

Chapter 12

Participation and the Architect: Creative Partnership or Communication Breakdown?



Dominique Lefrançois

Abstract Studies on participation tend to focus on describing the process. The exact form of their involvement, along with its effects on architecture and the lived environment, is rarely discussed. The aim of this article is to better understand the effects of participation in the long run after the initial involvement. This will be done by studying three rehabilitation projects in the Paris region. Our aim was to gather the opinions of those who had not made their voices heard through the official channels of consultation. Above all, it was to give visibility to, and understand the meanings of, the appropriation of spaces which have become invisible simply because they are used in ways which seem to go against the norm.

Keywords Ethnography · Public space · Participation · Urban ecology

12.1 Introduction

Since the very beginning of urban regeneration policies in France in the 1980s, a recurrent criticism levelled against the forms of town planning and architecture inherited from the *'trente glorieuses'*¹ has been that residents find it difficult to take ownership of these spaces. The refurbishment of large social housing estates is often based on the notion of bringing them into line with the norms of what a 'city' is considered to be, namely a compact space following the model of the historic city centre, rebuilt successively within the same footprint (Vayssière 1988). Yet, is this not a rather narrow vision of urbanity? Many districts once situated on the periphery have been so completely swallowed up by expanding cities that are now an integral part of new, enlarged urban centres.

¹ The three decades of postwar economic growth.

D. Lefrançois (✉)

Unité de Recherche AUSser, Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'architecture de Normandie, Rouen, France

e-mail: dominiquedefrancois4@gmail.com; dominique.lefrancois@rouen.archi.fr

Here, neighbourhoods are still regarded as enclaves, their inhabitants discussed solely in terms of crime and welfare dependency, as if they were untouched by developments in the way people live, and in particular the way in which the delineation of urban and residential districts alike can move, or *be made to move* (Estebe 2015; Lepoutre 1997). Might observing the social practices of these same residents and their involvement in architectural and urban development projects not help enrich the way in which we regard the large out-of-town estates of the French *banlieues* and move away from the stigmatizing—and highly distorted—image traditionally applied to them?²

This, then, is the central question of the ethnographic study presented in the outline here. By revisiting three refurbishment projects carried out in social housing estates around Paris, all based on the principle of resident participation, it also evaluates the usefulness of participation, an integral part of French urban regeneration policy since the 1980s (Bacqué and Sintomer 2011). Much has been said and written about participation in France: desired and reviled in equal measure by public actors, architects, social housing providers, commissioning clients, and local officials, it was paid considerable attention by French researchers in the 1970s and again in the 1990s and, to a greater extent, the 2000s (Blondiaux and Fourniau 2011). The researchers in question were generally at pains to show how these supposedly participatory projects were, in practice, not very participatory at all. It is true that these projects³ involved only a small number of people, and those who did express their opinions—which tended to reflect the preoccupations of the middle-class and/or retired population—often did so at the expense of other groups (young people, immigrant populations, etc.) who were largely absent from consultation sessions. The aim of opening up deprived areas to new populations, and the French government's policy of social diversity—which seeks to attract the middle classes to these districts—also have their part to play, in this diagnosis.

Above all, as sociologist Rosenvallon (2020) passionately argues, there is a need to find ways of consolidating what is a rather 'elastic' concept of participation and reconfiguring it to respond to the practical realities of a plural, post-electoral, post-majority society; to find ways, more generally, of representing the governed as a whole, and not just those supposed to represent a majority of people—a majority which no longer sees itself as being reflected through these intermediaries.

The crisis in our democracies stems from the fact that society no longer feels represented in its true diversity (Rosenvallon 2020). Local officials, commissioning clients, and social and urban actors still tend to see society in terms of large blocs or categories—professions, trades, and social classes—even when the individuals in question no longer feel that they belong to a group and do not define themselves in terms of stable social practices but rather in terms of trajectories, of constant disruption, of communities of experience, rather than of belonging, all of which

² The term *banlieues*, or suburbs, designates the areas dominated by public/social housing found on the outskirts of France's major cities and has become a byword for social deprivation and exclusion.

³ The same criticisms apply to the various forms of participation which could have involved residents earlier in the planning phase, in particular regarding the design of furniture and other equipment.

are in a state of flux. Rosenvallon thus calls for the development of a form of non-electoral representation. For, in his view, to build a society one must first build an understanding of how people live, and in so doing put an end to the unawareness that we have of one another. From this comes the need to construct a new narrative, to give expression and public recognition to the opinions and the lives of all. The present article, which deliberately mixes descriptions of social practices and statements from residents with scholarly analysis, thus stems from this desire to provide an account of the life of places and the people who use them.

