

**Designing With or Against Institutions?
Dilemmas of Participatory Design in Contested Cities**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores growing concerns behind the potential instrumentalization of participatory design within democratic institutions and city-making projects. Drawing on ethnographic data collected during a participatory urban redevelopment in Sydney, it analyzes the wider political, economic and cultural dynamics shaping participatory design (PD) in contested urban spaces. As a result, the article reflects on the institutional frameworks that challenged the democratic claims of PD, analyzing three interdependent levels of institutional constraints: ideology, governance, and narratives. In doing so, the article interrogates the role of expert-led urban governance, of neoliberal ideologies, and the power/knowledge relations in the building of a consensus narrative. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting the contingency of the so-called constraints, exploring an alternative conceptualization of institutions as social relations. Following this approach, designers may challenge constraints and simultaneously work with, against and beyond institutions.

KEYWORDS

City-making; participatory design; institutional constraints; design in the public realm; urban redevelopment; citizen participation

Introduction

Local governments increasingly advocate for community participation in urban design projects as a form of decentralizing power and investing in local knowledge. While these initiatives provide new opportunities for the practice of participatory design (PD) at the city-level, it also offers new challenges and risks of co-optation. At the end of 2015, the state of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia announced a participatory urban redevelopment plan for the public housing estate of Waterloo that illustrates this risk. The redevelopment included non-binding consultation and participatory activities to identify the needs and aspirations of residents; however, at the end of the 12-month program, local wishes and worries were hardly reflected in the final master plan. Instead, residents questioned the very foundations of the redevelopment and the anti-democratic aspects shaping its process.

The controversial plan aimed to deliver a new metro station, triple the current number of dwellers, and sell the current state-owned land to create thirty percent renewed public housing and seventy percent private housing. In this context, various local scholars (Wynne et al. 2018), activists and residents were worried about the practical effects of the urban renewal: the acceleration of gentrification in this former working-class neighborhood; the displacement of low-income dwellers and Aboriginal residents; and the privatization of public land, despite the increasing deficit of public and affordable housing in inner-city Sydney (Lawson et al. 2018). For many, the discourse of participation in Waterloo was used to legitimize dominant neoliberal forces and serve anti-democratic interests. It was an example of the instrumentalization of participatory design at the city-level.

This article reflects on the growing concern over the political uses of participatory methods in contested and neoliberal urban spaces.¹ Building on the recent works concerning the institutioning of PD (Huybrechts, Benesch, and Geib 2017), it critically analyzes the participatory process of Waterloo, highlighting the institutional constraints that prevented PD from unfolding according to its original democratic claims. Specifically, I draw on the ethnographic description² of the release of the final master plan of Waterloo to extract broader political, economic and cultural dynamics shaping the participatory design process.³ After following a thematic analysis of the data, the article organizes the constraints experienced in Waterloo into three main levels: ideological, governance, and narrative.

The Waterloo Estate offer a distinctive case for this analysis as it combines global, postcolonial and neoliberal city dynamics. It is worth noting, though, that the analysis does not pretend to be generalized to every PD process at the city-level. In fact, the article acknowledges and reinforces that the context in which PD unfolds –including the institutions, the scale of the initiative, and local and urban politics –changes its possibilities of success. Essentially, this concrete and large-scale PD experience shows how the global aspirations of Sydney, in attracting international capital, deals problematically with local aspiration and participatory practices. In short, the contributions of this article to the literature are two-fold: firstly, to identify and develop institutional constraints operating in city-making projects; and secondly, to shed light on the ways in which design conceptualizes institutions. It explores the notion of constraints as situated struggles, and offers a two-pronged approach to institutioning in PD.

Critical Framework: Participatory Design and Institutions

The Post-Fordist era has dramatically changed the ways in which PD engages with the public realm. Growing market competition, austerity cut-backs, financialization of the economy, globalization and changes in the labor market have differ significantly from the original conditions of PD during the 1970s. In recent decades, participatory culture has gradually focused its efforts on citizen-led initiatives rather than public institutions, political parties or unions (Huybrechts, Benesch, and Geib 2017). In the context of neoliberalism, such formal structures have been increasingly perceived as inert entities, fully captured by commodification logics.

Against this backdrop, different researchers have been recovering the foundational democratic claims of PD, calling for a re-engagement with institutions to change them from within (Lenskjold, Olander, and Halse 2015). On the one hand, this call recognizes the risks it supposes: the ideological hegemonies of institutions (Kaethler, De Blust, and Devos 2017), the challenges of multi-stakeholder environments (Huybrechts et al. 2014), the depoliticizing effects of redevelopments (Palmås and Von Busch 2015), or the legitimization of controversial urban planning projects (Miessen 2010). Nevertheless, this acknowledgment does not prevent designers from reclaiming institutions as potential sites of change.

