

# TOWARDS PARTICIPATION OF EXISTING BUSINESSES IN THE REGENERATION OF INDUSTRIAL URBAN WATERFRONTS

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# REFLECTION

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In a concluding part of the graduation thesis, a reflection will be provided on the graduation research and process. The reflection comprises a reflection on the research relevance, methods and process.

## Research relevance

This section will discuss the position of the research within the graduation laboratory and the corresponding chair of Urban Development Management and it will describe the scientific and societal relevance of the research.

### Position of research within graduation laboratory

The graduation laboratory Next Generation Waterfronts builds on various researches that have been conducted upon urban area (re)development. In these researches, governance questions and the division of roles between government, private parties, civic actors and knowledge institutes play a key role. The main challenges of waterfront redevelopment processes lie within the interface of economic geography and urban planning, and the management of the many stakeholders involved in these endeavours.

This thesis elaborates on the latter with the subject of participation in planning processes for urban regeneration. The research examined how participation processes that involve the existing community, being the (industrial) businesses, can be improved in industrial urban waterfront regenerations. Hereby, the research contributes knowledge about managing complex development processes by offering a new perspective on participation processes, being participation with (industrial) businesses.

### Societal relevance

As a result of the tendency to (re)develop inner-city locations, a tension between living and working, on account of a lack of space, is currently identifiable in industrial urban waterfront regeneration projects in the Netherlands. For municipalities, and developers, who want their development plans to succeed in these areas, participation of the current users of the area is a necessity. The need for participation will be strengthened by the implementation of the new Environment and Planning act that requires the inclusion of participation in urban planning processes.

But despite the amount of academic and practical attention that the subject of participation is getting in current urban development projects, a constructive thought behind the implementation of participation instruments and a design of the participation process often remains lacking. In all the cases studied the subject is high on the policy agenda for municipalities. Nevertheless, the outcomes of participation, especially with regard to the involvement of existing businesses, are often not satisfying for both the existing companies and the municipality. As became apparent in the research, if the relationship between actors is at odds with disagreements about the planning process and/or plans, this leads to a time-consuming process, which requires a lot of (negative) energy for all actors and also disadvantages the project in terms of time and money.

The results of the research provided insight into the current use of participation instruments in practice and the underlying factors that support or impede participation of existing businesses. The results provided factors which could contribute to a more effective participation process. Based on the factors of improvement, a process approach has been drawn up that can support municipalities in carrying out the participation process with existing companies.



In practice this could lead to more satisfaction with the participation process for both parties, more results from the participation process, less conflict about development plans and ultimately a more efficient and qualitatively better development process and plan.

### Scientific relevance

Although a high number of academic researches is available on participation in urban planning processes, the existing literature mainly includes research into public participation as a part of policy making and residents' participation in urban developments. This is a different type of participation process than with existing companies. In participation processes of industrial area transformations, the existing companies are asked to contribute ideas about the future of their business location. This is different from citizens who think along on the introduction of a new law, or future residents who can co-design their new home.

The results of this research also indicate that the current theoretical framework offers too little attention to the context of participation processes, and that important factors, which can impede the participation process, cannot be solved with this framework.

For this reason, the recommendations of this study have presented a new process approach that puts more emphasis on the entire process than on the application of instruments and the role of municipalities. This offers the opportunity to better adjust the participation process to the context and to focus on mutual ambitions, interests and process goals. Furthermore, despite that the recommendations in this research are written for municipalities that want to achieve participation with existing businesses in industrial urban area transformations, the process approach can also be useful for other parties, such as private developers, that want to achieve participation in similar projects.

## Research methods

In the following sections, the different research methods that have been applied to conduct this research will be discussed.

### Literature study

The literature study lays down the basis for the empirical research and is therefore a primary source of information in this research. Conducting the literature study was considered to be quite a challenge. The subject of participation is very broad and literature particularly focused on the involvement of existing businesses in urban planning processes could not be found. With every article new information on urban planning and public participation was obtained, what resulted in the theoretical framework being adjusted several times. Probably, this was one of the most time-consuming parts of the graduation process.

It was only during the empirical research that the various theoretical concepts fell into place and it proved to be valuable to come back and forth between theory and practice. Discussing the use of the theoretical concepts with both academics and people in the practice of urban development improved the understanding of the concepts and narrowed the scope of the research.

The fact that there was no directly applicable theory on the research subject was seen as a lack in this research. The theoretical framework that was used was not fully applicable to the cases. Nevertheless, this also resulted in findings to improve and complement the existing framework.

## Case study

In the beginning of the graduation process, the choice was made to conduct research into the development of the Schieoevers in Delft. Hence, the research began with the decision to conduct a case study. Subsequently, when the research problem and question were defined, the choice for a qualitative research method was made. A qualitative method was chosen for the research due to the focus on the people and mutual relations, which are difficult to measure. The selection of case studies is a logic step in qualitative research and therefore the choice of a case study remained unaltered.

Initially the research was designed as a comparative case study research in which three cases would be analysed in detail, and the results would be applied in the form of an advice for the fourth case, being the Schieoevers. This choice was based on the idea that the other three cases would be further advanced in the development process, and therefore provide lessons learned on the participation process for the Schieoevers. But at the start of the empirical research, after the P2, it turned out that the cases did not clearly differ from each other in development phase. Also, the cases encountered the same challenges in the participation process. This resulted in the decision to analyse all four cases as a comparative case study, after which they could provide lessons for each other, but also for other future projects. Because of this decision, more data was collected about participation processes, which led to more extensive recommendations. However, the recommendations are aimed at the participation process in the initiative and planning phase, and not at the implementation phase of area developments. This was not possible due to the current development status of the cases.

