From ‘Troublemakers’ to Problem Solvers – Designing with Youths in a Disadvantaged Neighbourhood

Martin Severin Frandsen
Roskilde University
Universitetsvej 1, P.O. Box 260
4000 Roskilde, Denmark
martinf@ruc.dk

Lene Pfeiffer Petersen
Roskilde University
Universitetsvej 1, P.O. Box 260
4000 Roskilde, Denmark
lepfpe@ruc.dk

ABSTRACT
This paper presents the experiences and reflexions of a design practitioner working in the field of community development. The case illustrates how participatory design processes can contribute to social change. The paper tells a story of design process where youths from a local school in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in the suburbs of Copenhagen, designed and constructed colourful and imaginative dustbins to handle problems with local littering. The project was successful in creating an increased local awareness of waste management and reducing the amount of litter. However, the more important but less tangible result of the design process was the change it produced in the social relations in the neighbourhood. By giving them the opportunity to work as designers, the process contributed to a shift in the image of the youths from one of ‘troublemakers’ to a positive image of collaborative problem solvers.

Author Keywords
Participatory design processes, community development, pragmatism, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, youths.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.m. MISCELLANEOUS.

INTRODUCTION
As witnessed by the sociology of trouble (Emerson & Messinger, 1977) any social setting generates social tensions that can lead to identifications of deviance and designation of individuals or groups as ‘troublemakers’. In an urban environment this is particularly evident in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where poverty and lack of opportunities can lead to a build up of social tensions and mistrust. An often referred to situation of unease is the encounter with youths gathering in and occupying public or semi-public spaces. In a Danish context, studies have shown that it is often a very small group of so-called ‘unadjusted youths’ that in actual fact are guilty of more serious public order violations and thus can fairly be judged as genuine threats to security. In spite of these factual circumstances, youths that can be identified as coming from neglected neighbourhoods are often generally perceived as ‘troublemakers’ and ‘usual suspects’ in situations of relational trouble.

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For practitioners working with community development, a main challenge is to find ways to relieve social tensions and to build new social relations of trust and cooperation. This process can imply changing how people feel about and perceive both themselves and others. In empowerment and asset-based approaches to community development, the ability to change local residents’ perception of themselves and their neighbours, here among the local youths, is seen as key to successful community building. An important step is thus changing peoples image of themselves and their neighbours from that of persons with needs that can only be met with the help of outsiders to that of more self-reliant people with assets and capacities for collective and collaborative problem solving (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

The aim of this paper is to explore how participatory design processes engaging local youths can help remedy relational troubles and at the same time contribute to the creation of new relations of social cooperation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The paper thus follows a growing research interest into how participants in design processes are affected by their participation (Guha et al. 2010). Firstly we present a very brief outline of a theoretical understanding of the design pedagogical practice exemplified in the case study. Secondly we tell the story of how experimentation with participatory design helped uncover undiscovered talents among local youths and produced a change of their image from a label of ‘troublemakers’ to a positive image of problem solvers. The case story is based on interviews with the designer Anders Hagedorn, ethnographic field observations and documentation from the community development project.

PRAGMATIC AND PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PEDAGOGY
While not consciously drawing on pragmatist concepts of learning the participatory pedagogical practice in the case corresponds strikingly to the pedagogical theory of the pragmatist John Dewey that was put to the experimental test in his famous Laboratory School. Based on psychological observations, Dewey developed the hypotheses that there was no difference in the dynamics of experiences of children and adults. All are active beings who learn by confronting the problematic situations that arise in the course of their daily and routine activities, and for both thinking is an instrument in resolving these uncertain and sometimes troubling situations. When children enter the classroom they arrive not as blank slates, but bring with them native impulses to communicate, construct and inquire as well as interests...
The neighbourhood of Charlotteager is located in the former industrial town of Hedehusene, nowadays mostly a residential suburb to Copenhagen. Charlotteager consists of three non-profit housing associations that were built in three successive stages from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. Outwardly Charlotteager is a very green and mostly well-kept neighbourhood. A look at the socio-economic statistics however reveal a large group of single and unemployed parents, a low average level of income and education and at the same time a high number of children under 18 and youths between 18 and 24. One effect of this combination of socio-economic factors is a relatively large number of reports of parental neglect and of children and youths needing special education and social support. Among these, some also have a history of delinquency and vandalism. A small survey conducted in 2009 showed that 25 % of the residents viewed the relationship between adults and youths as bad or very bad, 44 % saw it as tolerable and only 31% saw it as good or very good. The survey also indicated that threats to security, lack of parental responsibility and few opportunities for the local youths were some of most important matters of concern among the residents.