As part of this effort to repoliticize PD, Huybrechts, Benesch, and Geib (2017) propose the concept of *institutioning* to further reflect on PD's dependencies on institutional frames, in both meso and macro levels. As the authors highlight, although often invisibilized, participatory design is also shaped by institutional frames such as policies and funding schemes, as well as cultural frames related to citizenship or democracy. Moreover, the notion

of *institutioning* explores the scale of PD and works to expand the sense of participation. In this regard, participation would not only include persons or groups, but cut across organizations, from local to transnational levels. In this context, designers not only engage with, but are also part of institutional framing.

Building on this notion, DiSalvo and Lodato develop the concept of institutional constraints, defined as “the constraints produced by and through work with institutions” (Lodato and Disalvo 2018, 2). Constraints might be the limits imposed by prior decisions on PD practice, which curtail the proper alignment of human and material resources necessary to sustain participatory processes, or the ideological mismatch between contrasting values and beliefs. This article expands this concept by unpacking three different macro levels of institutional constraints observed in city-making projects: neoliberal ideologies, urban governance and consensual narratives.

Underlying those discussions are the different forms in which institutions, and in particular the modern state, may be conceptualized. In this article, I engage with a specific understanding of institutions entangled with concepts of the state, power and governance. I approach the practice of governing as an attempt at ruling that must deal with fragile and contingent accomplishments (Li 1999). In other words, I try to move beyond the images of state institutions as unitary, predictable and all-powerful entities, paying attention to the ways in which a state’s legitimacy is sustained and negotiated. Such an approach is partially indebted to Gramscian approaches that stress the relationality of state institutions. According to this conceptualization, state institutions are a set of social relations; they are the material outcome of a balance of social forces, always in tension (Poulantzas 2000). Framing the state in those terms invites scholars to a closer, micro-level analysis of local institutions in

order to understand mundane state-making practices. For designers, this empirical approach may offer a more dynamic understanding of institutions, here open to interventions and change.

The vignette described in the next section follows this everyday strategy and unpacks the institutional constraints operating in Waterloo. The analysis of data was largely inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) proposal for reflexive thematic analysis: reading the data, coding, and organizing codes into themes, to then refine, define and name the final theme areas. In this particular case, I gathered all the barriers and challenges encountered during the participatory process, looking to find interconnections between them, and to organize the information into macro-level constraints. Importantly, during the analysis, I was careful to maintain and connect everyday empirical claims — such as meetings, specific bureaucratic petitions, or difficulties in understanding a particular report — to wider dynamics such as an anti-politics machine or neoliberal urban politics.

The Masterplan Release

The participatory process proposed to discuss the future of Waterloo commenced in October 2017 and outlined different stages. The first stage, the envisioning phase, was undertaken by a team of designers, policy makers and communicators. According to the final envisioning report, the team was responsible for conducting different activities to “gain input” from the community, giving people the opportunity to “get involved” and “have their say” on the final masterplan.⁴ The activities performed included workshops, pop-up information stalls, a community day, and an online survey. The key findings of this process can be found in a final report organized in five themes: culture and community life; transport, streets and

connections; housing and neighborhood design; community facilities, services and shops; environment and open space.

After the envisioning stage, the government released three preliminary masterplan options: Waterloo Estate, Waterloo Village Green, and Waterloo Park. Subsequently, a second round of participatory activities started –the option testing phase –to further discuss the three options (Figure 1). The results of this stage assisted the Land and Housing Corporation of NSW in the preparation of the preferred masterplan. On the 2nd of April 2019, I joined one of the most awaited meetings of the consultation process: the release of the preferred masterplan (Figure 2). After a long process of consultation, this was the big day to see what the future Waterloo would look like.

Urban planners, politicians and designers were standing in front of an audience, separated, to present a Powerpoint presentation. Ron,⁵ a government staff member, started the meeting by recounting the community participation process. He displayed the numbers and all the consultation activities to demonstrate what has been done. Technical studies, internet surveys, pop-ups, focus groups and community days were all central features in his narrative about the consultation process. In this official narrative, the expert-led participatory process would have allowed the community to identify common visions and achieve a consensus among all residents.

