Towards a Power-Balanced Participatory Design Process

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ABSTRACT

Participatory designers have taken inspiration from other practices like the social sciences to develop socially just and horizontal processes to collaborate with communities. In the current work, we take the premise that designers do not have enough means to address concepts of power and politics in design practice. Therefore, we elaborate upon how designers could develop horizontal relationships within participatory design practices. Informed by the legacy of Paulo Freire, a research-through-design study exploring new ways of engaging and interacting with the community has been conducted. The study setup allowed for reflection upon the changing role of the designer in a community context. We conclude with a series of propositions and discuss their contribution to power-balanced relationships in participatory design processes.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **General and reference**; • **Design;**; • **Social and professional topics;**;

KEYWORDS

Dialogical Spaces, Liberation, Participatory Design, Power Dynamics, Praxis, Reflection, Social Justice

1 INTRODUCTION

For several decades, design practice has recognized the need to address social causes and issues of politics [1]. As a discipline with the capacity to mediate relationships, design has increasingly been understood as a socially relevant activity supporting societal transformation [2, 3]. Participatory Design (PD) is seen as a way to democratise innovation [4], by engaging the foreseen beneficiaries of the design project. Participatory designers increasingly act as facilitators [5] allowing for more horizontal relationships with the people they work with. In this way, PD empowers others and can be seen as a means to give the conditions for all involved to decide

and act during the process and influence the design outcome in a way that it represents their needs and values.

Participatory designers have looked for inspiration from practices outside the design domain to develop socially just and power-balanced processes. Particularly, methods, tools, and theories coming from the social sciences dealing with systemic oppression enabled designers in developing critical thinking and more accountability in the process [6]. Although PD has the potential to balance power dynamics between designers and non-designers, it is not straightforward how to apply these to PD practice. Research shows that power dynamics and politics are still too often a weakness in the design practice and that designers lack the means to address these issues in design practice [3, 7–9]. The current work aims to understand how designers could develop horizontal relationships in participatory design processes. In the remainder, we introduce the legacy of Paulo Freire and motivate the study setup aiming to establish horizontal relationships with a community in the South of Rotterdam. The resulting situated process served as a context to reflect on the changing role of the designer within the community.

2 POWER IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The origins of PD can be found in the democratisation of the workplace in the '70s in Scandinavia. Designers started collaborating with workers to re-design and introduced new technologies in the workplace. Later, PD continued to engage with other settings and with different publics always including people destined to use the new technology and, in this way, ensuring their wants and views helped to define and improve the designed outcome [4, 10].

PD was a big step to democratising the design practice and opening the space to include the voices of the people intended to use the outcome. However, as design practices move to the public domain, many discourses of participation in design fail to understand the ethical complexities of working in a democratic approach, ignoring that involving users in a project leads to addressing issues of politics and power [8, 11, 12]. Whereas design encourages people to interact in new ways, design often produces (and reproduces) social relationships and systemic power dynamics. These relationships are not only built after using a design product but they are also reproduced in the PD process itself where different actors with different access to power interact with each other.

When it comes to improving social and political reflections in PD and its relation to democratic processes, the work of the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire becomes particularly relevant [13, 14]. Especially, it has inspired many scholars and practitioners in the Global South developing new theories and concepts for design delinked from the Western practice, proposing situated and hybrid approaches in order to "deal with social issues that are not typically associated with the profession, such as human rights, ethics, politics, ideology, and oppression" [9, p. 17].
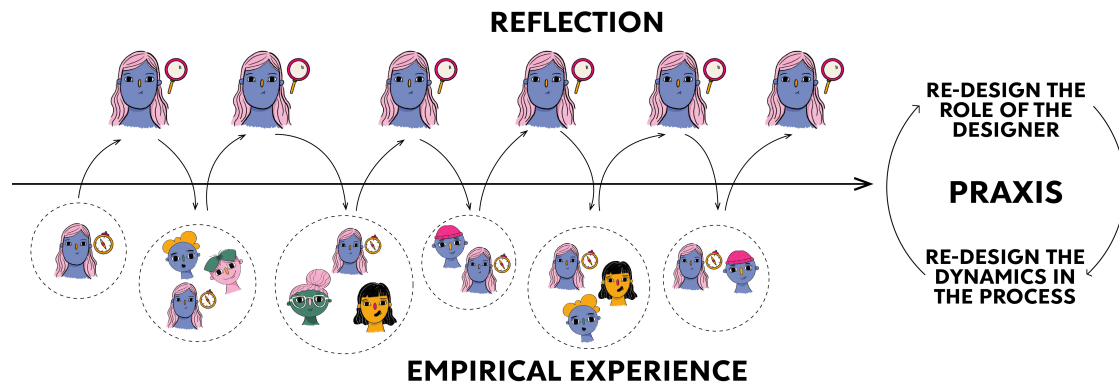
Figure 1: Design process as reflection and action. The bottom part represents the action and refers to the empirical experience in context supported by six explorations in which the designer aimed to engage in power-balanced relationships with the community in order to re-design the dynamics inside the PD process. The top shows the reflections on the empirical experience that generate insights on the designer's role in the design process. On the right, it shows how these perspectives relate to the Freirean concept of praxis in a cycle of reflection and action.

