into a regional picture?



7. **But one can offer concurrent opportunities to draw people to the project, by thinking of ways to provoke their curiosity and stimulate their imagination.** Give people opportunities to rethink the site on the site! InfoBox in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz was part of that major regeneration scheme. A semi-permanent structure, this striking piece of architecture engaged and informed people about the works underway, and became a tourist destination in its own right. But it doesn't have to be flashy: a vacant shop or flat can be transformed into a space for imagining and informing.
8. Increasingly people have access to **the Web** and know how to use it. This allows people to participate from their own home or local centre. On-line Planning for Real has been piloted with a GIS map system. People leave the equivalent of flags as electronic messages linked to an area. They write as much or as little as they like, and can return to respond to comments left by others. Such a tool could allow people to comment on the whole 'patchwork' of their regional lived experience, and have conversations with people in other localities, without having to leave their own. Participants could also be easily kept up-to-date via email.
9. And what about **other less technological networks**, allowing discussion of regional projects without having to physically bring people together? A series of empty shops could all engage people on relevant local aspects, while building up, and feeding back again to participants, a regional picture. Or what if every school in the region was involved in researching issues of their local open space, feeding into a regional open space planning network?

Time

This section moves from the practical - 'When are you involving people?' and 'For how long?'- to more philosophical considerations about people's perceptions of the value of time.

When / for how long are you involving?

1. **Temporary interventions can engage people and help re-imagine a site** e.g. inflating a large bubble in the park for a day effectively draws people in, offering a venue for creative activity (in this Architecture Foundation project it's dance by local girls) and consultation about a site of local - or, with some publicity, regional - significance. So can a participative arts project, e.g. decking a landscape with lanterns made by local children, or planting a huge flowerbed with one flower for each participant's ideas. In London, as part of the regeneration of a canal, we created a series of guided tours about the canal's history with local children and old people. These drew audiences to a space they don't normally visit, encourage them to see it from a new perspective, and gave them a new, positive memory about it.



2. **Catch people's attention when they're not expecting it.** Street vox pops can be used to make radio or TV adverts. In one regeneration area, a short-film based on initial consultation, proposing alternative visions for the town, was shown in local cinemas before movies. Short, but effective!
3. **Make people aware of how long things take:** initial enthusiasm can turn to disillusion when they see nothing changing. Things seem even slower at the regional scale. Provide feedback to people about when decisions will be made and actions taken, and inform them of substantial changes and delays.
4. Most importantly, **get people involved when they still have a chance to influence the outcome**, and with enough notice to make a considered response. Consultation becomes token when the decisions have already been made.

How do people feel about Time?

1. **Think about how to convince people that it's worth taking the time to contribute.** People are busy with families and jobs – they need to be engaged in a way that makes them want to prioritise having their say.
2. One also needs, relating to Point 4 above, to **convince planners and developers that it's worth taking the time to involve people.** Engaging people and really listening to them helps develop 'ownership' of change, and a pay-off in terms of the development's sustainability, and it's relevance to the population's needs and activities.

3. **Be aware of 'length of tenure' issues** i.e. people's feeling about their right to contribute depending on how long they have been in a place. I once surveyed a Somali resident of an estate, who said that she didn't think she should comment, as she was only temporarily housed there. Questioning revealed she had been living there for 2 years, and would be there another few before receiving a permanent home! A considerable residency, by British house-moving standards, but her 'temporary' label made her feel she hadn't the right to contribute!

Geographer Doreen Massey on the development of London's Docklands: as a socialist, at first she supported cries from inhabitants, forced out by development and rising land prices, that 'This has always been a working class area.' But something made her uneasy. She realised why, when a few years later, the same voices said, in the face of Asian immigration that 'This has always been a white working class area.' While being sensitive to the relationships that people develop over time to a place, we need to be on our guard about inadvertently giving some more 'right' than others to be listened too, otherwise we will miss out both on the potential contributions of those others, and on opportunities for positive change.

2 ways of involving different groups in the regeneration of one estate in Islington:



Gardening workshop with refugee women's group.