Karl and Dan, two urban planners, were responsible for explaining the final proposed masterplan. As soon as they held the microphone to start speaking, people started to question and complain. Both presenters tried to continue their presentation, expecting to leave questions for the end, but in a few seconds another man promptly interrupted: “sorry, since you are talking about open space, let’s talk about high-rise. Are you actually

proposing a forty-five-story tower here? From 2,500 people, you want to increase the number of dwellers to 11,000? This is insane! Do you live here, would you live here?"

Questions were piling up; the dynamic of the meeting started shifting. People were not expecting a presentation, but rather an opportunity to express their frustration and suggest changes to the project that was being presented as already finished. The design team tried to respond to each of the questions, but the technical answers were not an appropriate response to political questions. "You have some really nice and glossy pamphlets here, but the truth is that we have no say on the density for this future neighborhood!" said a young woman. Encouraged by her intervention, another man raised his hand to also contribute: "how many new public houses are you building here? I need figures!" Surprisingly, no one knew the answer. Despite all the renovation discourses, this central issue to the community was not being considered. For many residents, the lack of public housing was their main concern in the redevelopment. They believed the inner-city needed more affordable houses to tackle the rising rates of rental stress in the city (Mares 2020), and to reduce the waiting list to access affordable housing: an average of five to ten years (NSW Department of Communities and Justice 2019).

Following these interventions, an Aboriginal man stood up: "this is Aboriginal land, and we will not be, once again, removed from our own land." Assertive, he gave his opinion and left the room. Finally, another Waterloo resident, John, also decided to intervene: "what is this 'community facilities' square in this illustration? We said we need our community garden on the ground here, where is it on this plan?" At this point, the meeting was getting intense. Despite the consensus performed at the beginning of the presentation, residents seemed furious, and the reality of the meeting revealed itself to be more conflictive than the

harmonious final report suggested.

After another generic answer, John continued to speak while organizers tried to ask him to finish and let other people contribute. He didn't stop, and when someone else tried to interrupt him, he pointed his finger saying, "you won't shut me up, mate!" People started to feel uncomfortable. He continued, until he was interrupted one more time and, again, angrily stated he would not stop. He was tired of not being able to speak up.

As the environment started to get more uneasy, different people spoke at the same time and raised a raucous. A woman fainted, fell from her chair onto the floor and everyone suddenly stopped. A group of people moved in her direction to help. She slowly woke up, and the organizer explained she had epilepsy: "she got nervous", he said, and called for everyone to calm down. After this worrying scene, John concluded his idea and turned his back with a last thought: "you are just a cascade of bureaucrats!"

After that night, this meeting would be referred to as a disaster. What was expected to be an informative session to celebrate the results of a long participatory process became a platform for confrontation and insults. The event should have been an opportunity for residents to oppose the project and challenge its narrative. Instead, it became a stage to dramatize the limits of residents' participation and to expose the local demands concealed during the participatory process. Each demand raised by participants during the meeting was linked to wider institutional constraints, that both limited and shaped the process.

In the following sections, I further develop the three main constraints that help to explain the failure of the public meeting and the failure of the process as a whole: ideology, governance and narrative. The ideological level refers to the hierarchy of values that guided the decision of urban policies in Waterloo. The governance level relates to an expert-led

urban governance embedded in highly bureaucratic contexts that tends to depoliticize wider political conflicts. Finally, the narrative level captures the storytelling of a participatory process that produces fictional common visions to pacify controversial projects and silence alternative narratives. Although interdependent and articulated in practice, each of these levels emphasizes a specific dimension in which PD operates.

Ideologies

In the course of this dramatic meeting, residents drew attention to a fundamental institutional constraint of the participatory process in Waterloo. Issues like the final number of public housing available, density or building heights, were strictly linked to the ideological level of the process. Since the NSW government announced the participatory redevelopment, it established what became commonly known among participants as the non-negotiables: political decisions already made, and thus, unable to be discussed during the participation program. Part of these non-negotiables was the “neutral cost” approach to the project, the “social-mix” policy and the selling of public land. These non-negotiables were grounded on neoliberal ideologies that dictated the number of new private apartments –including building heights and unit sizes –necessary to make the project economically viable without public investment.

In recent decades, different cities around the world have seen a neoliberalization of urban planning. This process, which began after the crisis of Fordism-Keynesianism, between the late 1970s and early 1990s, underpins several political and economic restructures crucial to understanding Sydney’s current urban planning policies. Literature around neoliberal urbanism (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Franquesa 2013; Hackworth 2013)

sheds light on how neoliberal politics have increasingly informed urban planning by putting accumulation at the center of its policies. For Hackworth (2013), this was the result of an increasing competition that seeks to attract people and capital as part of a constant need for economic growth. Moreover, given the growing adoption of austerity measures, cities progressively rely on private and international investments to finance their own development. As a result, decisions at the city level become increasingly constrained by global finance dynamics.