The question here is a political one. One has to want to listen to people and know how to do so, taking account of the diversity of what they say, what they are reluctant to say, and what they desire. The architect Andrei Feraru, who was in charge of the three post-refurbishment projects examined here, certainly sought to do this. Following his sudden death during our research, we pay tribute to him here, as not only an architect but also as a man of the theatre who in his spare time explored various ways of letting people speak, through the narration of experiences and stories alike. Might artists and actors be able to function as intermediaries to bring out the desires, needs, and practices that not everyone is able to express, and to make these voices heard?⁴

In 2006, the approach Feraru chose for this refurbishment was firmly participatory, and we will therefore examine his method here by returning to the three social housing estates involved: the Cité de la Fosse aux Loups in Fresnes, the Villa Saint Martin in Longjumeau, and the Jean Bouin residential complex in Taverny, all property of social housing provider (hereafter SHP) 3F, which employed him along with a landscape designer, Armelle Claude, and sociologist Véronique Blin from the sociological consultancy company GERS. Residents were invited to take part in participatory workshops led by the sociologist, who was also tasked with conducting a study into residents' social practices. The issue of sustainable development was also raised as a particular priority, given that the mayor of Longjumeau, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, had just been appointed to the government as Minister of Ecology.

⁴ Working with his wife, Patricia, Andrei Feraru cowrote plays, including *Making Off*, performed at the Théâtre de l'Opprimé in Paris, a work based on the 'forum theatre' model, which seeks to make social and political conflicts visible by giving voice to marginalized groups. This work was to have been performed at the Maison de la Culture in Genevilliers, the town in the Paris *banlieue* where Andrei Feraru was overseeing the refurbishment of a large estate. Taking the form of a large debate, it presented the creative process involved in his forthcoming play *12 jeunes en colère* (*12 Angry Youths*) based on Sidney Lumet's film. Written collectively by a group of authors and performed in several languages (French, English, Italian, and Romanian), the play shows how immigrants live in one language while dreaming or working in another and features characters from different backgrounds: Chinese, Italian, and Algerian. More generally, it examines how a society regards its young people, who are seen as listless and insecure.

12.2 A Resolutely Plural Approach to Collecting Opinions: An Ethnographic Method

The present study presents the results of an investigation carried out on the ground with Mina Saidi, an architect and ethnologist involved in ongoing research at the School of Architecture at Paris La Villette and the Normandy School of Architecture. It also builds on existing studies of Living Labs conducted with Nadya Labyed (Sevrans Cycloterre project, Caen-La Mer). We have sought to assess how the refurbishment schemes were received by residents—whose reactions could range from appreciation and appropriation to criticism and outright misuse—and the extent to which these corresponded (or not) to residents' needs and varied practices.

Our aim in returning to these three sites was to gather the opinions of those who had not made their voices heard through the official channels of consultation. A neighbourhood is defined not only by its inhabitants but also by their movements—those who live in it, work in it, or simply pass through it. Consultation is often envisaged in geographically limited terms or focused on people thought to represent a neighbourhood. However, today's neighbourhoods stretch beyond their strict geographical boundaries.

The acknowledgement of disparities in people's ability to express their views in public (Bacqué 2015; Bacqué and Mechmache 2013; Blondiaux and Fourniau 2011; Zetlaoui 2013) underlines the need to engage with a wider variety of populations and also adopt other modes of data gathering—in addition to straightforward listening, for instance, the observation of places and gestures. The ethnographic method that we employed involves intensive data gathering on the ground, observing these areas at different times of the day and also over time, for a period of six months. Our aim was above all to give visibility to, and understand the meanings and modes of, the appropriation of spaces which have become invisible simply because they are used in ways which seem to go against the norm, in spite of their contribution to the upkeep of the neighbourhood. Studies on participation tend to focus on describing the process, the degree to which people become involved—or not. The exact form of their involvement, along with its effects on architecture and the lived environment, is rarely discussed. Just as 'guerrilla' acts and practices are ignored, in many cases the voices of residents are not heard, as they seem to be contrary to a fixed idea of what cities are, even if in reality these are constantly evolving. Far from being a constraint, as one often hears in this profession, might the involvement of residents not actually help open our eyes? And fuel—rather than, as some complain, stifle—the imaginations of architects and their commissioning clients?

