

Urban Planning through Exhibition and Experimentation in Stockholm

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1 ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss findings of our case study on the making and implementation of the exhibition 'Experiment Stockholm' in 2015, which, based on artistic exhibits as well as a number of forums, aimed at generating creative narratives for the sustainable urban future in the Swedish capital city-region. Our analytical framework is informed by the emerging notion of 'urban living labs' across Europe as well as 'communicative' and 'actor-relational' planning theory', which is discussed in another paper within the proceedings of this conference (cf. Schmitt et al. 2016). We argue that the exhibition 'Experiment Stockholm' and the activities around it can be characterised as a soft mode of urban governance that can help to unlock creativity and to open up avenues for experimentation and alternative solutions in urban planning. However, caution must be taken to not overvalue such approaches, as our example implies a rather exclusive expert forum instead of a mode of governance that might be associated with openness and wider engagement. In addition, our example illustrates the significance of suitable and unconventional methods, which otherwise considerably limits the innovative capacity of the participating stakeholders and their search for alternative solutions.

2 EXPLORING 'EXPERIMENT STOCKHOLM' AS AN URBAN LIVING LAB

2.1 Introduction

In the following, we will present and reflect upon findings from the exploration, making, and implementation of the exhibition 'Experiment Stockholm' in 2015. Based on artistic exhibits as well as a number of forums, our exhibition aimed to generate creative narratives for a sustainable urban future in the Swedish capital city-region. Our analytical framework is informed by the emerging notion of 'urban living labs' across Europe (cf. Bergvall-Kåreborn and Ståhlbröst 2009; Franz 2014; Juujärvi and Pessa 2013) as well as 'communicative' (cf. Healey 2003a, 2003b) and 'actor-relational' planning theory' (cf. Boelens 2010; Boonstra and Boelens 2011). This sort of literature is discussed in another paper within the proceedings of this conference (cf. Schmitt et al. 2016) with a view of providing an analytical framework. The distilled three categories (see below) shall help identifying innovative forms of urban governance rather than assessing a vague concept, whose label seems to be increasingly assigned to any sort of 'investigative' urban development setting that can be described as 'not business-as-usual' (ibid). In our analysis, we follow these three categories by adding a number of research questions that have guided our empirical investigations. Before turning to these categories and discussing the empirical findings, we briefly describe the context of the exhibition 'Experiment Stockholm' as well as some methodological notes.

2.2 The study object: the exhibition 'Experiment Stockholm'

The exhibition 'Experiment Stockholm' has been facilitated by the Stockholm-based foundation for art, architecture and urbanism 'Färgfabriken' (the paint firm – named after the former use of the premises where the foundation is located and operating). Among the various exhibitions and related projects and activities in which Färgfabriken has been involved since 1995, this exhibition is the third of its kind that illustrates urban planning issues and potential futures related to the city-region of Stockholm.

An early forerunner was the exhibition 'Stockholm at Large' (2001 – 2002), which, through a number of multi-actor workshops, discussed and developed possible urban futures for Stockholm. The results have been exhibited to the general public (in total about 25,000 visitors). Among other things, the project has led to a new course at the School of Architecture in Stockholm ('The new urban planning office') and a 'Handbook about the future of Stockholm' which illustrates pathways for the future urban discourse in Stockholm (Åman, 2004). Several years later, the concept of 'Stockholm at Large' was further developed into an even larger exhibition: 'Stockholm on the Move'. The preparatory work started in 2010, and the exhibition as such ran between November 2011 and March 2012. "The field of play for the project [here the exhibition

‘Stockholm at Large’] is the big exhibition in Färgfabriken’s main gallery. The exhibition strives to create a coherent overall picture [here about the challenges in the Stockholm city-region], gather the different parts of the project and present an entirety, consisting of a historical background, different visions, utopias and dystopias and some of the infrastructure projects that are on-going and proposed for the region.” (Färgfabriken, 2015a) The exhibition was flanked by a number of workshops and seminars in order to interact directly with a number of stakeholders. “Stockholm on the Move is a profoundly inclusive forum for constructive dialogue among politicians and other stakeholders, a venue for debates about infrastructure and urban development. It is also a forum in which the citizens of Stockholm are given concrete opportunities to develop their ideas, their fears, and their desires about the development of the city and the region.” (Färgfabriken, 2015a). In addition, a catalogue has been published (Färgfabriken 2012) which presents further thoughts and ideas about the development of the region and about global tendencies in infrastructure.