Neoliberal cities like Sydney are thus characterized by the active role of local government and urban policies in search of investments. Rather than passive or external actors that unleash market forces, state institutions emerge in this process as key actors to create the conditions for private investments through policy regimes and regulatory practices (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Some examples of these practices are financial and tax support, deregulation, flexibility of planning controls, or the creation of mixed capital corporations and public/private partnerships. Another example is the promotion of urban renewal by local governments through ongoing and localized public investment in city infrastructures. This latter operation is particularly visible in Waterloo, where governments decided to invest in a new metro station that, as they claimed, would function as a “catalyst for growth” (Sydney Metro 2018, 13). In this project, the promotion of growth was enabled by selling off state-owned land –specifically the public housing estate –alongside a gradual investment in the surrounding areas that actively increased land value.

The policy that guides the redevelopment of Waterloo – the *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW* (NSW Government 2016) – also clearly articulated such an approach. According to its official report, these directions sought to promote a “greater

involvement of private and non-government partners in financing, owning and managing a significantly expanded stock of social and affordable housing assets” (NSW Government 2016, 5). As they put it, by “unlocking” the value of public housing sites, “fast tracking” redevelopments through infrastructure investments, and selling government-owned properties, the NSW government expects to finance and increase housing stock in the state (NSW Government 2016).

In addition, these directions also established the social-mix policy whereby every new redevelopment in the state should seek an “integrated community” offering a diversity of socio-economic dwellers. In practice, this means that instead of having 100 percent of public housing estate, the new redevelopments must accommodate private buildings in higher proportions. The thirty percent public and seventy percent private target would reduce the social stigma associated with public housing and reduce the supposed side effects of concentrating disadvantaged communities. Accordingly, the social mix policy would encourage social inclusion, based on the prejudiced assumption that higher-income residents could serve as role models for low-income residents (Arthurson, Levin, and Ziersch 2015). However, as local scholars highlight, underlying the “integration” and “diversity” rhetoric of the policy lies a political and economic agenda of reducing public investments to the public housing sector (Rogers and Darcy 2020). In this agenda, every new redevelopment should have a “neutral cost,” meaning that the selling of public land funds the building of new public housing.

Such policies demonstrate how the redevelopment of Waterloo was oriented towards the generation of surplus values through public investments, looking for efficient conditions that enabled the extraction of wealth from land use. A specific question raised by a participant

during the public meeting in Waterloo was particularly illustrative of how such neoliberal ideologies both constrained and shaped the participatory process: “how many public houses will we have in total?” she asked. At this point, officials couldn’t provide this information for what was a federal and state program designed to renew and grow the supply of social, affordable and private housing in the country. The lack of data revealed that the priorities of the project were not so much to increase the amount of public housing available, but instead to attract private investments to the area.

Noticing this, residents fiercely opposed the social-mix policy. In May of 2019, the Waterloo Redevelopment Group –an open group formed by tenants and local organizations engaged in the redevelopment –voted a motion against the seventy/thirty ratio. The motion called on the government to reconsider the social mix target, demanding “no less than seventy percent” of public housing. At the end of the motion, the group also stated the following: “this motion urges the Government to reconsider its no-net cost policy for the redevelopment of Waterloo and instead support direct investment into social housing” (Waterloo Redevelopment Group 2019). In doing so, residents both unveiled the ideological constraints of the project, at the same time they contested through other channels the limits of participation.

The neoliberal ideologies that shaped Waterloo’s urban politics were fundamental constraints to the development of PD in the context of city-making. Although strictly related to the other levels of constraint I will develop next, this ideological level brings attention to the political economy where city-making and redevelopments evolve in contemporary society. In particular, it sheds light on the political and economic interests sustaining the project, and its contrast with the democratic claims of participatory design.

Governance

During the public meeting of Waterloo, I came to realize another crucial institutional framework shaping the participatory process: the bureaucratic, technocratic, managerial, and pragmatic lens used to deal with highly conflicting political issues. The clash that arose between government officials and residents in the public meeting of Waterloo was shaped by what the anthropologist James Ferguson (1990) calls the anti-politics machine. Although this is a concept formulated in the 1980s, scholars like Mike Raco and colleagues (2016) argue that we are currently observing a similar phenomenon in urban redevelopments, alongside a local and participatory discourse. For them, the anti-politics development machine –or the assemblage of private and public sectors –means the technocratic rationale behind an expert-led mode of governance. Similarly, Swyngedouw (2010) analyzes how contemporary urban governance is characterized by a new regime of governing between multiple stakeholders that removes political conflicts from the debate, rather than deepening a community’s participation.