It is, however, important to note that participation by residents tends to seek consensus, and as such is not always representative of the diversity of individual opinions. Consequently, it generally leads to highly normative responses; in other words, the exact opposite of what the Living Lab method analysed in this book—which suggests the idea of experimentation, the search for new ideas and ways of doing things—is expected to produce.

12.2.1 Plan

First, we examine the question of public space. In this respect, the refurbishment can be considered a success insofar as it has enabled the appropriation of this space by residents. However, the way this has occurred has worried building managers and caretakers, in spite of the fact that they had themselves asked for these spaces to be used. A nice smooth, clean, empty floor may appear easier to maintain. Yet what could be more participatory than seeing people engaged in activities in public spaces? Is it not the case that public space is the site of arguments, of debates, and of meetings more generally? This is how we have experienced it at any rate. Our status as outsiders in the neighbourhoods under study, along with our willingness to bring together people of different ages and belonging to different categories who rarely feel able to speak to each other or are even used to treating each other with outright hostility—youngsters and older people, social housing tenants, and neighbouring homeowners—has allowed people not only to express their views but also to enter into dialogue with each other.

Second, we examine the way in which ecological imperatives have guided refurbishment works. Here, the verdict of residents has been less favourable. One might even ask whether in this case participation brought about an effect opposite to that hoped for: at the end of the process, residents felt that their requests were not listened to, even though their opinion was sought, leading them to disengage from these participatory mechanisms. This is in spite of the fact that they may have clear ideas on this subject, which come from their experience of a lived urban space different from that of the city-centre model, constantly presented to them as an ideal. Shifts in lifestyle and the environmental question are shaking up many boundaries, be they territorial or disciplinary, including those of this project. With participation still very much on the agenda, then, it is important to turn our attention towards the places in which it takes form.

12.3 Spaces Open to All, and no Longer Dominated by Men

What were these planned improvements, then, and how have they been received? It was the intention of the designers and architects, let us not forget, to lure people into outdoor spaces by employing architectural legerdemain. At Longjumeau, this involved creating a central park where there had been a patch of scrubby grass, along with a shared biodiversity garden. On all three estates, children's playgrounds were positioned not far from the main gates, and the rather shabby lawns were spruced up. A frequent criticism of estates like these is that the public spaces are dominated by a certain age group, and more generally by men. The media tends to focus on young people left to ' fend for themselves' who, the argument goes, have completely taken over public spaces. As a result, some sociologists conclude that these spaces are avoided by other people (Donzelot 2012). Another worry, expressed by the mayor

of Fresnes, relates to the tendency towards isolation and increased loneliness among residents. The architect, who was concerned about the small size of the apartments, saw the focus on improving outdoor areas as a chance to provide residents with added living space.

Today, the improvements seem to have largely fulfilled these objectives. At Longjumeau, the park and playgrounds have proved popular, and are used by large numbers of people. The fact that parents are happy to let their children play outside is seen by 3F as proof that the new improvements have brought a new sense of security. Indeed, children stay outside until late at night, much to the annoyance of the caretaker, whose job it is to keep these public areas clean and orderly. This practice does go against convention, which holds that children should be in bed by a certain time. The caretaker sees the presence of children at what is judged an unreasonable hour as proof of the well-worn accusations levelled at supposedly negligent parents unwilling to look after their offspring.

Overall, then, the use made of these refurbished spaces corresponds to what the architect wanted and expected. Public space, in the form of playgrounds and a park, constitutes an extension of the home by virtue of being regularly used. These have become predominantly female spaces, serving as living rooms for women who, rather than inviting them indoors, meet other women in these extensions to their apartments. For example, a daughter who has moved to another estate where she does not feel a close connection with her neighbours knows that here she can find her mother and her old friends from her apartment complex.

Given the large number of women working as childminders on these estates, public squares and parks also appear to fulfil the role of workspaces. This type of work is accessible to women without qualifications living on the estates and can be done at home. Home, however, is a small place. Thus, in order not to bother their own families and to let the children they look after run around, many women exploit these outdoor spaces.

Might it also be the case that a lack of high-quality parks elsewhere brings in people from surrounding areas? Among the people from other neighbourhoods who frequent the park on the Saint Martin estate in Longjumeau, there are not only childminders but also grandmothers looking after their grandchildren. This was the case for one woman living in the neighbouring condominium. Her own apartment complex, now occupied by an ageing population, has removed its playground which, for lack of children, is now just an ornamental area that no one is allowed to walk on. This property owner is therefore in the habit of bringing her own grandchildren to play in the playground and park of the estate next door. Indeed, one young man we met a short distance away joined our conversation, telling us that 'the great thing about the estates is that there are all these young people and children (there are lots of families, both French and foreign!)'. The lively atmosphere found here benefits the neighbouring complexes, home to a wealthier but older population whose grandchildren have school friends who are allowed to play outside the apartment buildings, as well as college students, who sit on the benches at lunchtime while the college gates are locked, preventing them from gathering outside.