Since ‘Stockholm on the Move’ has been even more successful than its forerunner (200 to 300 visitors per day, 60 workshops and seminars, 37 guiding tours for school classes, 80 for companies and other organisations), the idea has been to make a follow-up exhibition in the fall 2015. During 2013 and 2014, the preparatory work was tackled, which specifically included the re-activation of former and the inclusion of new collaborators and funding partners in the Stockholm city-region, along with the identification and formulation of a number of questions and themes. Two so-called partner-meetings, together with a number of other workshops, seminars and related activities have been arranged during spring 2015. These were supposed to form an ‘inspirational ground’ on which parts of the exhibition should be based on. Over the summer of 2015, together with Färgfabriken (i.e. the creative director, the curator and specific ‘project’ related experts and managers), a number of carefully selected artists have developed concrete exhibits. At the same time, ‘material inputs from other partners involved’ have been integrated too, although a further adaptation (here primarily in form of posters) has been done in order to make the inputs suitable for this kind of exhibition (Interview Färgfabriken 2015).

1	City, suburb, countryside
2	Interaction and integration
3	Nodes and hubs
4	The ‘bigfoot’
5	Dialogue is not monologue
6	Informal methods
7	Varied building, varied functions
8	Beyond the car age
9	Planning for the unplanned

Table 1: The thematic scope of ‘Experiment Stockholm’.

In total nine themes (see above, table 1) have been distilled within a number of bilateral meetings and discussions, primarily between Färgfabriken and the involved in-total 35 partners, which represent (among others): five municipalities within the Stockholm county (Hanninge, Knivsta, Sollentuna, Nacka and Stockholm); the Mälardalsrådet, a non-profit special interest organisation for municipalities and the five county councils around the lake Mälaren; the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency; The Nordic Building Exhibition; the Swedish Architects Union; The Nordic Building Exhibition; three research institutions; and five private companies in the fields of environmental consulting, architecture, construction and real estate. These 35 partners have financially supported the exhibition project, albeit with different price tags, and have thus guaranteed themselves ‘a say’ in the preparation and even implementation of the exhibition (Interview Färgfabriken 2015). Although Färgfabriken is a politically independent foundation, one needs to add that it is financed by funds from the National Arts Council, the Culture Administration of Stockholm and the Stockholm County Council, whereas its main sponsor is the Lindéngruppen AB, a family business focusing on the long-term development of industrial companies, as well as by the entrance fees for exhibitions.

2.3 Key research elements/questions

The key research elements/questions have been informed by the three categories addressed in Schmitt et al. (2016), namely ‘co-creation’ and ‘exploration/experimentation’ (for both the key question was ‘how are the two categories facilitated and practised?’) as well as ‘evaluation’. Regarding the latter, the key question was ‘what sort of tangible or non-tangible outcomes have been co-created and to what extent has the knowledge and learning being generated has (or might have) an impact on any sort of urban policy or governance practices in Stockholm?’. Another set of questions involves the institutional and organisational context of Experiment Stockholm, the emerging actor-networks and power relations, the inclusion and exclusion of stakeholders and ways (and barriers) of promoting them to co-creators of knowledge.

2.4 Methodological notes

The authors of this paper have been directly involved as one of the research partners (see above) in the preparation and in the implementation of the exhibition as so-called participative observers. This enabled the authors to have ‘direct access to the empirical field’ as participant observers. In addition, three interviews with Färgfabriken and with a number of partners have been conducted.

