

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

insights into interests and forces that shape form and function of urban public space

by City Mine(d) LAB

Sociologists and urban planners from Simmel (1903) and Jacobs (1961) to more recently Sandercock (1998), Amin (2006) and Sennett (2012) unanimously agree about the significance of urban public space for a well-functioning democracy and civil society. It seems, however, that their conviction fails to seep through to the field. A wide gap divides planning and design of public space, on the one hand, from ownership and use on the other, and this to great disappointment of all concerned. Professionals like designers and civil servants see their good intentions stranded; residents and users of the city have the impression that things are being imposed upon them. With terms like 'participation' and 'consultation' attempts are being made to bridge the divide, but up to now with limited results.

Planning and designing public space has increasingly become a technical matter, in which safety, security, prevention and sustainability have to find a place along urban infrastructure of traffic, energy and water, preferably in an international appealing aesthetic. Accommodating the subjective experience of local residents/users in this context is difficult, to say the least. Besides that, users of public space often have a framework of reference and a logic that is strange to professionals.

Attempts were made in the past to give users the opportunity to become acquainted with the technical language and logic of planning and design by means of courses and trainings. Also processes were developed in which user and designer from a very early stage shape urban space together. The "level playing field programme" wants to go even one step further. For a full year, it wants to create a space where those interested from very diverse backgrounds come together to exchange knowledge and experience. The aim of the year is: from different perspectives obtain insight in interests and forces that shape form and function of urban public space.

The programme is aimed at current and future professionals and users of public space, who are interested as designers who want to produce better informed proposals, civil servants and planners who want to increase support for their work, local residents and community activists who want to explore their field of action, or students looking for practical experience. The programme enables both professionals and those directly involved a first hand experience of limits and opportunities of co-creation.

The programme brings together designers, private sector as well as civil service project-managers, students, residents and users on a "level playing field". "Level playing field" refers to the equal footing on which participants meet: rather than teacher-learner, it is about bringing together different perspectives that can be instructive for all involved. Experience from local residents with a public space contains as much information as a designer's technical skills or a planner's sociological insights. In addition, "level playing field" provides a (sometimes first) real experience with horizontal decision making.

I. Programme

The programme consists of 3 parts:

- 1 [conference]: a series of lectures/presentations/debates
- 2 [excursion]: visits to cases with similarities to those from the practicum
- 3 [practicum]: developing a proposal (physical intervention, regulation, decision making structure) for a specific location

1 Conference:

a. participants present to each other

In addition to the exchange of content, this is also an opportunity for participants to familiarise themselves with the way in which participants from different backgrounds present their work and to share the different skills (how to give a good presentation) and frustrations (jargon, difference in speed). As such the programme adds insights to skills.

b. external speakers

speakers are selected based upon relevance for public space (designers, researchers, active users, legislators) and for the chosen site (local resident, actors, organisations). The organisers propose a list of speakers that can be altered or added by participants. This allows for speakers to be invited following questions that arise during the practicum (for instance a legal expert, a traffic engineer, water-engineer).

2 Excursion:

Throughout the year the group visits sites with similarities to the chosen practicum-location on the basis of demography, issues at stake, function or future. The visits are mainly planned within the city, but visits to other cities are not excluded.

3 Practicum:

The organisers choose the site on which the group will work for a whole year. The choice is made based upon affinity with the site and opportunities that present themselves. Affinity here means that there are already (citizen) initiatives that will continue after the programme is finished. Opportunity means local actors find it useful to have another perspective on the chosen location.

II. Location

The location is a site that is already in use or has the potential to become a public space. Criteria are activities of neighbourhood initiatives, future destination and use of the site. The choice is made by the organisers of the programme, to be able to assess the potential and involve local actors from very early on.

III. Impact

To have areal impact, the programme should not be spread over different locations. This tends to remain very superficial because the time to familiarise with local issues and opportunities uses up all available time. Often this allows local actors only to tell their story, and receive general feedback. The programme actively looks for local participants who pool their local knowledge with the 'technical' and 'institutional' knowledge of other actors, to arrive at a more substantial analysis and a more realistic proposal.

IV. Participants

In addition to a series of insights and enriching experiences, participants also acquire practical skills like decode planning documents, give presentations, identify key-actors and initiate change in local environments.

Those interested propose their candidacy to take part. On the basis of different criteria – professional activity (designer, civil servant, student), location (local resident or not), personal affinity or skill, different ages – a diverse group of 30 participants will be identified. Participants commit for a full year. At the start of the year they pay a deposit of £200 which they lose if they miss more than 3 sessions without a valid reason.

V. Output

The programme gives the 30 participants insights and skills into the shaping of form and function of urban public space.

The programme is also a place for horizontal decision making where professionals and users can experiment and familiarise themselves with more democratic forms of consultation and urban planning. Together participants and organisers produce a document -exhibition, book, presentation, film, website – that describes the practicum-proposal, summarises the whole year, makes the information accessible for other professionals and users and that is useful of all participants in their professional context (new job, new neighbourhood initiative, ...)

VI. Tasks

1. initiators

- raise and manage funds
- insurance and licencing
- administrative follow up

2. organisers (team of 3) responsible for:

- identifying potential sites, choosing sites and involving local actors
- launching and managing candidacy proposals and selection participants
- facilitate work-sessions
- propose speakers
- logistical responsibility (infrastructure for presentations and meetings)
- organising excursions
- realising summarising document
- general management timeline

3. feedback group

- consists of organisers, initiators and interested parties from government, education and industry
- meets to evaluate and correct programme

4. participants

- group of 30 selected candidates
- take part in conferences, excursions and practicum
- propose speakers and excursions
- can correct programme

5. guest speakers

- give a presentation or take part in a debate based on experience or expertise required in the programme

VII. Timeline

The organisers meet 6 months before the start of the programme to identify the location (for a programme starting in March, this means meeting in September). This allows for a final choice of location and a call for candidates five months before the start. (Because the programme requires local actors, a location has to be picked before a call for candidacies can be sent out.)

September:	choice location
October:	launch call candidacies
December:	selection participants
February:	first meeting participants
March:	first impressions site (in <i>mixed-skill</i> groups: local participants with <i>professionals</i>)
March/October:	conference – excursion – practicum (min 15 sessions*)
November:	presentation practicum-proposal
December:	presentation final document

* The basic programme consists of minimum 15 sessions of a full day (morning and afternoon) and take place every other week. A session can consist of different components (conference, excursion, practicum). At the

groups request sessions can be added or moved.

VIII. Cost estimate

For 3 organisers, cost for guest speakers, running cost, infrastructure and production of a final document, costs for this programme are estimated to be minimum £150,000.

Exchange of knowledge and experience between current and future professionals and users of urban public space contributes to:

- a functional improvement of urban public space
- development of a more inclusive decision-making model that can make planning and design of urban public space more democratic