12.3.1 Social Diversity: An Objective Achieved More Through Public Spaces Than Housing

Are the neighbourhoods which today sit protected behind their gates thus profiting from the existence of more open social housing estates? SHP 3F wanted to move away from the model of ‘residentialization’, a form of refurbishment which in the 1990s–2000s saw estates being split into a multitude of residential units fenced off from their surroundings in order to give the impression of middle-class apartment complexes. Forty years of French urban regeneration policy appear in any case to have borne fruit: the money invested in these estates has by no means been wasted. On the contrary, one reason why a certain number of residents do not wish to leave these estates is that they now boast facilities which are not found elsewhere. As far as the caretaker is concerned, however, the appropriation of these spaces is a failure. He explains that he has the job of dealing with the extra rubbish generated by these crowds of people. The bins are overflowing because they were designed to be used by residents only. Since they are being asked to take on an ever-growing list of administrative duties, caretakers are unwilling to deal with the consequences of the refurbishment programme. As one of the caretakers states: ‘The estate is open, it serves the needs of all citizens, the problem is that its upkeep is down to us in our apartment complex.’ Indeed, should the local council not assist in managing and financing a public space which is situated within a private apartment complex owned by 3F, but which has been transformed through its use by the public into an urban park?

For this caretaker, the park is an eminently public area, given the diversity of people encountered there. In contrast to Donzelot’s concerns about the lack of public space in such neighbourhoods, another sociologist, Remy (2015), draws a distinction between residential public space and public space in city centres: the latter is more anonymous, open, and passed through by all and therefore resists occupation by any one individual or group rather than another (Habermas 1988; Joseph 1992). In a residential neighbourhood, by contrast, public space can be occupied for long periods without it necessarily bothering others, for the simple reason that rules of good neighbourliness are applied here. Women, young people, and children, for instance, who are all attracted to the same space, take turns occupying it at different times.

However, the park at Longjumeau is large enough to allow for the copresence of individuals who do not wish to speak to each other. It fulfils the role of a central public space, being frequented by women from neighbouring estates (Longjumeau is surrounded by several other social housing estates and private complexes) even though relations between these estates are tense, if not openly hostile. It is also used by women and men looking for a bit of solitude. Its size allows people to do something that is often described as a problem on these estates, namely cut themselves off. Madame G., for instance, comes down when she wants to read or get some peace and quiet. A mother of seven children is able to find a degree of privacy here that she cannot always get at home.

12.4 Ornamental Principles Out of Tune with the Lived Environment They Are Intended to Enhance

There are criticisms, but these mainly relate to the designers' overly normative conception of the facilities. 'Are these architects dwarves?' exclaims Madame C. on La Fosse aux Loups estate. This mother considers the playground equipment to be ridiculously small, as she sometimes needs to help her small child get into the Wendy house and would like to be able to join the game herself. Developers consider playgrounds to serve only one purpose—play—and only one age group: very small children. The playground is also designed for children of a specific age. Yet playgrounds are like clothes: children are constantly growing out of them. The equipment here is unsuitable for children who might like to play there when they are older.

Young children are better catered for than teenagers, who are very critical of the refurbishment. The spaces provided for the latter are poorly designed (such as a football pitch placed on a slope). Situated on the outskirts of the estate, hidden away, they are not used much. Indeed, young people are seen less as a specific age group with their own desires and problems and more as troublemakers (Mauger 2019). The improvement works have sought above all to reduce their presence. In Fresnes, the central space now occupied by the children's playground has pushed them to the outskirts of the estate in order to increase a sense of residential privacy. As a result, footballs have constantly been landing in the garden of a private house adjacent to the estate, giving rise to real conflict, first between the young people and the owners of the house and then between the latter and the children's parents. This dispute resulted in the building of a wall separating the house from the estate; this was paid for by the couple who own the property, as 3F did not respond to any of their complaints.

Does participation mean that adolescents lose out, thus exacerbating intergenerational conflict? Is this a consequence of an increased feeling of insecurity?