3 OBSERVATIONS FROM ‘EXPERIMENT STOCKHOLM’ AS AN URBAN LIVING LAB

3.1 The preparatory phase: Two partner meetings in March and April 2015

The main idea of these partner-meetings has been to further settle the nine proposed themes (see table 1) among the official partners, discuss trends and challenges, visionary pathways, and potential innovations. Färgfabriken has defined and briefly introduced the themes and the methods, but has not narrowly defined them, allowing a high degree of freedom for the participants, particularly at the first meeting. At the second meeting, some clearer guidance has been given to the participants. Moreover, it is striking that pencils and paper have been the only tools to express ideas and outcomes from the group work. This has certainly pre-defined (if not restricted) the scope of experimentation.

In addition, the scope of experimentation has been further constrained by the observed roles that most of the participants have played out. Although Färgfabriken has shaped an informal atmosphere and made clear many times that the discussion should go beyond contemporary topics and debates in urban planning in Stockholm, it was striking to see how little the participants have left their professional and institutional backgrounds. Their inputs to the discussions were, for the most part, anchored in their daily work, their everyday life experiences, and convictions, particularly in regard to the challenges and problems they are facing. Consequently, only a few were willing (at least to some extent) to think ‘outside the box’ and thus to experiment with various ideas, scenarios, etc.

As for an outcome of the two preparatory partner-meetings, one can say that the nine themes have not been questioned or re-formulated; rather, they were made concrete with some state-of-the-art reflections on cities from a ‘social cohesive’ and green-biased perspective. This can be traced back - not only to the chosen themes as such - but also to the selection of participants, which seem to follow a (although not very outspoken) certain ‘normative agenda’ that Färgfabriken had also in mind (Interview Färgfabriken 2015).

3.2 The exhibition phase and reflections thereafter

„[...] Experiment Stockholm [...] seeks to examine and experiment with strategies and solutions for dealing with the challenges of a rapidly growing Stockholm region. [...] Experiment Stockholm is a laboratory made up of the exhibition spaces, of seminars, debates and other events. We hope many people will meet in this experimental environment where we challenge old ways and propose and test new models and ideas together“ (Färgfabriken 2015c).

This has been the official opening statement on Färgfabriken’s homepage to describe what Experiment Stockholm is about and what the main intention is. In this light, it coincides nicely with the three categories that characterise urban living labs as discussed in Schmitt et al. (2016) and which structure the analysis below. It is also noteworthy that in this paper we focus specifically on six so-called ‘experiments’ within the exhibition and not on the many other events, seminars or even the artistic exhibits that were presented in the exhibition spaces. These experiments have essentially been workshops organised by one of the partners (often municipalities in concert with Färgfabriken) which were addressing one or two of the nine overall

themes (see table 1), and which were targeted at developing various futures and planning solutions of concrete neighborhoods.

3.2.1 Co-creation

These experiments have essentially been closed clubs, since only the official partners, as well as some specific guests, have been invited. Nonetheless, due to the variety of partners, these experiments can be qualified as multi-disciplinary collaborations. However, the majority of persons came from the urban planning departments of municipalities, so we could see a clear dominance of 'physical' planners in most of the experiments. This was further strengthened by the presence of invited building and construction companies. Most of the experiments proceeded within group-work (often between 4 to 8 persons with its usual dynamics) and presentations to all participants (in general 30 to 50 persons) followed by discussions. As in the case of the preparatory meetings, what was striking here was the use of rather conventional methods, as there was a clear focus on 'shaping' and 'designing' specific places related to actual local planning projects and challenges by using overview maps of the existing physical structures, which were then re-modelled with the help of pencils, paper and a number of toy blocks.

3.2.2 Exploration and Experimentation

The scope of the topics of the various experiments have been introduced by guest speakers (regularly consultants), as well as representative from Färgfabriken, followed by a further introduction by the organiser (here usually a representative from a municipality). What was striking was the fact that the tasks conveyed to the group have been neither carefully defined nor particularly questioned by the participants. Eventually, due to the rather conventional (and thus for most of participants, familiar) methods (see above), the various groups entered immediately into the above described re-modelling of the given neighborhood. This, together with the limited time (often 45 to 60 minutes for one task) has certainly limited the scope of exploring the issue at hand, and also the scope of experimentation. Since the 'experiments' have not been underpinned by commonly agreed understandings, having been limited by the rather conventional methods and the fact that concrete and well-known planning problems have been tackled, it has been rather difficult for the various groups to switch to a mode of 'unforeseeable' future-making.

