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Involving Citizens through Walking: Urban Walks as a Tool for Awareness Raising in Historic Built Areas

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Abstract. Public participation in decision making is a hot topic for spatial planning for many decades. Since 2001, the Aarhus Convention is granting, among others, the public rights for public participation. However, as Arnstein already in 1969 wrote, there are many levels of participation and ever since the publication of her paper scholars as well as practitioners are deliberating various levels and a multitude of tools of how to involve the public, in what stage, up to what depth to make it as effective and efficient as the situation allows. Urban walks present one of the methods of stakeholder involvement in which participants, usually local citizens, are guided through a walk in the site with experts explaining their ideas and collecting remarks from the participants. They offer an opportunity for community engagement and informal discussion on various topics in the decision-making processes, to witness successful examples and innovative tools. They are one of the most appropriate ways for awareness rising among the general public, as they offer in-situ exploration together with face-to-face discussions with professionals who are guiding the walk. The paper examines two case studies of urban walks. Firstly, a set of 8 urban walks taking place within the INTERREG-Central Europe BhENEFIT project aimed at raising awareness and building capacities in the field of sustainable management of historic built areas. Altogether, there were 148 participants in these events, and at the end of the urban walks, they filled in the feedback forms. Responsible partners also prepared detailed reports about all of these events and, together with feedback forms, these are analysed and the results are presented within this paper. Secondly, the paper uses a case study from Rome (Italy) within the Jane's Walk International Festival presented at the III Biennial of Public Space. The method of urban walks had been selected as a proper way to involve citizens in the project, to help disseminate the project results and make the citizens a part of the decision making in historic built areas in the project pilot sites. The results from the analysed reports give evidence supporting the effectiveness of this method. The paper further on discusses different forms of public involvement for future events and ways how to include the public in the decision-making processes.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary urban society (more than 4 billion people – more than half of the world – live in urban areas), the dematerialisation of information, the ways of relating to others and even of spatial use is increasingly topical, through new technologies, new instruments of communication, new development policies. But despite modern digital skills and gradually more the concept and instruments to build 'smart cities', it remains essential for people to interact and act in a real physical urban space, through direct experience and knowledge of the community and urban spaces around.



Promoted more and more and integrated into the various programs and projects for spatial regeneration, public involvement in decision making results in the definition of a greater civic sense, in the protection of cultural heritage and in the management of sustainable, integrated and accepted development.

The method of urban walks is one of the most suitable and successful tools, whose principle is basically to involve, to walk, to observe and to share knowledge at different levels. Also promoted as a successful planning tool for UN-Habitat [1], focused and used for defining a New Urban Agenda, urban walks are a “community-based approach” to city building. It uses free, citizen-expert led walking tours and makes space for people to observe, reflect, share question and projects for the places of daily living and historical-cultural value. It is a dynamic tool to raise awareness, for sharing objectives and involving citizens in the participation and planning of their cities. In addition to the organization and support of experts and technicians, the involvement, doubts, questions and proposals that the community can provide during this “on the move experience” is fundamental.

Another international movement of urban walks is indeed inspired by the ideas of urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), who sustained the concept of City as a public space for all: “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody” [2] and supported the active participation of inhabitants in governance and planning.

2. Urban walks as a tool for heritage preservation

Walking has long been considered a practice of cultural, ecological and political significance. Historically, marching and walking was a part of resistance tactics to uphold or disregard the status quo [3]. Walking has been lately used as a method to engage with our identities as reflected in our surroundings [4] and allowing people to get an improved understanding of being part of the surrounding.

Urban walks (sometimes called city walks or Jane Jacobs Walks [5]) are one of the methods for increased public participation in planning and architecture [6]. Jane Jacobs several decades ago was using this method to express her worries about the proposed policies and obtain people’s opinions and preferences about the places they live in [2]. They can be used for the situated discovery of issues connecting the city to its residents [3] whereas the topic of heritage preservation and historic built area (HBA) management can be one of these underlying topics. As for the application, Thibaud [7] gives examples such as neighbourhoods, shopping malls, railway stations, transport hubs, underground public spaces or large urban projects. Urban walks can be utilized as an innovative source of learning opportunity for society and for preserving heritage, for exploring cities and their rich heritage but also as a tool for old city revival and heritage management [8]. These walks can help residents to explore their surroundings with a focus on specific topics [9], for instance through the lenses of heritage care. Such heritage walks can help preserve heritage through the transfer of knowledge [8].

The main goal of urban walks is to increase the level of awareness about a specific issue by gaining access to the sensory experience of the participants in motion [7]. The urban walks simultaneously require movement (walking), perceiving and describing which increases the effectiveness of the delivery of the message compared to static presentations. They allow for ‘talking by walking’ [9] as a way to actually visit the area. Additionally, these walks are taking place in-situ so that participants can have direct contact with the deliberated territory and objects.