The current study further contributes to this transformation of the design practice by learning and applying concepts from the Global South to delink the role of the designer from the normalised practices and oppressive power dynamics when developing a PD project in the Global North. We elaborate upon Freire's pedagogy program centred on the liberation of oppressed peoples from systemic power structures. For Freire, social power relationships are summed up in two positions: the oppressed and the oppressors. According to Freire, education supports systemic oppression coming from the oppressors or supports liberation for the oppressed. Freire [2000] conceives a new relationship between the teacher (oppressor) and the students (the oppressed) in which the latter are empowered to shape the course of their own education in order to change their reality. Differently put, the Freirean approach called praxis, envisages how teachers and students could engage in "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" [15, p. 25] and promotes a liberatory model called problem-posing. In this scenario, the job of the teacher is to create the conditions to co-learn based on the student's experience in the world and how their realities are shaped in their contexts. The liberatory model entails a critical process valuing learners' self-determination, dialogue, and a non-hierarchical relationship between the actors involved aiming to transform oppressed individuals into subjects engaged in collective action to change the reality of the oppressed but also one of the oppressors. According to Freire, the oppressors need the help of the oppressed in order to be liberated from their condition leaving behind their identity that supports the mainstream systemic power. This liberation of the oppressed and the oppressors can be achieved by developing critical consciousness: a critical understanding of societal and political factors that are related to oppression in daily life experiences.

As such, the current study refers to the designer as the oppressor who needs to be liberated from their role with the help of and in dialogue with the community involved (the oppressed) through a process of reflection and action.

3 METHOD: REFLECTION AND ACTION

Even when being aware that power imbalances can be reproduced in PD, designers can engage in oppressive attitudes [12]. Particularly due to biases and preconceptions of the designer's role within a PD process (e.g., the designer should be the one defining the problem, the designer should take the lead in proposing a process or participatory activity, the designer should propose a solution). These preconceptions can influence designers and direct them to engage in oppressive dynamics even when aiming for more horizontal relationships. The current study aims to better prepare designers to engage in more power-balanced relationships. Six different explorations have been conducted in the neighbourhood of Afrikaanderwijk in the South of Rotterdam that aimed at establishing horizontal connections with local residents providing dialogical spaces for re-evaluating the role of the designer inside the process (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows how we combined empirical experience with reflection. Based on Freire's concept of praxis, reflection and action both have a key role to liberate the designer from her oppressive role in a PD process while aiming for power-balanced relations. Action (Figure 1, bottom) refers to the partially unplanned interactions with the community in Afrikaanderwijk conducted by the designer. The designer had the goal of establishing dialogical spaces with the community without imposing any specific role for herself in those interactions. In this way, the designer was re-designing the dynamics with the community inside the process. These empirical experiences aimed to be delinked from the normalised relationships between the designer and the community in the PD practice. Ethnography and autoethnography as well as unstructured observation and dialogue helped to engage with the context in a less disruptive way, valuing the relationships established with the members of the community.

The reflection (Figure 1 top) refers to the researcher's reflections on the designer's empirical experience and extrapolates learnings and conclusions to inform how the role of the designer is being

re-designed in order to engage in power-balanced relations with the community. Given that the designer/researcher was constantly confronted with self-related issues and biases, there was a potential self-absorption to be avoided. To stay away from this bias, the researcher's reflections to understand the empirical experiences have been articulated with mentors and peers. The reflections about the role of the designer were not articulated with the members of the community as the designer was participating in the context as a person interested in engaging in local activities and projects, not as a PD designer carrying out a PD project. The reflections done with the community covered topics regarding the context, personal life experiences, and ongoing community activities to reach social change.