3.2.3 Evaluation

Through our interviews we have learnt that, in two cases, the results from these experiments have informed one informal policy document as well as one draft planning scheme. Others have reported that the experiments have helped them to 'think-out-of-the-box', particularly through the multi-disciplinary networking, which otherwise hardly takes place in their lives as planning practitioners. Some of the organising municipalities have articulated that the experiments have particularly supported (in-house) discussions on the topic at hand, as the experiments offered new perspectives. One of the municipalities has even utilised 'Experiment Stockholm' as a staff training opportunity by joining, as much as possible, the various events, seminars, and experiments in order to make best use of the membership fee to become an official partner of Experiment Stockholm.

4 CONCLUSION

Although in this paper we have focused on the six experiments, one question is of course the relation of these more practice oriented forums to the more 'artistic-based' exhibition. Our respondents have argued in general that the latter has been a frame rather than a foundation for creativity and experimentation. In some ways, the exhibits have been too abstract, and it has been difficult to make linkages to the more workshop-like experiments. This can be considered a 'tightrope walk' to link prospective and art-inspired themes with current 'real-world problems' of stakeholders.

Another point for reflection is the membership principle, which included those with the willingness to spend their resources (money and time), but excluded others. As a consequence, the established temporary multi-disciplinary networks can be characterised by an exclusive, if not elitist, urbanist community within the Stockholm city-region.

On the positive side, one can certainly note that Experiment Stockholm has offered a learning environment with many networking potentials (for members within the experiments, but also for other interested 'persons' in the numerous seminars and events, as well as the artistic exhibition as such). Also, some of our

respondents mentioned that the various activities have helped them think in a more comprehensive way about urban planning and thus overcome the prevailing silo mentality in urban planning, opening up avenues for cross-sectoral coordination.

The ‘meetings’ and ‘experiments’ that have been discussed here have also illustrated the important role of more organisational issues in practicing ‘co-creation’ and ‘experimentation’ within multi-disciplinary networks. First to be mentioned is the functioning of the networking-platform, which includes the role and performance of the facilitator as well as the moderator (cf. also Schmitt et al. 2016). Secondly, the significance of suitable and unconventional methods should be mentioned, which are significant in regards to provoking visionary thinking and supporting creative alternative solutions.

Our observations within Experiment Stockholm suggest as well that this soft, temporary, and to some extent experimental mode of governance faces the same deficits regarding transparency, legitimacy, durability and equality as similar attempts to strengthen participative planning approaches that run in parallel with formalised urban planning procedures. First to be mentioned here is the rather individualistic approach, which means that not only the membership principle decides who is in or out, but also, once included, the individual capacities play a crucial role. Here one should mention the observed group work dynamics (and their inherent selective processes), presentational and communicative skills, and the fact that such settings clearly privilege charismatic and knowledgeable personalities. Another point is the durability of the established actor-networks, which need to be carefully maintained by follow-up activities and creating new windows of opportunities for co-creation. As a third point, one should add that the resources and available mechanisms for transferring lessons from such ‘experiments’ within urban governance are unevenly distributed within these actor-networks.

All of these critical points need to be carefully considered when appraising ‘urban living labs-like’ approaches, as the case of Experiment Stockholm illustrates. Following Schmitt et al. (2016), we argue that this example can indeed be characterised as a soft mode of urban governance that can help unlock creativity and open up avenues for experimentation and alternative solutions. However, caution must be taken to not overvalue such approaches, as our example implies a rather exclusive expert forum instead of a mode of governance that might be associated with openness and wider engagement. In addition, our example illustrates the significance of suitable and unconventional methods, which otherwise considerably limits the innovative capacity of the participating stakeholders and their search for alternative solutions. Hence, we argue that: if considered as a complementary approach to public urban planning, the applicability and legitimacy of such soft and experimental modes of governance as discussed above need to be carefully considered.

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