The urban governance of Waterloo resonates with these conditions, as it assembled non-governmental, public and private sectors, including the outsourced consultants responsible for the participatory methods. Such anti-politics machines seek to “fast-track” developments and prevent any disruption or unpredictable political contestation. While doing this, experts transform complex community demands into “reasonable and deliverable units of activity” and wicked-problems tend to be removed from this delivery-focused participatory process (Raco, Street, and Freire-Trigo 2016, 3).

Building on Ferguson’s work, Tania Li (2007) also labels two key practices of the development program observable in the public meeting of Waterloo: identifying deficiencies

that need to be rectified (problematization) and rendering such problems technical and an intelligible field. The latter, she argues, simultaneously renders problems apolitical. The concept of “rendering technical” thus captures how, in development programs, problems are framed in ways to match an expert’s previous repertoire. In doing so, the definition of problems is strictly linked to –and constrained by –the availability of solutions already familiar to experts. Correspondingly, these scholars of development agree that development schemes process out political-economic questions such as the control over means of production, or other structures that support systemic inequalities (Li 2007, 11). James Scott also offers an insightful reflection on the risks of designing within institutions and uncritically “seeing like a state” (Scott 1998). For him, the modern state encourages a form of governance that must narrow down unwieldy realities making it susceptible to measurement and calculation.

In the public meeting of Waterloo, the questions raised by tenants regarding public housing policies were a clear example of this operation. While residents framed their questions in political terms, experts repeatedly tried to reframe decisions in technical terms. For instance, during the meeting, one of the arguments offered by a government official to support the social-mix model was that neighborhoods formed by 100 percent public housing – what many residents supported for Waterloo – were “out of date.” In doing so, they drew on their position as an expert to justify political decisions by reframing them as technical decisions, while also citing the United Kingdom and New Zealand as examples of the most updated urban trends. Similarly, the expression used by John – “a cascade of bureaucrats” – was particularly illustrative of the perception of many residents about a process that typically used bureaucratic arguments to limit political debates.

Finally, when an Aboriginal man stood up and claimed that the local Aboriginal community wouldn't be removed once again from their own land, he was exposing the historical and colonial conflict shaping Waterloo, land of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. In recent decades, this inner-city area has suffered a steady decline of Aboriginal and low-income residents due to increasing property value. As argued by Shaw (2007), this recent phenomenon updates and continues, in different ways, the violent dispossession process that sustains the foundation of Australia as a nation-state. Yet this historical and ongoing displacement of Aboriginal people, or other existing conflicts in postcolonial cities, was hardly mentioned in the final reports of the participatory process.

Similar practices of conflict exclusion – in which problems can only be defined by what they exclude – were also noticeable in the narrow alternatives presented to the community as “testing options.” During this stage, discussions about the masterplan tended to focus on formal issues such as the park's location, the height of the buildings, shaded and sunlit areas and the building's wind corridors. These issues were certainly relevant to the lived experience in the neighborhood, but once they gained centrality in public debate, they made other structural problems of the city invisible. These included silencing class relations in an old working-class neighborhood; omitting gender relations; historical and ongoing displacement of Aboriginal communities from inner-city areas; and intergenerational issues in an aging community. Immigration debates in a neighborhood with a great diversity of nationalities were also processed out of the conversation.

After observing this exclusion of structural political debates from the redevelopment, many residents began to refer to the participation program as “just another box to tick,” meaning that “participation” was seen in this process as development management tasks,

rather than a genuine search for community control. By using this metaphor, residents expressed the anti-political machine as a fundamental constraint to navigate this highly complex structure of urban governance.

While acknowledging institutions as crucial sites of change, it is imperious for participatory design to critically consider the development rationale that frames problems and solutions in contested urban space. Adding to this, the next section will explore how the ideological and governance dimensions of the redevelopment came together in the building of a consensus narrative.

Narrative

To participate, Christopher Kelty tells us, is to live stories (Kelty 2019). For him, the ways in which we organize and tell the events of participation are crucial features in the experience of participation itself. More than merely illustrations or fabrications, stories are fundamental ethical representations that orient us. The analysis of the masterplan release meeting foregrounds this narrative dimension. The different stages of the participatory process were organized as a story framed in terms of consensus. The meeting was marked by a public performance of expertise that included body language (e.g., standing upright while the audience is sitting, holding papers, keeping an assertive tone of voice, etc.), technical terms (e.g. amenity, density, the use of government acronyms, etc.), and official reports aligned with the government's discourse. This practice is what I explore here as consensual a narrative: a lineal story of problem-solution that evolves over a well-defined timeline, in stages, and in specific settings.