Making a game about the estate with young residents

Narrative / Story: a framework for community involvement

This is not just a fancy frame to a presentation, but fundamental to the way I understand the relationship of people to their environments. As things happen in space and over time, narratives or stories emerge. Places - spaces with meaning - emerge too, the material manifestation of these space-time encounters. As does our own sense of self, of who we are and what we do, as individuals and collectives.

For narrative – the sense that *a* follows *b*, because of *c* – is fundamental to human identity: the stories that we tell about ourselves, each other, our surroundings, are what give us our understanding of our place in the world and the inter-relationship of things. And such identity stories do not form in empty, abstract space, but in the physical environment, 'natural' or man-made.

I love the way Doreen Massey describes this: that, over time, a place acquires its identity as a myriad of individual and collective human stories intersect with its own trajectory. In turn, each human story evolves through its intersection with those of the places it passes through and inhabits, and the others we encounter there. When, as planners or developers, we enter a

landscape with plans to alter it, we walk into a complex network of narratives that we would do well to be aware of.

Therefore in conclusion, considering some of the issues and questions raised in the two previous sections, and focusing more on the 'what's' and 'how's'; of effective community involvement, I:

- a) look at understanding the project itself as a story in which to engage people
- b) consider ways to use story to engage people, and,
- c) stress the importance of acknowledging pre-existing stories within the project process

1. **Clarity of the story of the evolving project**, and clarity of its presentation to participants, is fundamental for effective community involvement, particularly on a large-scale project. Is the project truly a participation project, where participants will have the chance to define the issues and actions, or is it more of a consultation about a pre-existing agenda? Whichever, make the parameters clear. That way people know what they are involved in, understand what they can influence, and can decide whether they want to give their time to it.
 - Be clear what you are asking people.
 - Be clear what can be expected to happen i.e. don't let the involvement process lead to unfeasible expectations.
 - Be clear what follows what. And when...
 - And, most importantly, Why! Consistently give feedback to explain any plot twists, so people can see that if things don't happen as they would like or were encouraged to believe they would happen, that there are good reasons for that.
2. **Use stories as 'hooks' to engage people**, countering the potential abstraction of the regional scale. What are the stories within the bigger story of Saarland's landscape? What are the questions people are already asking? The stories they are already telling?

E.g. How to engage the person who neither feels real interest in feeding into London's Spatial Development Strategy, nor has any idea how to start, but who regularly complains to their neighbour that their son can't afford a house in the city? Maybe by encouraging them to see the consultation as a forum for to express their views on housing provision in London, and to see their contribution as a small but valued element of a bigger discussion.

Related, is the need to believe, and to encourage people to realise/remember, that they are intelligent, and that their experiences are a vital source of information. I love the story of architect, Will Alsop (of famous Peckham Library) running a consultation about regeneration of a Northern town. The team began with collecting vox pops in the streets, asking each person: 'What one thing would you like to see happen to Barnsley?' Perhaps not surprisingly, just about everyone said, 'Free parking.'

If left at that, Barnsley today might just be one enormous car park! But the next stage was a public workshop. When everyone was there, the first thing they said was: 'This is what people told us would make Barnsley a better place.' Then showed a film of all the vox pops sewn together. For 5 minutes, a series of voices and faces all repeated: 'Free Parking!' Everyone had a bit of a chuckle at themselves, and then spent the day working to think in a more ambitious and creative manner what Barnsley might be. I think that was a great way of provoking people to think a bit deeper, engendering a bit of self-awareness.

3. **Consider what pre-existing local and regional stories can contribute to the planning process.** What are the things that people are already DOING in an area, that if amplified could lead to fruitful development and stimulate planning ideas? How to incorporate these stories into developments? Where could those stories go next?

I said earlier that working in a bottom-up, participatory way in regional planning might be tough. But we heard a very inspiring story yesterday about that local group of railway heritage

enthusiasts who kept something going locally because it mattered to them. Thanks to 'official' structures recognising the value of their project, it then acquired regional / national significance as a destination, feeding into regional development. Now, the Internet is linking them into networks of international enthusiasts. This is 'asset-based community development' – focusing on what a community already has, rather than what it needs and lacks.