The target group for these events can be very broad, it can include the residents from the area, broader public, local and regional authorities, non-governmental sector representatives, professionals, tourists or other users of the space.

When designing any participation methods, it is crucial to deliberate the potential threats and downsides of each method. For urban walks Ondrejicka and Ondrejickova [10] define the following:

- High-tide of public interest – the threat of steep decline in interest of the public in the event – it is important to uphold the attention by a genuine effort to be part of the decision-making process and by keeping the discussion interactive and attentive to their inputs;
- Trust, apathy and scepticism of the public – this is rather CE specific of low trust in the participation processes as a heritage from the socialist period – it is crucial to focus on trust building from the very first stage and maintain this trust by openness and constant flow of information among the parties in the participation process;
- Non-unified terminology – since the beginning it is important to keep the language sans overly specific and scientific terminology, but to use more informal everyday language. It is important to keep in mind the need to unify the terminology and explain the key terms to create common baseline knowledge for stakeholders. When publishing materials in all phases of the participatory process, the language of these materials needs to be fit for the recipients and including a glossary of key terms which might cause misunderstandings. Additionally, it is recommended to use a discussion facilitator/mediator familiar with the project and able to capture these misunderstandings in the language and explain it even repeatedly during the process.

3. Methodology of urban walks

Urban Walks present an opportunity for community engagement and informal discussion on a variety of topics. A shared walk, first of all, has a strong aggregating value because it is about connecting people to the places where we live and work, to cultivate belonging, socializing and engagement-get participants involved.

In general, the number of participants should not exceed 25-30 people to avoid excessive dispersion and allow everyone to follow the path. An urban route, just so that it is within the reach of the largest possible number of participants, should not exceed 2-3 kilometres in large and busy cities, while it may be longer in quiet towns or in naturalistic places. The length must be evaluated on the basis of an average participant who is not necessarily a great walker, ensuring accessibility and security for all.

The walk should not take more than an hour and a half - two hours and provide traits as homogeneous as possible between the stages. You do not have to start and end at the same place, but the starting point should be an area where a small gathering will not be in the way, and preferably, where seating is available. End the tour near public transit if possible, and ideally, where people can sit down and talk more, sharing this event (parks, patios, coffee shops).

The main steps in designing successful urban walks:

- Before the walk
 1. Choosing a topic/theme, e.g. HBAs (knowledge and enhancement of historical and cultural heritage; knowledge of the urban evolution of the places; cultural aspects and local identity; historic heritage preservation...)
 2. Choosing a prospective walk leader/moderator (share the guiding duties with one or two friends/colleagues)
 3. Planning the route-stops (city map) /itinerary/agenda-time. An inspection will be necessary before the realization of the walk
 4. Choosing Points of Interest (four to eight to fifteen points of interest)
 5. Thinking places, stories, activities, gamification
 6. Promotion of the event-walk: contact information; time/place of meeting
 7. Networking and Cooperating (info point; schools; libraries; cultural centres; newspapers/radio; websites and social networks....)

- During the walk
 1. Brief introduction and distribution of route maps/images and description of the specific points (additional amplification systems or headphones).
 2. Provide participants with a road-book/leaflet
 3. Interaction and involvement of the local community/associations/artisans...
 4. Moments of rest, questions, games (possibly in places not crowded and protected). People can express their ideas using post-it notes
 5. Livestreaming or recording offline during the event - group souvenir photo
- After the walk
 1. Dissemination of urban walk message/report/satisfaction survey
 2. Presentation/exhibition of photos and videos

Additional tips:

- Plan the Urban Walk itinerary ahead of time;
- Make a survey in advance, calculating route-stops, timing and interest of the place;
- Confirm the date and time your tour is offered and the starting place on the website program;
- Participants' registration; distribution of maps/materials;
- Keep the distance manageable for a broad range of ages and fitness levels;
- The staging points must be carefully selected (in terms of the level of noise, suggestive, with areas of shade or sun according to the seasons, with possible points where you can sit or lean);
- For connecting sections, it is good to identify pleasant and not very busy routes, so as to favour the knowledge and the conversation among the participants or solicit further information on the basis of possible questions.

4. Urban walk case studies

Here we will present two case studies. The first one is from INTERREG Central Europe project BhNEFIT focused on creating strategies and tools fostering sustainable management of historic built areas (HBAs). The second case study is from Rome from 2015 where the city of Rome in cooperation with "Sapienza" University prepared urban walk event.