FROM ‘TROUBLE MAKERS’ TO PROBLEM SOLVERS
In 2007 a new 5-year experimental community development project was undertaken in Charlotteager. Having recently had only modest success with engaging a broader spectrum of local residents and here among in particular local youths in the community development process, the lead partners behind the new project wanted to try out a more asset based and participatory approach. The project was initially a partnership between the three housing associations and the municipality of Høje-Taastrup. To introduce and test new participatory methods the grassroots urban laboratory, Supertanker, was subsequently brought in. Having originated in inner Copenhagen in 2002, Supertanker was an interdisciplinary group of action researchers, artists, architects and designers (Brandt et al. 2008). For Supertanker the new community development project was an opportunity to test ideas of using design processes as catalysts for social interaction and change.

From the interdisciplinary Supertanker group, the designer Anders Hagedorn was put in charge of the effort to engage the local youths in the development of the neighbourhood. Before arriving in Charlotteager he had worked with disabled people and asylum seekers and had used participatory design methods to uncover and promote the unacknowledged talents and capacities of minority groups. Hagedorn brought the same approach with him to Charlotteager where he experienced through his daily work, that many local youths were viewed as ‘troublemakers’ who did not contribute positively to the community. This view included a broad group of young people, most of whom were not guilty of anything but minor incivilities and occasionally noisy behaviour. For Hagedorn it was thus crucial that the effort to engage the local youths would address and work with some of the perceptions in the neighbourhood that put many of the adolescents in a bad light. As he had already learned, and as would become more obvious as the collaboration with the local youths progressed, the young people were often just as worried about the issues of the community as other and older residents.
Designing Dustbins

The educational design project was organized in close collaboration with the local public school as well as the local youth club. The design process started in February 2009 and ran for approximately three months. It was organized as an integrated part of the curriculum of a class of 8th grade pupils.

The first stage consisted in a mapping and identification of the issues and development potentials in the neighbourhood as seen from the perspective of the pupils. Following the mapping the pupils brainstormed and developed a range of ideas and suggestions for solutions to the identified problems that were visualized and further elaborated in drawings. The results of the mapping and development of ideas were presented at an exhibition at the school open to all residents in Charlotteager. On the basis of the feedback and response to the exhibited ideas, two projects were chosen for realization. One of the ideas was to design and produce new dustbins for the neighbourhood to handle a problem with littering in the neighbourhood. This idea was chosen because it was both feasible and could help solve a problem that concerned the entire neighbourhood and not only the youths themselves.

To create as much possible ownership and at the same time the highest learning outcome, it was essential for Hagedorn that the pupils were involved in all the stages of the design process from idea to construction. After the exhibition, the different design ideas were further elaborated first in sketches and later small-scale prototypes in the form of cardboard models. A fundamental design idea was to create some spectacular and creative designs that could bring a playful element to the use of dustbins (Figure 1).

With the small scale prototypes the basic designs of the dustbins were ready, and the production stage could begin. This meant that the design process was now taken outside the school and neighbourhood setting. To begin with Hagedorn took the students to a junkyard, where they found old barrels and other metal residues that could be reused as material for dustbins. Then the process continued at a production school in the nearby town of Roskilde where the pupils learned to forge dustbins out of the found recycled materials. Back at the school and in the neighbourhood, the dustbins were then painted and decorated with stencils.

During the production stage, the group of individuals and organizations involved in the participatory process gradually expanded. To help the pupils with the forging of the bins, contact was made to a local blacksmith who would become a permanent collaborator in the community development project. The same thing happened with a teacher from the production school that later became involved several in other activities in the neighbourhood.