While young people may have contradictory impulses, making it difficult to keep them happy, so too do their elders. The latter may feel worried at seeing them continually hanging around in front of the buildings, but at the same time reassured to find them there when they come home late at night or laden with shopping, knowing that there will always be someone to help them if need be. This mix of ages enables a sort of informal building supervision to be maintained. The variety of outdoor furniture also helps with this, directly contradicting the theory of situational prevention, which states that a clear layout of facilities focused on a single function is needed to prevent conflict. Thus, while children are left outside alone, this is only because adults can rely on the informal supervision of their children by other residents, who are keeping an eye on their own children from their window or at the playground. Forms of sociability associated with inward-looking communities are thus not incompatible with more informal types of solidarity.

When it comes to the subject of sustainable development, more strident criticisms are voiced. Residents are unwilling to adhere to ecological measures and, fifteen years on, the shared garden at Longjumeau is abandoned and in a sorry state. People abhors a vacuum, as preventive architecture tells us, and the marsh areas filled with

rubbish confirm this. As one woman explains, 'we haven't necessarily got green fingers, so we don't care about the gardens'.

Residents have more pressing concerns: instead of marsh areas, they would rather see parking spaces which they are continually asking for, or areas for barbecues. Indeed, they are dubious about the usefulness of these environmental measures, which they see as pointless. All the more so, because they have been left disappointed by broken promises: the adoption of eco-measures has not led to financial savings for households (Ortar and Subrimon 2018). Rising energy prices and the individualization of energy bills in particular have contributed to weakening the position of households, even though they have been trying to comply with this discourse. Cars, meanwhile, which the refurbishment scheme has sought to exclude as much as possible, are an absolute necessity for work in the suburbs and also make things easier for families, when grown-up children end up having to live with their parents for long periods.

These ecological measures are driven by educational and moral, even paternalistic objectives, which tends to put people off them. The recycling points and shared gardens that were supposed to act as showpieces have turned out to be anything but. Promoted today as a way of introducing biodiversity to urban areas, in the 1990s gardens were touted as a method of creating social interaction in deprived areas. Then, when concerns about crime came to the fore, it was hoped that they would help reduce feelings of insecurity by encouraging residents to take ownership of their space: it was imagined that a shared attraction to gardening would overcome neighbourhood conflicts. The department in charge of participation at 3F sees gardening as a socialization tool, bringing people together, fostering greater cooperation in local affairs, and encouraging tidiness. For us, this is a questionable approach. These measures do not take into account the practices of residents, who are largely unconcerned with ecological imperatives. They also fail to acknowledge differences in taste with regard to the built environment, which have already been analysed by ethnologists (Depaule 2004; Dubost 1999). When lawns are replaced by rampant weeds, this rather detracts from the desired image of a well-ordered estate.

The newly installed bins are technological marvels. Yet, by ignoring social practices, they risk being misused, misunderstood, and ineffective, overflowing as they are with litter and surrounded by bulky objects piled up beside them. Their unsightly state is blamed on people's incivility, yet for us it provides evidence to the contrary. For, if the bins are overflowing, this is down to various reasons. One is brought to our attention by the caretakers, who are angry with parents who let their children take out their rubbish bags: 'The new bins are too high or too tightly closed and therefore inaccessible to children'. They throw the bag in, without being able to close the lid of the bin, and consequently the rubbish goes all over the place. But what is seen here as irresponsibility can also be read as a sign of civic responsibility and an equitable division of household tasks, whereby children run small errands (buying bread, taking out the rubbish). It is evidence of how children are being taught to join in shared efforts and help with daily tasks.

The bins are also overflowing because no thought has been given to an urban practice which is widespread in our cities, but particularly well developed in estates

like these, and akin to a form of recycling. Many people rummage through the bins, some looking for food, others for clothes or furniture. Some trade the items they find on the Internet or markets and get their stock from the bins, where one can find bags, old shelves, shoes, or appliances in working order. These overflowing bins are also a sign that people have to move frequently. But these items are thrown out on the understanding that they could be used by someone else. Mattresses and bags of usable clothing will therefore not be placed in the bin, but next to it.

12.4.1 Has the Original Layout of Major Estates Lasted Better Than today's Fragmented Refurbishment Projects?

One criticism of the outdoor spaces on estates built in the 1950s–1970s is that they neglect the spaces next to buildings and pedestrian use more generally, concentrating instead on the view that residents have from their windows (Sennett 1992). Yet, is this not one of the better points of these estates, with their tower blocks and massive high-rise units? Designed on a scale to fit into the ‘grand landscape’, these offer magnificent outside views. The remarkable sites chosen for many estates—on hillsides or at the edge of forests, as seen in Marseille, Paris, Rouen, and Nancy—are another element in their favour. In this sense, have these colossal *grands ensembles* estates perhaps lasted better due to the consideration given to the wider landscape in this period? Today, by contrast, through the residentialization policy and the diversity of planning instruments, design tasks are compartmentalized and sites are split into plots, forcing landscape architects to work on a much smaller scale.

