

THE CERAMIC PROJECT: DESIGNING FOR, WITH AND BY YOUTH

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Extended abstract


1. Introduction

During the last decades, there has been an increased policy interest in enhancing children and youth participation in development processes. According to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, and which became a Swedish law in 2020, children and youth have the right to participate in development processes that affect them, which is in line with the precepts of participatory design (Björgvinsson et al., 2012, Hansson 2021). Also, policies like *The New European Bauhaus Initiative* (2020), and *The Swedish Policy for Designed Living Environment* (2022) puts particular emphasis on the participation of all in the development of living spaces.

Scholars have modeled children's participation in society in different ways. One of the most well-known models is Roger Hart's (1992:8) *Ladder of Children's Participation* which in turn revisits Arnstein's (1969). According to this ladder, different levels of participation can be distinguished from the lowest ones – manipulation and decoration – to the highest one - “child initiated with shared decisions with adults”. This ladder and other normative models categorize and rank different participation schemes, but they say little about how children's (intended and designed) participation unfold in practice and what are the conditions and consequences of such participatory processes. The interest and practices of children's and youth's participation in developing living environments can also be inserted in the long tradition of participatory design in Scandinavia (Ehn and Kyng, 1987).

Our contribution focuses on a case where design and craft were used to involve young adults in the shaping of a recreational peri-urban area in Gothenburg, called Linnarhult, and aims at unpacking how the participatory process actually unfolded around a specific craft material, namely clay. Our study shows a process in which participatory design materializes through fast and slow prototyping that emerges and develops over time (Hansson and von Busch 2022). Socially embedded tools – that is tools embedded in and at the same constructing the specific sociality of a place - are developed, making participation possible (Hansson and von Busch 2023). The participatory design process in which we engaged also tried to move away from a “design for design” approach and set up a “design infrastructuring” approach (e.g., Binder et al., 2011, Hillgren and Seravalli, 2011, Björgvinsson et al., 2012), targeting the design situation taking place after the project and to produce “something from which future opportunities can emerge” (Hansson 2021:72). In this paper, we tweak the STS notion of boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989) and conceptualize how clay becomes a boundary material

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- flexible and robust, mobile and rooted at the same time - around which not only youth's participation in the making of Linnarhult but also their access to many other urban areas develops.

2. The case study and methodology

Our case study is located in Linnarhult, a recreational area in the peri-urban North East of Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city. It follows a youth-initiated project, between January and July 2022. The project was organized for, with, and by youth and included eight participants from 15 to 26 years of age. The project emerged as a result of previous research activities taking place in Linnarhult, in which the leader of the youth group was actively involved (Hansson and von Busch, 2022; Hansson and von Busch 2023). *Kultur Ungdom*, a non-profit organization supporting youth projects in the region, funded the development of the youth-organized project where different art forms were explored with Linnarhult as a base. The group also received other types of infrastructural support from local actors. Part of this project developed around creating ceramics from locally found clay, which is in focus here. After the Kultur Ungdom-funded project ended, the leader of the youth group got into other life-changing engagements, like job and marriage, and the youth's group was discontinued as financial and time resources to engage the group were lacking (e.g., for coordination, professional support, and food). Thus, one of the authors (Hansson) decided to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2010), and sustain the work. A new project named "The community cup" was initiated where the focus is to re-connect and deepen the relational ties that were established during the clay project. This time, an invitation is made to a broader audience, and the Linnarhult home organization, EAC, is acting as the host to make possible a more long-lasting process.

3. Results and Discussion

The research shows how a local natural resource, clay, became a "boundary material" (cf. boundary object, Star and Griesemer, 1989) that brought several actors together: the youth, a civic organization, an artist in the surrounding network, public cultural organizations and academia. A social and material "construction site" was formed (Latour, 2005:89), where policies were put into shape. Not only was the clay shaped, but also through the clay new social relations, agencying the youth in new ways, were created. The designer's role was to help shape this construction site and form these linkages.

When the project ended and funding was over, the group started to dissolve and the construction site stopped. With the discontinuation of the public funding and the enrolment of the group leader in other engagements that competed with clay-making timewise, the objects created remained, but the process established to create them was interrupted. In other words, the boundary material clay solidified into ceramics stopped working as a boundary material, losing flexibility and rootedness (in Linnarhult) and closing down the range of potentialities of what clay could be and become for, with, and by the youth. Ceramics could not engage funders as much as clay had done. The continuation of the project went back to clay shaping, to remobilize a wide range of actors and played intentionally on the relation between malleable and solidified clay (clay and the cup), between grass-root and institutionalized organizations, and between voluntary and payed-for work. Our case, therefore, points at the shortcomings of a project-based organization of youth's participation in the city which, rather than shaping and nurturing the relational ties of a lasting infrastructure, establishes a short and performance-driven time horizon.

Our interactive, practice-oriented contribution will be presented in the Tiny House on Wheels, parked on the Växjö campus at the time of the conference. Making cups of clay, while drinking coffee in ceramic mugs made in Linnarhult, will allow us to engage with both plastic and solidified clay as a mobile boundary object in a new context.

Keywords: participatory design, children and youth, boundary object, construction site, design infrastructuring, project-based organization.

Conflict of Interest

It is hereby declared that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

The authors' contributions are as follows: HH has organized and conducted the field study; ER has advised HH during the field study and has contributed to the development of the conceptual framework, together with HH. ER has won the grant from FORMAS (see funding) and led the project between November 2020 and September 2022 and HH has led the overall project from October 2022. Both authors agree to be accountable for the content of the work.

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