The Library of Engagements

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ABSTRACT

The Library of Engagements is a Participatory Design tool for engaging citizens in the production of space, urban and architectural design in their cities. It is a collection of methods, techniques and tools used in participatory design. This piece of work aims to bring the debate about community participation and public consultation in the built environment to as wide an audience as possible. The Library contributes to the movement to obliterate the “myth that space is produced by a single person.” [1]

I would like to invite individuals or small groups to share my collection of ‘methods of engagement’ - in an attempt to inspire people to get involved in transforming where they live. I will personally present an example of each method using a catalogue of objects and stories to illustrate them.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Human-centered computing → Interaction Design →
- Participatory Design

KEYWORDS

Participatory Design; Engagement; Archives; Performance; Methods.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Library of Engagements is a Participatory Design tool for engaging citizens in the production of space, urban and architectural design in their cities. It is a collection of methods, techniques and tools used in participatory design. The physical archive consists of a catalogue index box, four archive boxes and a selection of books. The archive boxes have documents, photos and objects relating to examples of different methods catalogued in the index (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The index is a catalogue for the archive and methods. © Emily Crompton

This piece of work was initially developed as part of my thesis project which critiqued participation methodologies employed inside and outside architectural practice to analyse and discuss public engagement in the built environment. This theoretical study and subsequent collection of methods has continued to evolve through my professional practice, community facilitation and academic research activity.

It is an attempt to catalogue different methods of engagement. It draws on performance art, local history and community asset building methods. It looks critically at who is involved in the decisions about cities and neighbourhoods and encourages the widening of that decision-making. Most of all it

is generous and connects to the individual participant to suggest a method that they could use in their own community or neighbourhood.

The Library is activated by participants in conversation with the librarian, who will be present to speak with visitors to the Library and select a method of engagement relevant to their life / project (see Figure 2 and 3).

Figure 2: The archive is curated by the librarian. She is always present. © Emily Crompton

Figure 3: Participants activate the archive by speaking with the librarian. © Emily Crompton

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A PERSONALISED TOOLKIT

Consultation exercises are usually met with rolled eyes and public apathy; in contrast the Library provides examples of people-power projects democratising an ever-privatised production of architecture. The Library contains a range of methods from public surveys to public protests. Methods have been categorised by understanding a range of variables including

who was involved, their initiation, motivation, timing, and the methodologies used. The Library is a call to action for people to become full democratic participants in the production of space. It is a living archive, activated by participants, and curated by its owner, Emily Crompton [the librarian]. Objects, documents and personal stories demonstrate each example in the Library. It is in this way that the Library becomes a tool itself, demonstrating a “transformative participation” [2], one in which the outcomes are not only built or drawn, but which also regard the personal transformation of participants.

While manuals are written to be accessible to the majority of people, Doina Petrescu criticises them for being too directive and rather than be liberating, tending to control the participative process. There is little written for architects about how to consult particular groups, the importance of timing in consultation, different techniques and how to design an effective method. By looking at a variety of examples, I am hoping to distinguish the different characteristics and aspects of methods, emphasising the importance of creating a bespoke method for each situation, community or activity [3]. Small illustrative examples are used to inform and possibly enlighten an alternative way to practice architecture or approach participatory design.

The Library of Engagements is a highly personalised method of sharing the knowledge of participatory design. While this is a personal collection, the aim is to continually expand the Library of Engagements and for it to become a valuable resource for spatial agents and active citizens, with the potential to create a publication/ online resource in the future.

4 SITUATED ACTION IN HASSELT

The Situated Action will take part in the micro-city of Hasselt, Belgium. I will invite individuals or small groups to share my collection of ‘methods of engagement’ - in an attempt to inspire people to get involved in transforming where they live. I will personally present an example of each method using a catalogue of objects and stories to illustrate them (See Figure 4 and 5).

Figure 4: The librarian uses the catalogue to select a relevant method, and the artefacts held in the archive provide stimulus regarding a specific method or project.
© Emily Crompton

Figure 5: Participants hear about methods of engagement which are relevant to their own experience and capability.
© Emily Crompton

The Action will take place in a central location over one day and will be open to the general public. I will also invite specific guests, policy makers, practitioners and academics who have been involved in projects locally, which involved some form of engagement in their process. They will be invited to contribute a method to the Library as part of the Action.

There will be a period of investigation ahead to understand the local context and potential projects. Some local projects of interest include Kapermolenpark project which used digital tools to collect ideas from citizens, a residency project called The School where designers are incubated at the school of architecture, a recent festival called Tournée Locale which included a project called 'Everyone Share in Runkst', and 'The Union' program of art in open space developed by the Province of Limburg, Z33 and the cities of Hasselt and Genk [4]. These examples amongst others will be researched further and entered into the Library to be shared.

I expect to meet the citizens of Hasselt, to understand the issues facing their urban landscape, and uncover the methods they are employing, or even inspire them to use other techniques. I will audio record the conversations as a record of the action, which will be used in an exhibition to allow more citizens to 'eavesdrop' on the action and continue the discussion with as many citizens as possible.

5 INTERACTIVE SESSION AT CONFERENCE

Conference attendees will be able to experience the Library of Engagements at a 30-minute interactive session. This will include a brief introduction to the concept of the Library and a

demonstration of some of the items included in the archive. Participants will be then be encouraged to read about some of the methods using the index cards. A local example/ project will be provided and participants will be encouraged to suggest ideas of relevance which the project could utilize to increase, or begin, participation. The librarian will facilitate this discussion using examples and corresponding objects from the archive.

Through asking the participants to use the library to enact the action, as well as bringing their own experiences of participatory design methods, it is hoped that distinctive and project-specific ideas for engagement will be conceived. This will be shared back with the local project.

The session will end with a request for suggestions of other methods the group's members have experienced, invented or used. It is hoped that by engaging fellow practitioners and academics in the field of Participatory Design the Library's collection will continue to expand.

6 REQUIREMENTS

For the situated action, the Library requires a table and 4 chairs in a space where the public will be passing through. The location will be a centrally located publicly-accessible place. It is hoped that the people based at the location will also benefit from the intervention. The Interactive Conference session and Exhibition require a 4 x 5m space. (See Figure 6 and 7).

Figure 6: Interactive session layout proposal. © Emily Crompton

Figure 7: Exhibition layout proposal. © Emily Crompton

7 THE LIBRARIAN : WHO I AM

Emily Crompton [the librarian] is an architect and urban designer with a desire to involve as many people as possible in the design of spaces, buildings, neighbourhoods and cities. She is a senior lecturer at Manchester School of Architecture with experience in a number of architectural practices, having worked on projects of varying scales, most of which involve engagement of some description. For more: www.LibraryOfEngagements.com

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