Critiques of modernity have also led designers to the model of separate plots, reimposing it on a public space originally envisioned as being free from the limits of private property, stretching out into wide horizons. However, is it not time now to rethink the boundary between the built environment and public space, but also between humans and the natural world, between housing and the landscape? If refurbishment schemes seek to foster better relations between people, could they not also find better ways for humans to coexist with animals? One of the reasons why residents are unhappy with their biodiversity gardens is that these increase the number of bees and other insects that they are less willing to accept, while the SHP is unable to eradicate other pests—rats, bedbugs, and cockroaches—that plague the estates. Dogs are another source of conflict between neighbours. The association which looks after the shared garden, for instance, complains that dogs are always digging up their plants.

Could we get some ideas from residents who have, in fact, had one foot in the countryside for a long time? The wild boar roaming the forest edge in the Hauts Rouen neighbourhood, the childhoods spent birdwatching in Peterbos in Belgium, the housing blocks surrounded by cows at Sarcelles: these are all symbols of an urban environment situated on the edge of cities, which illustrate, as philosophers

and ethnologists remind us, that the boundary separating the city from nature is a tenuous one (Descola and Ingold 2014; Desprez 2019; Latour 2015).

The names of these estates are also evocative of their surroundings. The *Cité du Renard* (the Fox Estate) in Fresnes leaves one female resident wondering whether, since the spread of ticks is linked to the disappearance of foxes, the latter could not be re-introduced into cities to emulate the situation in London, where they coexist alongside humans. As part of a workshop bringing together sociology and fine art at the Normandy School of Architecture, students curated a list of old recipes proving that, in the past, certain forms of coexistence between humans and other creatures were possible; and why not imagine animals living in ‘mini-apartment blocks’, which are already being sold for domesticated bees and other small animals?

12.4.2 Grey Areas: Spaces Which Are Neither Public nor Private, Promoting Insular Practices

As for the boundaries between public and private spheres, these are not very clear, as they vary according to both people’s desire for individuation and the degree of intrusion of work into home life. This implies that living space, seen in terms which go beyond the physical boundaries of its walls, can include spaces of ‘secondarity’—to use the term so dear to the sociologist Remy (2015): spaces where the individual can give free rein to their need for privacy and express their own identity. These would include the playground or the car park, the former functioning as a living room or meeting place for women, the latter being a more masculine space, serving as a workshop for DIY or mechanical repairs. They mark a renewed differentiation of the occupation of space along gendered lines, and at the same time signal the return of work into the private sphere of the home. Herein also lies the key to improving social relations in these neighbourhoods: the conflicts in question are as likely to arise inside the apartments as they are outside. Yet if the boundaries between spaces are blurred, so too are those between activities. Is doing DIY or mechanical repairs work or is it a leisure activity? Working as a childminder has much in common with the domestic sphere. DIY allows one to turn a space built or owned by someone else into one’s own. It corresponds to Arendt’s (1961) definition of ‘work’ (as opposed to biologically essential ‘labour’): an activity which befits person and restores an identity which may have been left battered by unemployment or a low-grade job.

Public space, then, accommodates different degrees of publicness. It is therefore up to architects and those commissioning them to give form to these: legal specialists could also become involved, given that what is now looked for is a third way between ownership and renting, between public and private. The notion of third places or commons is back on the agenda (Garnier and Zimmermann 2018; Ost 2012). It refers to the shared use of ‘common’ spaces, an idea often dismissed as unrealistic in the context of deprived neighbourhoods owing to the enduring misconception that people from low-income backgrounds are unable to manage their own affairs. Yet, does the

car park/workshop/maintenance area not already possess some characteristics of a third place or commons? This is certainly the case as far as its form and use are concerned (Lefrançois 2014).

12.4.3 Other Forms of Interaction Do Occur, but in Marginal, Liminal, or In-Between Spaces

For the moment, the community gardens are the only shared spaces to have been accepted. However, they have not proved popular in these neighbourhoods, as they seem to correspond to the desires of better-off populations, middle-class architects, and housing managers, whose jobs—particularly in the Internet age—are increasingly dematerialized, leading them to seek a return to the soil and manual tasks.

