

Challenges and limitations

Collaborative mapping and participatory methods, which involve communities sharing information about their daily lives and spatial experiences, have become well-established approaches in various contexts. While it is essential to critically examine just how genuinely collaborative or participatory these processes are, they have been widely adopted, from favela-upgrading initiatives to public projects in Germany. However, a significant gap still exists when shifting from identifying issues to proposing solutions. In the design and implementation phases, the focus is often still on drawing from the expertise of architects and urban planners rather than leveraging the lived experiences of non-professionals who frequently shape and construct their own spaces.

There is a noticeable disconnect. While participatory processes have evolved to better involve residents' perspectives when diagnosing problems, they often fall short of integrating those same voices in developing solutions. Community expertise tends to be undervalued when transitioning from problem identification to the design phase, in which professionals typically dominate the conversation. It is crucial to shift the focus towards co-designing solutions that prioritise the residents' knowledge, creativity and aspirations, which would not only lead to more contextually appropriate outcomes but also foster a greater sense of ownership and sustainability in urban projects.

The challenges of implementing collaborative design methods in urban planning and architecture are deeply intertwined with the limitations of our current professional training and tools. Traditionally, architects, planners and designers have been educated within frameworks that prioritise technical expertise, control over outcomes and adherence to established standards. This training often does not adequately prepare professionals to engage with communities, especially those who exist outside formal planning spheres (Sandercock 2003). As a result, many practitioners struggle to meaningfully incorporate diverse perspectives into their projects, lacking the skills needed

to facilitate open dialogue, listen actively and adapt to the evolving needs of communities.

However, this issue goes beyond a mere lack of training. It is also rooted in a deeply ingrained belief in the transformative power of design. Many professionals operate under the assumption that design alone can dictate and improve ways of living, and they often impose their vision of what urban spaces should be like on local communities. This approach is grounded in a top-down, technocratic perspective that assumes that professionals know what is best for communities, leading to outcomes that may not align with the actual needs and desires of those who inhabit these spaces (Mirafab 2004). This belief in the omnipotence of design not only reinforces power imbalances but also risks perpetuating colonial and paternalistic dynamics in urban development, where professionals dictate solutions without genuinely involving the people who will be affected by them.

The limitations of these traditional methods and over-reliance on professional expertise are particularly problematic in diverse urban contexts, where lived experiences vary widely across cultural, economic and social lines. Conventional planning tools often fail to capture the nuanced realities of marginalised communities, resulting in projects that are disconnected from their local contexts and are sometimes actively harmful. For example, standardised design solutions may overlook informal economies, communal spaces or traditional practices that are crucial to the social fabric of certain neighbourhoods (Watson 2014). The inability to engage effectively with these complexities can lead to the displacement of residents, erasure of local identities and the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift in how collaborative design is approached. It necessitates a move away from the view of design as a tool for imposing predetermined solutions and towards an understanding of design as a process of co-creation. This shift calls for new methods and practices that prioritise dialogue, flexibility and responsiveness, enabling communities to participate actively in shaping their environments. By embracing participatory approaches, such as co-design workshops, urban games and community-driven mapping exercises, professionals can begin to bridge the gap between expert knowledge and community wisdom (Awan et al. 2011). However, for these methods to be genuinely effective, there must also be a deeper cultural change within the professions – one that acknowledges the limits of design, respects local knowledge and is open to relinquishing control to those who have traditionally been excluded from the planning process.

It is not a question of dialogue between those who master knowledge and those who do not but of conflicts between different forms of knowledge, such as those based on experience and urgency. The challenge lies in how to articulate these different worldviews. We must understand that as technicians, we have some specific knowledge, but residents have much to teach us about their daily practices.