In this section I examine the risks of PD's engagement with this narrative, and

in particular, with in the power dynamics of knowledge production that seek “common ideas” or “shared visions”. Inspired by the work of Foucault around power and knowledge (Foucault 1980) I call attention to the problematic notion of expertise in design, especially when participatory design works to mediate between citizens and democratic institutions. In this context, designers might engage in the building of a consensus narrative that presents the participatory process as a harmonic and homogenous process, fundamentally undermining structural social injustices.

Uma Kothari argues that participatory methods can serve as a tool to produce knowledge about some groups while revealing their “real” problems and local issues. In this process, “experts” (such as designers, urban planners, policy makers, etc.) are imbued with the authority to speak on behalf of a community, translating “the community’s perspective” to the final decision-makers. For Kothari, participatory approaches are about “the identification, collection, interpretation, analysis and (re)presentation of particular forms of (local) knowledge” (Kothari 2001, 143) and thus inseparable from the exercise of power. As a result, experts may participate in a system of knowledge that classifies and gives power to those who hold the legitimate knowledge –the experts –and those who do not; those who may speak on behalf of others and those who do not.

In this context, two notions become central: consensus-making and harmony ideology. First, knowledge production in the case of Waterloo works toward the building of a consensus narrative that, as Mouffe (2005) describes, partakes a wider understanding of a liberal democracy in which an anti-political vision prevails to the detriment of an agonistic perspective of politics. Second, this participatory process is also shaped by what Nader (1990) defines as coercive harmony. That is, a harmonized ideology that seeks to prevent

conflict, pacify, and finally legitimize controversial projects. Consequently, in terms of conflict resolution, the harmonized ideology establishes a culture that avoids not the causes of disagreement itself but its manifestation. In Waterloo, a participant resonated with this idea and explained to me how the process was only focused on “the positive” aspects of the consultation. She said: “they [the government] went with the positive: if people want this, or people like that. But the process sort of left out all the negatives, what people said: ‘no, we don’t want that, we don’t like that, we like this as it is.’” In other words, it rejected disagreements and projected a harmonious perception of the process.

Reports such as *The Vision of Waterloo* – responsible for reflecting the “vision”, “aspirations,” and “needs” of Waterloo – also exemplify this process in which messy conflicts and heterogenous world-views are objectified and purified by experts (Latour 1993). Through a set of techniques –editing, clustering, graphs, pictures, diagrams, language choice, etc –the report supported the building of a consensus narrative embodied by the different stakeholders. For example, an interviewed architect who used to live in Waterloo and actively engaged in the participatory process, told me he thought the results presented in the report were “questionable.” According to him, the report presented as a shared vision the different interests among public housing tenants and private residents of Waterloo. For him this was a critical issue in the participatory method, given that private and public tenants had conflicting interests. To illustrate this idea, he said that one might want a shopping center for convenience reasons, while the public housing tenants might think: “I want to keep my home, so I don’t want a shopping center here.” As a result, he affirmed that the consensual narrative of the report “washed out the wishes of people who lived there, with the opposite wishes of what people who didn’t.” In short, this architect’s perception revealed how

antagonistic interests within Waterloo were strategically presented as “common” and “shared” views through the expertise of design.

This process is strictly related to power and knowledge production in the ways it allows only certain actors to tell the official story. The experts responsible for producing final reports –*The Vision of Waterloo* –hold the power to strategically select parts of a complex socio-political context, control the “backstage” of the storytelling, and make disagreements invisible. Consequently, the availability of only one official narrative –the one promoted by institutions –can be itself a form of institutional constraint.

Lodato and DiSalvo argue that the tendency to not address the “back-office” or institutional frames in PD deepens the problem of depoliticization as it is seen as an “outgrowth of politics” instead of a productive political space (Lodato and Disalvo 2018, 151). In this sense, the detailed analysis of the “backstage” of designing within democratic institutions is crucial to reclaim the political dimensions of PD. If designers hold the power to make dissents invisible, they can also make it visible. For this reason, in Waterloo, final reports could have included the limits and the controversial politics that the designers had to deal with, honestly exposing the constraints of the process. Rather than presenting the final results as fully consensual and polished, the tensions, contradictions and limits that had been masked during the presentation of results in public meetings or reports could have been opened-up. In essence, this concern with transparency resonates with the ongoing effort of PD researchers seeking to promote arenas in which to negotiate differences and articulate multiple views while acknowledging conflicts as constitutive elements of social life (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012; Disalvo 2012; Parra-Agudelo et al. 2018).