Instead of the participative schemes and Living Labs promoted on these estates, might these gardens go some way towards bringing about the social diversity that has been sought, unsuccessfully, through the construction of small apartments to attract middle-class residents? Diversity, in our view, has been achieved more effectively through the facilities offered than through housing. Having people from very different backgrounds living in close proximity in the same apartment complex generates mistrust and even conflict instead of the emulation and mutual understanding that was expected (Chamboredon and Lemaire 1970; Donzelot 2012). In this sense, the community gardens, like public parks, fulfil the role of public spaces in the sense that Habermas gives to this term: they allow a variety of people to meet, namely residents of the estates and populations from other neighbourhoods and social backgrounds. In residential areas, however, such contact seems possible on the margins only, in liminal or in-between spaces, in a slow and gradual manner.

The clearest example of such liminal, threshold spaces are the local shops. These benefit from their peripheral location on the ground floor of the apartment complex, facing onto the road which forms the boundary with other neighbourhoods. Located on this threshold, these shops have become true spaces of public expression and even of political discourse, to judge from the conversations overheard there, in which varied points of view, often defying stereotypes, are expressed by all on subjects such as crime, young people... The shops on the estate—a bakery with a terrace, a tobacconist and newsagent, and a pharmacy—thus function as real public spaces. The shopkeepers are simultaneously outsiders and intimately familiar with their surroundings, and as such well suited to the role of mediators (Tarrus 2002). Here, exchanges can occur between residents who are on bad terms or who normally find it hard to talk: between new and former residents, between homeowners from neighbouring areas and young people from the estate. It was in the tobacconist's shop that the 'mini-war' between the young people from the Fosse aux Loups estate and the couple who own the house next door was resolved. It was also the place where

the residents of the new development and those living on the estate were able to stop eyeing each other suspiciously.

Is this the price at which the ecological imperative comes? That of acknowledging spaces of discussion—such as local shops—which let new and existing populations meet and allow urban density to gain acceptance? They are surely more effective in this respect than consultation committees, which do not attract many participants and even contribute to reinforcing conflicts—not only between young and not-so-young people but also between the working-class population and the middle classes, local officials, architects, and SHPs.

12.5 Conclusion: Taking a Bolder Approach to Interdisciplinarity and Breaking Down Barriers Between Professions

The problem is, in fact, that residents are constantly expressing their views—sending letters, signing petitions, writing to the press—yet are scared or simply unwilling to attend the consultation instances where a pretence is made of listening to them. Instead of the work on building interiors that they ask for, residents get a refurbishment of outdoor spaces. And similarly, while their involvement is sought in designing a bench through Living Labs and other workshops, they are forbidden from doing DIY in their apartments or in the car park. All the while, residents complain incessantly about electrical, plumbing, and heating problems, and about the walls painted on the cheap, with old materials, that are already looking shabby.

Might it not therefore be useful to prioritize dialogue with the actual actors involved in these projects in order to improve the quality of the services delivered? Social housing is a public service with a limited budget. Even so, is the problem here not more one of a lack of coordination between the various professionals involved in this work and the low quality of the services provided by these companies, which all belong to huge conglomerates? Driven by the sole objective of profitability, these firms use a precarious workforce made up of poorly paid casual staff (Jounin 2009) employed at day rates.

Might it not be productive to open up these discussions to a wider range of actors, including these companies, as the Caen la Mer Living Lab⁵ plans to do? And why not include these undervalued workers themselves, re-imagining maintenance works as a space for exchange between residents and workers, as the architect Patrick Bouchain (2006) proposes? This would give new meaning to construction jobs that have become devalued because they have been dehumanized and increase the involvement of residents in decisions affecting their own homes. It would also help resolve another conflict, that between SHPs and their tenants, the former accusing the latter of being

⁵ According to a project manager from the Caen la Mer social housing office, in the city of Caen whom we interviewed.

welfare-dependent whiners while residents accuse their landlords of being concerned merely with appearances and not with making material improvements.

Is it not right to involve residents in decisions on issues which concern them directly, such as whether cars are really as contrary to ecological principles as is supposed? Indeed, might residents be a source of innovation? For instance, the car park, currently seen purely in quantitative terms, could be seen in a more qualitative way as a space in its own right. Living Labs themselves—seen as structured spaces for meetings between different populations—could put themselves forward as spaces for ecological experimentation, challenging accepted ideas and offering a vision of these estates which goes beyond the city/nature opposition, as their residents, living as they do on the very edge of the city, have already understood. They could also find ways to reconcile the discrepancy between long-term accommodation and short-term social housing—meant to be a springboard for families who are not supposed to stay there for long but end up being unable to move into any other form of housing—through an acceptance of the idea that tenants should be able to adapt their accommodation a little more to their lifestyle, given that they will be staying for some time.