4 THE RESULTING DESIGN PROCESS AND DIALOGICAL SPACES

Figure 2 shows the six encounters with some members of the community of Afrikaanderwijk. The interactions between the designer and the local residents were of different kinds resulting from the opportunities the designer looked for. As such, the first exploration served as a preparation for the context giving insights to the designer about activities to be part of later in the process. The remaining explorations were intended as dialogical spaces where the designer engaged in dialogue with the community by participating in different activities. These activities included playing basketball in the main park, having some snacks in a street brunch, participating in an open theatre organised by the community and co-reflecting with some members about topics like gentrification and other social issues. The next section motivates the insights gathered through reflecting on these explorations that inform PD practice on how to develop power-balanced relationships with the community and the corresponding role of the designer.

5 DISCUSSION

While developing the explorations in the context, the role of the designer in those interactions was reflected upon in order to understand how to develop more horizontal relationships. Taking into consideration that PD re-interpreted the role of the so-called 'ego-designer' (the gifted designer working in solitude not being in touch with the user of their products) to the role of the facilitator, the current explorations demonstrated how the role of the designer can be pushed further. As such, in some of the explorations, the role of the designer transformed into the role of the designer-participant. In Exploration 1 and Exploration 2 the designer acted as a participant in the context but not necessarily in an activity facilitated by the members of the neighbourhood. In Exploration 1 the designer participated in the context as a careful observer while in Exploration 2 the participation consisted in playing a basketball game. With this type of participation in the context, the designer was able to explore the neighbourhood as the members of the community felt natural to introduce. These first encounters were open and revealing as they were not mediated by a design activity that could reduce the identity of the community and their experience in the context by the bias of the designer. By avoiding the imposition of any design activity or even entering the context as a designer developing a project, the designer was able to delink the role and engage in more horizontal interactions.

Explorations 3, 4, and 5 started by engaging the designer as a participant but chronologically changed to a role closer to a partnership. In Exploration 3, participating in the brunch and a neighbourhood meeting allowed us to see the process as a discovery guided by the community that opened spaces for the designer to join and know better the context, its dynamics and relevant topics for the community. Encountering the community in a more horizontal way permitted the designer to be part of activities and spaces that probably could be unreachable from a position of power and control of the process. Participating in the open theatre in Exploration 4 allowed the designer to understand the values and beliefs of the community from their own point of view and showed the designer other ways of participation different from a design activity. In this exploration participation was framed by the community, for the community. The exploration also allowed for closer relationships and meaningful dialogues with some members as the designer did not need to focus the attention on facilitating any activity. Lastly, the co-reflection meeting of Exploration 5 showed the relevance of finding common care with the community (in this case the topic of gentrification in the neighbourhood) as it allows the designer and the community to see each other as partners working towards the same goal having equal care and attachment to the topic and points of view to be shared.

Exploration 6 did not reveal a specific role of the designer as it did not represent a single event in a specific moment of time, but it is considered the maintenance of the relationship built in the other explorations through periodic dialogue and it did not affect the role of the designer inside the process. However, it seemed that the ways of engaging with the community created strong bondings and relationships not dependent on design activity.

Figure 3 visualises the designer's roles in the explorations. It shows that the first explorations started on one side of the axis and gradually moved to the centre with the final meeting in Exploration 5 in which a co-reflection allowed a shared control of the activity. This transition of the explorations from the right to the centre of the axis happened because in the first contact with the context the designer needed to be as less disruptive as possible, so less oppression is exercised over the community. The findings of the current research show that for these changes in the role to happen, there is a need for dialogue between the community and the designer. Only by creating those dialogical spaces the role of the designer could be re-evaluated and negotiated with the community in mutual understanding during the whole process.

The theory of liberation enabled the interpretation of the explorations as a path for the designer's liberation. Similar to PO where the oppressor can only be liberated by the action of the oppressed, in the current study the designer was being liberated from the oppressive role, from facilitator to participant and partner (Figure 4), by the interactions with the community in Afrikaanderwijk and the dialogical spaces that permitted this transition.

Figure 4 shows an extrapolated framework from the role of the designer in the explorations and the different levels of power and control the designer and the community might have on those roles. In the role of the facilitator, the designer has more power over the community and the project because in that role designers still have

E1: GETTING TO KNOW AFRIKAANDERWIJK

Preparation

Based on observation around the neighborhood, the exploration gave hints of activities and places that could be visited in the future and be used as dialogical spaces with the community.

E2: BASKETBALL FOR THE FIRST TALK

Dialogical Spaces

This exploration permitted the first interactions with members of the community. The dialogue while playing basketball gave insights to follow some of the social media of the neighborhood to look for other activities to join.

E3: JOINING THE BRUNCH AND A NEIGHBOR'S MEETING

Identifying and dialoguing with people that is actively engaged in the neighborhood led to be part of activities related to activism and social justice in the context. This also opened the door to set-up the meetings corresponding to the next two explorations.