Contesting Constraints

The fraught encounter between the NSW government and residents of Waterloo revealed the institutional constraints experienced during this participatory city-making project. However, the encounter simultaneously demonstrated constraints as fragile and contested limits. In that meeting, as it turned out, residents publicly opposed constraints related to neoliberal ideologies, governance and consensual narratives: they questioned the ideologies underlying the social-mix and “no cost” principles, the bureaucratic and performative dimension of the process, and the limits of its consensual narrative.

During my fieldwork I observed several other forms of contestation that challenged institutional constraints. In March 2016, a tenant-led group –the Waterloo Public Housing Action Group (WPHAG) –was created to contest the redevelopment. In June, the group organized the Waterloo Tent Embassy and occupied the main central lawn of the Waterloo Estate for several days. During the occupation, tenants gathered around a pit fire, held meetings and collected the signatures necessary for a parliamentary petition presented by the local state Member of Parliament for Waterloo, affiliated to a government’s opposition party.

In March 2019, the City of Sydney council, who partially opposed the project, also released an unofficial alternative redevelopment plan together with a massive media effort, right before the state elections in New South Wales. In this alternative plan, building heights and density were lower and the overall target decreased from 6,800 to 5,300 dwellers. Private housing represented only thirty percent of the alternative redevelopment plan instead of seventy percent, and the *Matavai* and *Turanga* towers, two of the iconic public housing towers of the estate, were to be refurbished rather than demolished. The local government

also called for direct investment, instead of following a “no-cost” project approach, and aimed to retain public ownership through leasehold provisions (City of Sydney 2019).

After those pressures, planning controls shifted to the local municipality instead of the state of NSW. Moreover, previously unplanned initiatives were undertaken by the government, including the provision of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer, the acceleration of maintenance requests, and the refurbishment of two Community Rooms in different buildings of the Estate. The New South Wales Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC) also agreed to consider a “Human Service Plan.” In this new plan, issues such as mental health support and long-term housing maintenance were to be addressed alongside the redevelopment masterplan that exclusively centered on the built environment.

While this article does not extensively analyze these resistance tactics, they show that institutional constraints, and the results of the participation process, were challenged in Waterloo through multi-level tactics that mobilized actors beyond the state’s framework: NGOs, community-based organizations, local municipalities, or residents’ groups. These public conflicts reflect a dynamic political arena. A massive redevelopment like Waterloo cannot occur in a straightforward way in this context. Moreover, the practice of local contestation reveals that institutional constraints are not a pre-established static barrier in city-making projects. Instead, they are constantly being contested, always open to unforeseen change.

Learning From Failure

Framing institutional constraints as a given, and as an unquestionable feature of designing in the public realm, can mask a highly contested political terrain. For this reason, the first

concrete learning that comes out of the failure of PD in Waterloo is the call for a reconceptualization of institutions and constraints. I suggest that a dialectical conceptualization of institutions as condensed social relations (Poulantzas 2000) may better grasp the practice of designing within democratic institutions and support designers to deal with institutional constraints. Rather than rigid subjects or abstract entities, it may be productive for designers to think of institutions from their concrete daily practices, and as part of dynamic and contingent social relations in tension. After all, institutions are themselves produced through specific social practices, historically situated. By carefully looking at daily interactions, dissent can rarely be completely erased.

In this sense, the deep understanding of local statecrafts and their political dimension become crucial strategies to design within state institutions. This task includes the understanding of the state's daily practices and routines, its particularities, internal conflicts, contradictions, and socio-historical production. In doing so, designers can strategically navigate on the edges of constraints, building on potential moments when social norms are provisionally suspended, as in the masterplan release; it is in such moments that invisibilized discourses may flourish and constraints can be contested. In those exceptional situations, friction and tension become productive mechanisms to both resist and enable other discourses.

The second lesson imparted by this study is concerned with the ability to work strategically with alternative organizations outside of the institutional and official landscape. As Waterloo demonstrated, state institutions are not independent sites of work, separated from civil society. Rather, unplanned movements outside the realm of official workshops and the State of NSW — including the emergence of a new tenant-led group, the municipality's

opposition campaign, or Parliament petitions — also shaped state institutions and the participatory process. As Cumbers (2015) suggests, dynamics of state–economy–society are integrated and ongoing arenas of contestation, rather than autonomous spheres. State institutions and grassroots civil society are part of an intermingled, dynamic and ongoing relationship (Cumbers 2015, 70). In this sense, institutional limits are in fact shaped by multi-level relations unfolding both within and outside institutions, locally and globally.

