

Spaces, Places and Faces: Tools to Widen Community Involvement in Urban Design

Theme: Social Dimensions of urban land management and community involvement

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The UK Government's agenda for a 'strong urban renaissance' has given a high priority to inclusive design and the creation of well-connected pedestrian environments that are accessible, safe and attractive to visitors and local users alike. However, Lord Rogers, Chair of the Urban Task Force has expressed disappointment that progress in the UK compares unfavourably with European counterparts that have created attractive spaces for high-density living [1]. Although there are a few exemplary schemes, in many cases 'urban streets are over-engineered to maximise traffic flow, pedestrians and cyclists are still treated as second- or third-class citizens' [2].

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InSITU (Inclusive and Sustainable Infrastructure for Tourism and Urban Regeneration) is a research project to support those who are working to improve public spaces with the active participation of local communities. Funded as a scoping study by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the cross-disciplinary research team are developing and testing new tools to widen user participation in areas that are rich in industrial and social heritage but poor in most other respects. Through innovative application of Geographic Information Systems for Participation (GIS-P) InSITU is enabling 'lay' participants with in-depth local knowledge to contribute to the design process on an equal footing with each other and with practitioners who can deliver significant improvements to the public realm.

The aim is to allow all participants - regardless of their expertise - to frame the issues and problems in their own terms. In particular, it seeks to involve so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups: people who tend not to respond to 'traditional' forms of consultation, such as questionnaires and public meetings. Local knowledge, understanding and preferences are articulated through 'local panels', and represented on high quality digitised maps. GIS-P maps produced by different panels are superimposed, so that points of conflict and consensus can be identified and made transparent. Furthermore, the maps are produced in a format that can be readily interpreted and used by key specialists, including urban designers and land use planners. This allows citizens, planners and implementers to engage in a more direct – and less confrontational – manner than was generally possible hitherto.

The methodology is currently being piloted in collaboration with Local Authorities to secure better public spaces and recreation for local people as an integral feature of regeneration. These include accommodation of markets, concerts and other local events in historic public squares; re-use of a former chocolate factory with new pedestrian links (City of York); a river-side 'health walk' and interpretation of local histories (City of Salford). InSITU is designed to inform decision-making by established agencies of urban governance through 'roundtables' that are advising the research team throughout the project, and playing a leading role in critical evaluation of the outcomes.

[1] Rogers, R. (2006) 'An Urban Renaissance', in R. Sclar (ed.) *Divided Cities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 135-156;

[2] Urban Task Force (2005) *Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance*, London: Urban Task Force, p. 6.