

Abstract

Participatory Action Research as Support in Public Space Design

This doctoral dissertation addresses integrating participatory strategies rooted in action research with architectural practice focused on the design of public spaces in Poland.

Contemporary cities struggle with a democratic deficit manifested by a decline in citizen engagement in public life, increasing distrust towards institutions, and the state's encroachment of areas of citizen activity. This crisis is further exacerbated by the weakening of community bonds and the loss of local identity. Participatory tools, which effectively enhance citizens' influence over decision-making processes shaping their environment, can serve as a response to these challenges.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze participatory methods based on design-research activities conducted in Brussels and Wrocław, and to develop a system supporting the implementation of participatory approaches in public space design.

The key strategy applied in this work was participatory action research, which combines active engagement with the process of knowledge generation. Furthermore, the dissertation is written within the framework of metadesign, understood as the design of design processes. This approach enables the flexible adaptation of actions to changing conditions and facilitates community involvement in projects.

The described strategies were implemented by the Author in collaboration with an interdisciplinary team during the temporary public space project – Maelbeek Vallée Verte in Brussels in 2023. Additionally, the research examined two Brussels-based projects — Jacques Franck Square and Marie Janson Square — with a particular focus on participatory aspects in the design process. Participatory practices in Wrocław were also analyzed, identifying existing tools and their potential for further development.

Based on the experiences, the dissertation formulates principles of authentic participation, as well as attitudes and tools that support both the design process of public spaces and the engagement of local communities. These findings are documented in a publication that includes a glossary and a manifesto for public space designers.

The dissertation also presents recommendations for adapting the analyzed tools to Polish realities, with particular emphasis on the context of Wrocław. The research and design process is summarized in the form of an infographic attached to the dissertation. The research findings were used to develop a prototype of a proprietary tool – the Impuls digital platform. This portal, functioning as a social networking site, is designed to support residents, organizations, and institutions in implementing initiatives and enacting changes in public spaces in a participatory manner.

This dissertation is practical in nature and can inspire designers, municipal decision-makers, community councils, Local Activity Centers, and local leaders to shape urban public spaces with a focus on authentic participation.