E4: BEING A STREET THEATER PARTICIPANT

Dialogical Spaces

Participating in a theater event organized by some memebers of the community let the designer have the time to connect deeper with some of the members and establish a time and place for the next exploration that was convenient for everyone in the group.

E5: CO-REFLECTION ON GENTRIFICATION & OTHER ISSUES

The meeting permitted to establish a closer relationship with two of the members of Afrikaanderwijk and openly discuss about gentrification and other issues related to social justice. The designer was able to keep contact with the members even if Covid-19 did not allow face to face meetings.

E6: STAYING IN DISTANT TOUCH

In the last part of the study, the contact with the community was kept via WhatsApp and phone calls due to the global pandemic. Even when this study was finished, the designer keeps having contact with some of the members and stills participates in some activities in Afrikaanderwijk.

Figure 2: The six explorations represented in pictures with the main outcomes at the design level and how each of them informed the exploration to follow. The first exploration was considered a preparation for the set-up of the next ones. The next five explorations are considered dialogical spaces that help the designer to enter horizontal relationships with the community and re-define the designer's role inside the process.
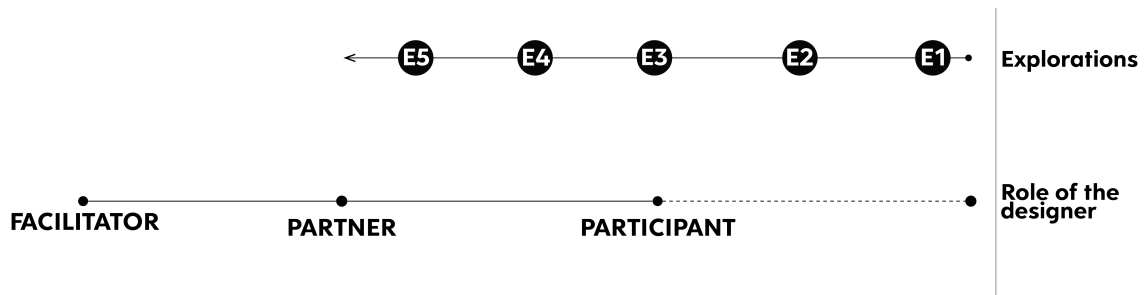
Figure 3: The explorations arranged in the proposed role of the designer axis. In this case, explorations 1 and 2 stand outside this axis as the participation of the designer was not inside planned activities. Explorations 3 to 5 move chronologically from the participant role to the area of the partner.
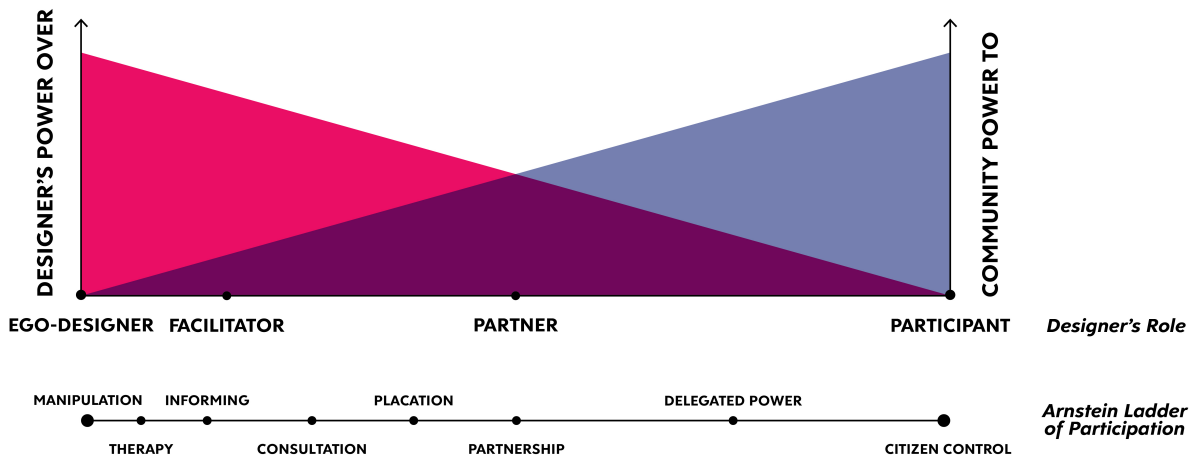