This offers an approach to PD beyond the dichotomy of designing either within or outside of institutions. Concretely, it suggests that to work within institutions does not necessarily foreclose participatory practices beyond those spaces. Instead, it may require the awareness of other political dynamics unfolding in the in-between of institutions and local communities. I thus suggest that multi-level dynamics shaping institutions, including unplanned grassroots initiatives, can feed into the wider strategy of designers to promote change through bottom-up initiatives. If they are aware of those wider political movements, designers may creatively navigate between both spaces.

Specifically, in Waterloo, designers could have developed strategic alliances with local governments that proposed alternative solutions, collaborated with community mobilizations such as the Waterloo Public Housing Action Group, or even position themselves in regard to motions or parliamentary petitions. This way, drawing on Cumbers' (2015) suggestions, designers could experiment with the possibility of simultaneously designing in, against and beyond institutions (Cumbers, 2015).

Conclusion

The revigorated interest in PD in the public realm calls for continuous exploration of

institutioning, as well as the constraints that prevent PD from realizing its democratic ideals. In Waterloo, the failure of the participatory process can be explained by different malpractices related to the institutional constraints exposed in this article: ideology, governance, and narrative. In this concrete experience, designers followed uncritically, and without any attempt to either expose or contest, the given policies of the redevelopment. These included the privatization of public land, the increase of current density and a controversial proportion of public to private housing. Alternatively, working simultaneously in alliance with organizations that challenge such impositions and within institutions may have shifted this resigned attitude and improved the outcomes of PD.

Moreover, in Waterloo, designers also passively reproduced the local state's rationale, including bureaucratic, managerial and pragmatic problem-framing. This uncontested and technocratic approach — that also often goes unnoticed by designers — masked and depoliticized PD in a highly contested environment. Design knowledge, including the visual communication expertise to generate final reports, supported the silencing of crucial conflicts underlying the redevelopment of Waterloo, such as class relations in a former working-class neighborhood, the ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal lands and communities, and the risks of accelerating gentrification alongside the rising rent in inner-city Sydney. As a result, the final masterplan arising from the participatory process failed in two main ways: it focused on the built environment while dismissing other social and political issues affecting the community, and it presented the results as a shared vision, despite various contestation.

While acknowledging the pitfalls of working within institutions, this article also provides some concrete clues for designers to strategically navigate in this context. First, it

calls for PD to remain critical and aware of institutional constraints such as ideologies, governance, and narratives. Publicly examining and dissecting how these constraints empirically operate in different contexts can open new opportunities for improvement, while supporting designers to practically contest those constraints. Second, the article also advocates for an alternative conceptualization of institutions as situated social relations in order to challenge polarized perspectives that either choose to work with grassroots movements or institutions. By assuming that those are not autonomous spheres, but rather inter-mingled and mutually constitutive, new opportunities to challenge constraints may emerge.

State institutions are undoubtedly a risky arena of work, always vulnerable to instrumentalization and neutralization of radical democratic projects. However, as this article argued, they also remain crucial sites of struggle and productive arenas to scale-up local and grassroots initiatives. For this reason, while there is no easy, one-size-fits-all answer for this challenge, the article invites design scholarship to further explore two-pronged approaches to institutions. On the one hand, to critically recognize and examine institutional and political constraints, and on the other hand, to continue to explore political strategies to deal with such constraints, while working in the in-between of institutions.

Notes

1. I understand neoliberalism both as a rationality of government and as the emergence of specific political economic shifts during 1970. As a rationality of government, neoliberalism normally draws on diffuse power technologies such as audit, entrepreneurialism, management, outsourcing and privatizations. As a dominant political and

economic ideology, it is typically associated with the growing integration of global economy, deregulation measures, austerity, financialization, the weakening of unions, etc.

2. I undertook fourteen months of fieldwork in Waterloo as part of PhD research in Anthropology from December 2018 until January 2020. The data consists of interviews with residents and local community officers, notes from meetings, and official government documents gathered during fieldwork. Ethical clearance was provided by the Arts Subcommittee of Macquarie University with approval number 52019356612707.

3. I was not involved in the project as one of the designers, in fact I had no direct connection with them. I collected the data as an ethnographer and as part of my doctoral research in anthropology.

4. Quotes are used to indicate categories used by institutions in reports and other official communications. The use of quotes expects to denaturalize such terms and demonstrate its use as part of the institution's rhetoric.

5. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this ethnographic account.

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