Dialogue in participatory design

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Design processes that involve user participation concern issues of representation in the early stages of design, when users' needs and expectations are being expressed. A participatory approach is used to investigate the nature of design discussion during the early stages of design. It is shown that the ideology of inclusive design is similar to the ideology of participatory design. The ability of language-use to reveal user preference is explored through the analysis of architect–user conversations. Investigating architect and user interaction revealed that tacit knowledge can be made explicit and the difficulty of generalising user-needs from user statements.
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The study of participatory design has been an active research field for several decades[1,2] an acknowledgement that users' direct involvement in the design and decision making process has a positive influence and that its investigation generates continued insight and knowledge. During this time there has been a maturation of the subject and subtle shifts in the field: recognising participatory design as a process with many approaches and techniques. Sanoff's[3] continued involvement and development of the field has shown that participatory design techniques can be used for different scales of project, to design and develop communities as well as individual buildings. Expanding the scope of participatory design beyond the design of a single building to the design of communities involved the participation of the community in the process. In this way participatory design is more than a collection of design methods to influence the built form, it also has a human dimension and can engage the people who form the community in the process.

Participatory design approaches are considered to reflect design as a social process, illustrating that the sphere of the design activity extends beyond

1 Sanoff, H *Integrating user needs in environmental design* National Institute for Mental Health, Raleigh North Carolina State University, NC (1973)
2 Cross, N (ed) *Design Participation: proceedings of the Design Research Society's Conference.* Academy Editions, Manchester (1971)
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the designer. When engaged in a participatory design workshop the people who attend are part of the social process of design and play an active part in the issue/problem raising, discussion and decision making processes that are part of the early design stage of a project. The people who are commonly known as the 'users' are active participants in the design process and hence the boundary between 'designer' and 'user' becomes blurred. This has similarities with Hill's[4] research which recognises that a building user's presence in a space will change the properties of that space; making their own alterations, by decoration and through the very act of occupation they alter the space. He acknowledges that through occupation the user is designing space. This position challenges the finality of the design process as well as the role of the 'architect'. He explores this concept further; playing with the legal definition of an architect, he introduces an 'illegal architect' into the picture[5], a non-architect designing space.

Sanoff's position as a frontrunner in participatory design (PD) is recognised[6] because of his continued application and refinement of PD methods. He grounds the methodological basis for participatory design in the action research methods of Lewin[7], which integrate theory and practice. The democratic principle underpinning participatory design is demonstrated through the involvement of different users during design discussions and through their potential equal contribution to the design outcomes. In this way the diversity of views expressed by people during the design decision-making process can influence the final outcome of a project. The egalitarian, non-discriminatory principles of participatory design are common with an 'inclusive' approach for the design of environments, which should not discriminate on accessibility.

There are two main reasons for adopting a PD approach; first because the study focuses on the verbal exchange of design ideas that is critical during the early concept, pre-briefing stages of design. The process is iterative and both knowledge and understanding emerge as a consequence of the verbal exchange of ideas. The second reason hinges on the ideology underpinning PD. Sanoff's work clearly articulates that PD methods form part of the broad democratic philosophy for participation of people in decision-making processes. This aspect is of particular interest to the project described as it parallels the principles of participation advocated by disability theorists[8] that people with disabilities should be in an empowered consultative position in more aspects of their lives, the design of environments being a key area of concern[9]. The social model of disability view, that environments disable people and that some consultative processes are placatory not emancipatory[10] is part of this argument as discussed within Luck's paper[11].

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5 Hill, J The Illegal Architect Black Dog Publishing Limited, London (1998)
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