Figure 4: The role of the designer during the explorations. The axis moves from the ego designer to the role of the facilitator, the partner and finally the participant. The vertical axis at the left indicates the power the designer has over the process and the community depending on the role they are having. When the role of the designer is near the ego-designer or facilitator, the power over the process and the community is higher. Once the role changes to partner and participant, the power tends to decrease. The vertical right axis, on the other hand, represents the power the community has to influence and have agency in the process and the outcomes of the project depending on the role of the designer. When in the project the designer is an ego-designer the community power is less while when the role changes to the right of the axis the community power increases. The bottom of the figure shows how the role of the designer compares to Arnstein's ladder of participation being the ego-designer on the manipulation and therapy side while the participant role corresponds to citizen control.

much of the decision making, control over the process, framing, etc. When moving to the role of the participant the designer's power over the community and the project decreases as more agency is given to other social actors. If we compare this axis with Arnstein's ladder of participation [16] the less power the designer has, the more power the members of the community are capable of exercising as they are not limited by design impositions. Differently put, the power and agency of the community translate into more citizen control in the process.

When understood inside a PD process, what the framework shows is that the role of the designer may and should change depending on the moment and what the situation is requiring, understanding that a project for social justice can be more than just what can be framed and managed by Design. As such, the designer can move between being a facilitator, a partner or a participant depending on what the project (done with the community) is required at any specific moment of the process. This constant re-evaluation

of the role of the designer is possible by defining the process together with the community, and consequently, also the roles will be defined in mutual understanding.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK: FIVE PERSONAL PROPOSITIONS

In the current section, we summarise our learnings and translate them into five propositions, aiming to support participatory designers to be better prepared to establish power-balanced relationships when collaborating with communities.

A power-balanced process is built together with the community. The process entails giving relevance to the relational aspect of the project and giving space for the designer to enter into close relations with people in their contexts. In this way, comprehension and trust can be built to develop a project structure and plan that aligns and respects the identities of all the social actors in the process. It also presupposes that the designer should not enter the process with a specific end goal in mind but it will be built together and in dialogue with the community to avoid influencing the outcome, thus giving away power to others to act and decide.

For a power-balanced process, the designer needs to be liberated. To be able to develop a PD process that is power-balanced and socially just the role of the designer in PD needs to be re-interpreted. In this research, the liberation of the designer implied de-learning the normalised practices of a designer in a PD process and engaging with the community differently. Using notions from the Global South, the liberation of the designer implied a constant re-evaluation and negotiation of the role that could be accomplished by having spaces for dialogue with the community. As such, some practices like spending time with people outside the design activities are fundamental to being able to establish dialogical spaces. In line with Freire's theory, dialogue becomes the tool for the liberation of all the social actors involved in the process. More interesting, as Freire affirms, liberation can only come from the oppressed, who in an act of love liberate themselves and the oppressor. In the same way, the designer can only be liberated from the oppressive role inside the PD process thanks to the community when willing to interact in those spaces.

The designer joins the community to design with them. A PD process that is power balanced entails seeing the project as a collaboration and not just as community participation. The horizontal process does not conceive an end-user to design for but considers the community as an equal partner to design with. This statement, however, seems to be true at least for the early stages in the process where a structure or a problem frame has not been defined. An assumption is that for future stages in the process the designers may indeed design 'alone', as some tasks in the collaboration may be assigned to them based on their skills. Still, even those possible moments of designing without the community have to be intended under the frame of a collaboration in which everyone is working towards a common goal and tasks are collaboratively assigned.

A project for social justice/change is more than what can be framed by design. A project as a collaboration intends that everyone involved in the process works together and contributes from their knowledge and capabilities. Especially when developing projects that aim to tackle complex social problems, it seems crucial to recognize that the project itself is more than what the design practice can define. Design skills are one more thing brought to the table as to reach social change is necessary to work with others.

A power-balanced process can be built in reflection and action. During this study, it was acknowledged that to build a power-balanced PD process awareness of power dynamics and how they affected the relationships of all social actors is needed. As such, the notion of praxis developed by Freire is a useful practice in a process that aims to be power-balanced. Doing periodical reflections about the activities and actions taken in the context was in this case a good strategy to avoid biases and overpass unconscious oppressive attitudes.

In conclusion, the present study investigated how PD processes could become power-balanced when collaborating with communities. This to better prepare participatory designers to engage in horizontal and socially just dynamics when working for social change. Hereto, a series of explorations were developed in the neighbourhood of Afrikaanderwijk in the South of Rotterdam enabling reflection on the role of the participatory designer in more power-balanced dynamics with some of the members of the community. Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, the study was set up on reflection and action where the designer's empirical experiences and interactions in the context were the bases for the reflections at a research level to find insights about the designer's role in the process. The study resulted in the re-interpretation of the designer's role as a participant in the context and as a partner with the community. Main lessons have been translated into five propositions to facilitate participatory designers in their pursuit of more power-balanced design processes that are more socially just and accountable.

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