4. **Acknowledge and incorporate (as appropriate) less tangible pre-existing stories.**

What are the memories, the habits, the significant incidents, the oral and popular histories of that place? Heritage in its broadest sense.

Encourage people, individually and collectively, to articulate those stories, and to share them with others, creating a narrative patchwork for the region, revealing the layers, good and bad, that made the place what it is. What common ground do these stories offer, and what conflicting narratives? Such memories can be:

a) used as temporary interventions / moments of celebration or communal achievement e.g. a piece of drama or an art installation in a space,

b) commemorated/ memorialised in some way, as we see in both Saarland and the Rhein-Ruhr regions in the preservation of the industrial past or new uses, or in the creation of permanent artworks e.g. sculptures, murals.

c) explored and learnt from as part of the involvement process: During the King's Cross scheme, a local Bangladeshi boys club spent a day with artists collecting stories, feelings and ideas about the area from local people and users of the area. To make it relevant to them, a central hub was set up in King's Cross station, and the boys sent out with mobile phones to research information and then text it back to base. Findings were collected there, then written up and displayed on news boards at the station, engaging passers – by to comment and contribute. The project used the boy's existing skills and interests to involve them and show them they had a valuable contribution to make. An informal, cognitive map of King's Cross, its heritage and daily life, was created by this Architecture Foundation project.



5. **And, explore ways of working to create the story of the planning and development process together, to do planning in more participative and less conventional ways.**

People who use a space can know things that planners will never know if they don't ask.

Another King's Cross Project by SS3 and Pavlov Media engaged a group of local residents in walking King's Cross together. Before setting off, they produced their own 'mental maps' of the area. They then walked through the development zone, considering: 'What is already there and should be amplified?' and 'What are the missing parts?' As they walked, they left their thoughts with chalk and Post-it notes behind them, to be recorded by the consultants, creating a 'marketplace of ideas' for plans to feed off.

There is great advantage in discussing on the site itself the elements of future development. It might not work for an entire region, but is great for a large site of regional significance, like

King's Cross. Imagine how powerful it can be if planners and/or developers are also on that walk, rather than the information purely coming through an intermediary. And if such initial input is given clear opportunities to continue inputting, and creating elements of the process story, the result can be much stronger sense of connection and 'ownership' of the scheme.



As GLAS, the artists of the text-message event put it: 'You're pulling all those threads together which can almost form another layer to put on an urban planner's map. Very often it's that kind of information that is going to determine the success of the development.'

Final thought ... in progress

Having trained in languages and as a translator/interpreter, I've always felt that the work I do at Groundwork - mediating between 'communities', design professionals, and places - was not a career change, but a natural extension of my interests. Last night at dinner I had a conversation with Rainer K and Andrea H, drawing analogies between the techniques of spatial (re)planning, and those of the translation of a text. Both translation and spatial planning have scientific elements to them, but they are both much more than a science.

Both activities take one complex entity/ story and turn it into another, which resembles it, but is no longer it. Words, grammar, function and facts about a place are one set of things, but sense, feeling, meaning, atmosphere are another, which need to be carefully explored and assessed. If one believes that 'sense of place' is not an intrinsic essence of a landscape, but the result of accumulated narrative processes, one may work to try to preserve the kernel of that 'sense'. However, the existing story may also require radical re-translation; perhaps need framing in a completely new context or narrative style.

But always bear in mind: There is usually more than one story there to be interpreted; more than one story pushing to be heard. More than one way to translate a word or finding. Despite this, decisions have to be made and consensus reached. And reaching 'perfect' consensus among all members of a population about a landscape's future and uses is hard, if not impossible, with conflict inevitably arising along the route.

We should not be utopian about community involvement solving all problems and creating a collective dream of a landscape. But we should ensure we have clear parameters for decision-making, for interpreting the findings of community involvement to ensure that we reach an informed decision, and for feeding back to people the process that led to that decision. Such a role or skills-set need not necessarily be that of the planner, but s/he needs to be sympathetic to this way of working, and to working with others who can offer those skills.

March 2004

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