

BRINGING THE FOREST AROUND THE TABLE: HOW TO SUPPORT OTHER-THAN-HUMAN PARTICIPATION IN URBAN REGENERATION PROCESSES THROUGH DESIGN?

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ABSTRACT

Complex systemic challenges such as urban regeneration projects that strive for a positive long-term impact, must take into account views and needs of multiple stakeholders, both of humans and other species (e.g. animals, plants, landscapes etc).

While human actors can directly engage and articulate their own perspectives, other species depend on humans to represent them. Humans who seek to represent other-than-human needs must be equipped with relevant knowledge, empathy, and imagination to do so. Additionally, they can benefit from having communication and representation techniques to support them in this task.

While participatory design suggests a rather rich toolkit to support the joint work of stakeholders, the representation of other species in this context is understudied. The purpose of the workshop is to address this gap. Through a combination of hands-

on activities and discussions, participants will have the opportunity to collaboratively explore and reflect on how design can support the participation of multi-species actors in participatory workshops in urban regeneration projects.

WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

With the increasingly urgent global environmental crisis and its impact on all planetary systems, the call for sustainable futures is more important than ever (IPCC 2022). As the global population becomes increasingly urbanised, cities have emerged as both the roots of unsustainability and the arenas to address it. Problems associated with the many interrelated sustainability issues such as climate change, economic underdevelopment, and social inequality are essentially urban in nature (Evans et al., 2016). Being home to a majority of the world's population, cities have the potential to drive significant change in sustainability practices. Their role as an experimental field, institutional interface, and focal point for reworking socioecological relations and sustainability is intensifying (Sachs Olsen, 2022).

In urban regeneration initiatives that aim to further urban sustainability, the future is constantly in the making, providing opportunities to collaboratively re-imagine how things could and ought to be (Dunne &

Raby, 2013, Neuhoff et al., 2021, Zohar & Neuhoff, forthcoming). However, there is a widespread shortcoming that often prevents these initiatives from reaching their full potential, that is to say, to re-imagine potential futures as those of humans alone (Bridle, 2022). Over a long period of time, we perceived the city as a ‘humanist citadel’ (Franklin, 2017, p. 1), i.e. as a place that secures human needs and undermines the needs of other species. Regeneration processes provide us with the opportunity to rethink this human-centred approach.

In recent years, entities such as rivers, forests, wildfires, weather systems, animal flocks and viruses, to name a few, have started to enter into urban political life. They are no longer seen as ‘neutral’ subjects, but as active, lively, fragile, powerful, and interconnected bodies that have been brought into the spotlight by the global environmental crisis (Franklin, 2017). This shift in perspective creates new subjectivities and sensibilities, recognizing the existence of pluriversal worlds and creating new relations with other-than-human entities from a position of humility and care, rather than superiority. This approach, scholars agree, is crucial to our long-term survival (Bridle, 2022, Akama et al., 2020).

In parallel, other-than-human design approaches have emerged, being recognized for their potential to expand our understanding of the perspectives and needs of non-human species (Sachs Olsen, 2022). As a response to the realization that “the environmental crisis is a design crisis” (Escobar, 2018, p. 44), the design community has begun to critically reflect on the fact that participatory design often undermines other-than-human participation (Akama et al., 2020), multi-species equity, and an understanding that human existence is intertwined with the lives of other beings (Haraway, 2007, 2016). By doing so, other-than-human design (sometimes also referred to as more-than-human, non-human, or multi-species design) is rooted in a relational worldview that acknowledges and values the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities.

Applying an other-than-human paradigm in participatory design is a matter of broadening the scope of stakeholders involved in the design process. But perhaps even more importantly, it is a matter of framing a new ontology. Whilst traditionally, participatory approaches concerned a human-centered way of knowing in a human-centered world (Bridle, 2022) an other-than-human paradigm needs to ask: how can we create a multi-species way of knowing in a multi-species world? But this is not the only question that emerges, as other scholars demonstrate (Clarke et al., 2019, p. 61):

“How do we make the experiences of non-human others palpable? How do we hear, and how do we encourage others to hear, the non-human voices? How do we bring them into participatory processes [...]? Most importantly, how do we convince others, who are less familiar with such perspectives, that decentering human privilege is important and relevant for the future of interaction design?”

Then, we also need to ask how the knowledge, needs, and lived experience of non-human stakeholders can be communicated, or, to formulate it in the words of Sachs Olsen (2022 p. 322), how we can “enable other species to have a say regardless of their capacity to speak”. Thus, applying other-than-human approaches in participatory design calls for rethinking 1) the ways of creating knowledge, understanding, and empathy; and 2) the ways this knowledge, understanding, and empathy is/can be conveyed to other stakeholders and external audiences. A process of mediation is needed since non-humans speak a different language than the common language of those (humans) more routinely involved.

In this workshop, we will collaboratively explore how to support other-than-human participation in urban regeneration processes through design. While human actors can directly engage and articulate their own perspectives, non-human actors depend on humans to represent them. Humans who seek to represent non-human needs must be equipped with relevant knowledge, empathy, and imagination to do so. Additionally, they can benefit from having communication and representation techniques to support them in this task. Participatory design suggests a rich toolkit to support the joint work of stakeholders, however, the representation of non-humans in this context is understudied. The purpose of the workshop is to address this gap.

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