Ultimately, there is a need to reconsider existing norms, as the ecological imperative necessitates a different way of seeing the world. Yet participatory schemes and Living Lab projects are often too normative. Driven by operational objectives, they lose sight of the fact that, before one acts, one can question everything, and above all, that one should learn to look at things carefully. This can be achieved by teaching the rudiments of ethnology in architecture schools, not with a view to promoting the discipline, but in order to teach students how to listen, which is to say, not to confuse one's own desires with those of others. Existing spaces of exchange could also be taken into account, while the composition of teams working on these projects could reflect a bolder approach to interdisciplinarity. In addition to architects and landscapers, why not also bring biologists and legal experts on board, to add some fresh perspectives?

References

- Arendt H (1961) *La condition de l'homme moderne*. Calmann-Lévy
- Bacqué MH, Mechmache M (2013) *Pour une réforme radicale de la politique de la ville. Citoyenneté et pouvoir d'agir dans les quartiers populaires; Rapport au Ministre délégué chargé de la ville*
- Bacqué MH, Sintomer Y (2011) *La démocratie participative, histoire et généalogie*, Editions La Découverte
- Blondiaux L, Fourniau JM (2011) Un bilan des recherches sur la participation du public en démocratie: Beaucoup de bruit pour rien? *Participations* 1(1):8–35
- Bouchain P (2006) *Construire autrement*. Actes Sud
- Chamboredon JC, Lemaire M (1970) Proximité sociale et distance sociale. *Les grands ensembles et leur peuplement*. *Revue française de sociologie*, XI, 3–33
- Depaule JC (2004) Savoirs et manières de faire architecturaux : populaires versus savants. *Savant/populaire, Les cahiers de la recherche architecturale et urbaine*, 15/16
- Descola P, Ingold T (2014) *Être au monde. Quelle expérience commune?* Presses Universitaires de Lyon

- Desprez V (2019) Habiter en oiseau, Actes Sud
- Donzelot J (2012) A quoi sert la rénovation urbaine? PUF
- Dubost F(1999) La maison, le beau et la mode. Terrain n°32, pp55–66
- Estebe P (2015) La politique de la ville à la bonne échelle? L'introuvable solidarité d'agglomération. In: Kirszbaum T (ed) En finir avec les banlieues? Le désenchantement de la politique de la ville. Editions de l'Aube, pp 117–129
- Garnier J, Zimmermann JB (2018) Solidarité sociale et proximités. De l'Etat providence aux communs sociaux. Espaces et sociétés 4(275):19–33
- Habermas J (1988) L'espace public. Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise, Payot
- Joseph I (1992) L'espace public comme lieu de l'action. Les Annales De La Recherche Urbaine 57–58:212–217
- Jounin N (2009) Chantier interdit au public. Enquête parmi les travailleurs du bâtiment. La Découverte
- Latour B (2015) Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique. La Découverte
- LeFrançois D (2014) Le parking dans le grand ensemble. Editions de la Villette
- Lepoutre D (1997) Cœur de banlieue, Codes, rites et langages. Editions Odile Jacob
- Mauger G (2019) Les jeunes des classes populaires sont des jeunes comme les autres. In: Masclet O, Misset S, Poullaouec T (eds) La France d'en bas? Idées reçues sur les classes populaires. Le Cavalier Bleu, pp 163–167
- Ortar N, Subremon H (2018) L'énergie et ses usages domestiques. Anthropologie d'une transition en cours, Editions Petra
- Ost F (2012) La nature hors la loi. L'écologie à l'épreuve du droit, La Découverte
- Remy J (2015) L'espace, un objet central de la sociologie. Eres
- Rosenvallon P (2020) Le parlement des invisibles. Le Seuil
- Sennett R (1992) La ville a vue d'œil, Plon
- Tarrius A (2002) La mondialisation par le bas. Les nouveaux nomades de l'économie souterraine, Balland
- Vayssière B (1988) Reconstruction/déconstruction. Le hard french ou l'architecture française des trente glorieuses. Editions Picard
- Zetlaoui J (2013) L'implication des habitants dans les projets d'écoquartiers en France. Vers des démarches intégrées. Cahiers Ramau n°6, pp 239–254

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