4.1 Urban walks for raising awareness and capacity building in the topic of HBA management

The urban walks within the BhNEFIT project took place between April and November 2019 as a part of the project dedicated to awareness raising and capacity building.

The project was dealing with sustainable management of historic built areas with particular focus on 6 pilot areas (Mantova – Italy, Karlovac – Croatia, Mátészalka – Hungary, Poprad – Slovakia, Mikulov – Czech Republic, Bad Radkersburg – Austria and Idrija – Slovenia). The project was focusing on creating a shared strategy for sustainable development of HBAs, local strategies for pilot areas as well as the creation of ICT tools supporting these strategies (GIS monitoring systems and BIM models). The last part of the project was aimed at defining and testing tools for increasing awareness and capacities of all subjects involved in HBA management. Three target groups were defined (general public, decision makers; and technicians and entrepreneurs) and for each group, specific toolkits were prepared and tested within the project and pilot areas.

The urban walks had been selected as a method for involving and building capacities among the general public. This method is appropriate to initiate discussion on a different topic of urban planning and the challenges of sustainable urban development by welcoming participants to witness successful planning tools, governance, community engagement, and interventions in urban spaces. The participants, in general, evaluated the events as positive and also indicated they would like to join similar events in the future.

The target group general public is, in general, referring to people — individuals who have an interest in or will likely be affected, either positively or negatively, by a decision to be made.

For the BhENEFIT project purposes, the target group was referring to the decisions related to the topic of sustainable HBA management, i.e. city cores with historic structures carrying historic values [11]. In this respect, under the general public, we refer to the local citizens of all age groups, the city visitors/tourists, the decision makers, technicians and entrepreneurs. These are those who are affected by the developments within the HBAs and whom the valorisation of these areas concerns.

In each country, the events were adjusted according to the specific topic the pilot area was dealing with. In Slovakia the key topic was energy efficiency of historic buildings, in Croatia, it revolved around maintenance and management of build architecture and in the Czech Republic, the theme was the environmental issues, social and economic challenges in the development of urban conservation areas.

Table 1. Urban walk participants

	Italy			Hungary	Slovenia	Croatia	Slovakia	Czech Republic
	Event 1	Event 2	Event 3					
Date	April 17 2019	November 11 2019	November 28 2019	May 25 2019	October 10 2019	April 16 2019	June 7 2019	June 19 2019
General public	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NGO	X	X	X	X		X		X
Decision makers	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Technicians	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Local public authority				X	X	X		X
Sectoral agency					X	X		X
Higher education and research			X		X	X	X	
Number of participants	17	24	18	22	11	35	14	7

4.2 Jane's Walk International Festival – First experience in Italy, Rome

For the first time in 2015, Jane's Walk will take place also in Italy, in Rome (City Organizer- Alice Siragusa) and this edition has been organized in collaboration with the "Sapienza" University of Rome, the association "Interazioni Urbane" and the III Biennial of Public Space (INU - Italian National Institute of Planning)[12]. One of the co-authors of this paper was (Dott.Arch. Micaela Scacchi, Ph.D. in Territorial and Urban Planning/ ECR) a walk leader, organizing a walking conversation about history, architecture, characters, esoteric mysteries of 'Coppedè Quarter', part of II Municipality in Rome (the official photographer of this event, within the Jane's Walk Rome 2015, was Arch. Monica Manicone). Using different engagement methods and tools, target group from different fields of interest (students, inhabitants, technicians, families, tourists, decision makers, intellectuals...) were involved the various days and at the same time games, quizzes and tests were held for the participants to stimulate their involvement and promote a face-to-face discussion.



Figure 1. Flyer graphic elaboration – Engage & Share

They responded with interest and participation to the various initiatives carried out, also with an exchange of information between them and with other inhabitants met along the way.

Furthermore, in conclusion, some questionnaires were distributed and requests were made to write or draw some more significant episode or element of the walk, also indicating suggestions for future projects (realization of a pedestrian area and limited traffic, redevelopment of public spaces, restoration of historic buildings and heritage preservation, enhance lighting, project of green parking and car/bike sharing systems, enhancement of small crafts and historical boutiques, integration between sustainable tourism and inhabitants...).

This was a pilot project, described by the Arch.Monica Manicone, PhD as official photographer, presented later as a video-presentation at the III Biennial of Public Space, within the thematic area of "The road", as an example of a very human scale neighbourhood, conservation of unique architecture and scenographic internal and external elements, sustainable mobility and micro connections.

This experience of global interactions in a local dimension was so appreciated that it was repeated in the following weeks too (Figure 2, 3).