As a first step of the case study an extensive document study was carried out to obtain the background information of the cases. This entailed reading an enormous amount of policy documents and (newspaper) articles. Although some of these documents can be considered as grey literature, the documents provided an overview of the development vision of the project and the chances and challenges that they entail. However, a disadvantage is the number of documents that are written in the course urban development projects which made it difficult to determine whether information is relevant and accurate. Besides, most of the documents on planning used in this research, are established by municipalities. This means the documents are written from their point of view, and the ambitions and plans that the documents contain are not necessarily widely supported. Also, it must be acknowledged that participation is not much touched upon in municipal planning documents.

As a primary source of data multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors involved in the chosen cases. During these interviews' insight was obtained on the actors' interests, the participation process and the perceived outcomes. The interviews account for a rich source of information for the research subject. Besides the more formal information on the participation process, the interviews also ensured a better understanding of the actors involved in the projects, their relationships and personal drivers for collaboration. However, arranging interviews was for some cases a time-consuming activity as important stakeholders of the project responded very late or did not respond at all. This was the case for entrepreneurs and also, the business association of Alphen aan den Rijn. Especially the latter was a pity because their responses could have been valuable in this research. Nevertheless, enough data was obtained from the interviews to answer the research questions.

To complement the interviews, the plan was to conduct a survey among existing businesses in the case study areas. The survey could provide more information on the interests and wishes of existing businesses with regard to the future of their business and the area. But after consultation with the mentors, it was decided that the survey would take a lot of time and the outcome was doubtful. Also, from the experience of organizing interviews this did not seem effective. The chance that entrepreneurs, who disagree with the plans, would respond was small. Besides, the questions could be difficult for them to understand. Finally, the answers that the survey could provide were not necessary to answer the research questions.

It was planned to present the findings of this research to stakeholders of the Schieoovers case. Besides the fact that it is valuable to share the findings and results, this could also have led to interesting feedback and based on that, improved recommendations. Unfortunately, this presentation is moved to a date after the completion of the graduation project. But, by chance, a research was published in December on a renewed participation process model by a company named VOLQ. Although that process model is much broader in context, similarities could be identified. By sharing the conclusions and recommendations of this graduation research with VOLQ during a meeting, meaningful feedback has been received that has improved the recommendations.

## Research process

This last chapter reflects on the research process that has been gone through in the past year from a *personal* point of view.

At the start of the graduation course the subject choice was quickly made with the topic Next Generation Waterfronts and the case of the Schieoovers in Delft that aroused my interest because of the proximity and involvement of TU Delft. Subsequently, the question followed: “what do I really want to investigate in this case?”. This proved to be a long search, in which the focus of the research changed several times. For the research this meant stepping away from the initial idea about what the outcome of this transformation process can be: “How does this become a successful mixed-used area?” to what the current problems are where these and similar projects run into. After explorative discussions with the mentor and reading articles related to this topic, this turned out to be the miscibility of living and working, and herewith the conflicting interests between existing companies and the municipality that need to be managed in the process. This resulted in a research question that focuses on the process and the relationship between involved actors, rather than on the outcome of the project.

While further exploring the topic of stakeholder management through a document- and a literature review, I learned about the theory of participation and its embeddedness in urban planning processes. Also, it was discovered that, with the introduction of the new Environmental and Planning act in 2021, participation would become a requirement in the development of plans. Together, this resulted in the first research proposal. At the end of the first semester I presented my research proposal during the P2 presentation. By that time the problem statement and research relevance were determined, as well as a literature study, the research methods and case selection. The proposal felt as a feasible research ready to be carried out during the second semester of graduation.

However, during the period between P2 and P3 a time-consuming process followed to make the research structure more explicit and mainly to develop the theoretical framework in such way that it was applicable in the empirical research. At the same time, I already started conducting interviews.

This resulted in constantly going back and forth between theory and practice, collecting more relevant and interesting literature but also obtaining the first findings. With regard to the findings, I struggled sometimes with the qualitative character of the research that made it difficult to obtain concrete results from the empirical research, and also, to look at the results objectively. The theoretical framework made it possible to reduce some of that subjectivity, but still the framework was filled in based on the data retrieved from interviews. This period I experienced as the most challenging phase of the graduation research.

At the P3 presentation the different research elements started to fall into place. In the research process this was also marked as a turning point. The literature study was completed, as well as the interviews, and with that a new phase of processing and discussing findings and comparing them with the theory started. The last phase, towards P4, I experienced as very productive and clarifying.

Although the final results are not as explicit as I wanted them to be, the research has brought some interesting findings which could be valuable for setting up participation processes in urban development projects, and thereby improving the involvement of existing businesses in such processes. As far as my research is concerned, I can say that my goal has been achieved. However, more importantly, I find the fact that my interest in urban area development has only grown throughout this year, and despite that participation did not seem to me to be a very challenging topic at the beginning, I got to realize the importance of the subject and how much there is to be achieved on this matter in practice.

Something that I will therefore take into practice myself is the importance of the social component in the development of plans. You can develop the most ambitious plan for an area or building, but for projects like these, in the end its success depends on the people involved: those are the people that not only define the place, they also define the process and, in the end, the project. For that matter, I can only endorse what Henry Ford<sup>1</sup> once posed: *"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."*

In the week before my final presentation, I walked along the Schieoevers in Delft to take photos for my report and presentation. Capturing the area in this way stirred my imagination on what this area will look when we are able to successfully work together. Hopefully this research can contribute in achieving that.

Bente Bast  
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<sup>1</sup> Quote by Henry Ford (source: Andersen, 2013)