Figure 2. Photo by Arch. Monica Manicone – Talk & Walk



Figure 53. Photo by Arch. Monica Manicone – Observe & Participate

5. Feedbacks and lessons learned

After the urban walks implemented within the BhENEFIT project, the participants were asked to fill in the feedback sheets asking about their basic characteristics (gender, age, category of participant (see table 1), the level of satisfaction, the most and the least favourite parts of the events etc.). Based on these inputs, the key lessons (positive aspects, problems/deviations and suggestion for improvement) were derived:

Positive aspects:

- Interactivity as important characteristics in order to keep the attention of the participants. Urban walks offer an opportunity to move beyond one-way communication to interactive setting;
- Urban walks provide an opportunity for PR activities of the municipality to demonstrate the project and other achievements;
- Urban walks as a beginning of deeper participation of citizens / as a basis for further participation as they provide a chance for a face-to-face contact with the local population. Further on, citizens can be more likely to participate in outlining/commenting local strategies and other forms of involvement in the public affairs;
- Various age groups can participate and therefore it is important to plan the route of the urban walk even for elderly / children / mother with a baby stroller in terms of length or barrier-free access;
- Urban walks are a great opportunity to gather the views of participants on the settlement / monuments / specific places. People like to express their views often in spontaneous settings as opposed to e.g. presentation in city halls;
- Urban walks as opportunities to experience the genius loci / identity of the place even for local inhabitants who live in the area for a longer time;
- Urban walks could be organized as a part of broader participation structure for a larger project and the results should be then used in the development process or as an input to another type of participation event/method;
- Besides the urban walk guide, it is a good idea to have another designated person taking notes and minutes of the meeting and inputs by the participants so ensure no opinion is lost;
- Wide range of participants under the group of general public ensured the best way to learn, share ideas and present different points of view; and
- Although the name of the participation method is urban walk, other means of transport can be used, for example, the urban bike ride.

Problems/deviations:

- There is a difficulty in gathering people, especially in smaller municipalities/communities;

- Weather is an important factor, hard to predict. What is important is to have a backup plan in case of bad weather;
- In case of larger groups, it is a challenge to involve all the participants and that some people take too much time with their questions which may not be relevant and/or of interest of all the participants;
- Dedicate time during the walk for explanations about the topic and the steps municipality is taking in order to arrange a more dynamic event avoiding the “frontal” approach; and
- It is crucial to invite people via multiple channels in accordance with local customs. The channels include social media posts (Facebook, Instagram etc.) [13, 14], local newspapers, local radio stations, leaflets delivered to the homes or presented on the municipality building etc.

Suggestions and recommendation for future events:

- Create a storyline to complement the expert content of the urban walk to help understand and take attention of the participants. Also, by storytelling you can form any topic, no matter how unthankful or serious it is and bring it closer to the general public;
- Provide refreshments and some small presents / gift bags as a type of icebreaker;
- Make the urban walks interactive in a way to involve people into two-way communication. Avoid lecture-like approaches and combine them with questions for discussion or collect ideas/impressions of the participants;
- Make sure the route is easy and physically possible for all age groups, from children up to the elderly. According to this, please make sure the access is barrier-free and there are places to sit at the stopping points, especially in case of longer events;
- It is advised to have one more person for taking notes and helping the lecturer with giving materials and other duties to allow for full concentration of the lecturer and ability to answer the questions undisturbed.

6. Conclusions

In the current context, fluid, dynamic, full of challenges, in response to a growing decline of ‘human habitats’, the concept of the ‘public good’ as a common value and as an opportunity for transformation, projects and development is increasingly being strengthened. So, citizens are more and more involved in promoting and practising regeneration events and projects: public or private stakeholders, spontaneous committees, associations, cooperatives.

Therefore, finding strategy and tools of communication and involvement becomes essential for every decision makers and planners. Urban walks, through the transfer of knowledge and exchange of views ‘on the move’, can help preserve the heritage and develop urban education, as well as a design approach based on concertation with the community.

The main goal of this tool, as an interactive approach between the environment and people, is to increase the level of awareness, encouraging walks guided by citizens that create space for each person to observe, reflect, share, discuss and re-imagine collectively the places where he lives, works and socializes.

In conclusion, also from the case-studies described, it is noted how, ‘the walking activity’ can provide ‘a first sensory framework’, which must then be rationalized with a methodology for evaluating. Moreover, the use of an understandable and shared language is necessary to better express the topic and obtain more reliable results, stimulate interest, constructive exchange of information and active participation. The meeting and sharing can, therefore, trigger not only stakeholder involvement tools, but also awareness processes, as well as proposals for re-appropriation and regeneration and spatial planning by local communities, with certain support of interdisciplinary experts and innovative decision

makers, to develop the dissemination of knowledge, but to address the fragmentation of opinions and skills.

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