In addition to the class of 8th grade pupils, other youths from the neighbourhood also became involved. The sketches and small models of the bins were shown at an exhibition at the local youth club, and members of the club contributed by spray painting and making stencils to decorate the bins. Furthermore, in a more random manner, several other children and youths outside of school and club auspices participated in decorating and installing the bins in the neighbourhood. An important element in the process was for Hagedorn the methodological rule that everyone who showed an interest and wanted to participate could become part of the process. With this openness, the design and production process was able to include and give many groups from the neighbourhood a share in the project. It was an essential methodological principle, which helped to create at sense of ownership of the dustbins for many other youths than the initial class of 8th grade pupils.

In addition to children and youths from the neighbourhood, the design process also involved the caretakers and tenant boards of the housing associations. Cooperation with the caretakers was important because they were the ones having to empty the dustbins once they were put into service. Their feedback in relation to the functionality and the location of the dustbins was therefore needed. The question concerning the maintenance and location of the dustbins was also discussed at a meeting between the pupils and the tenant boards, who had the formal role of approving and supporting the project financially. The design process thus provided an occasion for the youths to become acquainted with and learn about the tenant democracy in the housing associations where they lived, and for the board to see the youths in a new and unaccustomed situation.

Furthermore, the broad local ownership of the dustbins project was promoted by the fact that the whole process was continually documented and communicated by the local newspaper and on the housing associations own TV channel, where residents could view small films from the process and continuously keep themselves informed of the ongoing work. Residents who did not participate directly in the project could thus have the story of the dustbin design process conveyed, and get a positive image of the youths as people concerned with waste problems who also contributed positively to resolving them.

Finally, an additional element that contributed to community ownership was the inauguration of the

Figure 1: Small-scale prototype © Farokh Berenjgani
dustbins. In addition to a large group of pupils from different classes and age groups in the school, teachers, parents, residents, youth club workers, representatives from the tenant boards, caretakers, children and nursery nurses from local day care institutions, active citizens in Hedehusene and the local press participated (Figure 2). The inauguration thus also helped convey a positive image of the local youths and at the same time an image of a community cooperating in solving problems.

Figure 2: The inauguration © Anders Hagedorn

By-products of the Design Process
Looking back and reflecting on the design process, an important lesson for Hagedorn is that the essential thing was not so much the specific product the design process created, but the things the process triggered in the neighbourhood. One of the by-products of the process was the creation of a range of new and collaborative social relations in the local area that were to endure for the remaining three years of the community development project. Another by-product was the knowledge on design processes and democratic coorporation the project created among the youths. In this process, both the youths’ own sense of self and the surrounding’s areas image of them changed. Part of the learning process consisted in that the pupils were allowed to try out new and unfamiliar situations that might challenge their perception of their abilities and skills. The project was an opportunity for students to experience themselves in new situations and challenge their own, but also their teachers’ perceptions of their abilities and talents.

Of the total of eight youths from the initial 8th grade who participated through the whole design and construction process all expressed that they felt empowered and had experienced genuine participation. Furthermore staff from the local school and youth club reported that a large group of youths, some of whom had participated randomly in the process, felt ownership and were proud of the dustbins.

To sum up, the overall picture of the design process shows that it created, besides the concrete rubbish bins, a range of new and enduring social relations of coorporation in the neighbourhood and extended to the surrounding towns. In addition it produced new experiences and changed self-perceptions among the participating youths and a more positive outward image.

The process also generally spawned an increased awareness of waste management in the area and the caretakers could report on less litter in a subsequent period. And finally, the project created and communicated a story of the local neighbourhood as a coorporative community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
In this paper we have explored what participatory design with youths can offer in a community development context. As the story of youths designing new dustbins illustrates participatory design can be a powerful way of uncovering and mobilising undiscovered capacities for creative and collective problem solving. In judging the potentials of introducing participatory design methods in community work in disadvantaged neighbourhoods it is however important also to stress the limits of these kind of locally based projects. Evidence from Denmark shows that mobilisations of locally based resources and local networking strategies can in fact improve community life and make disadvantaged housing areas better places to live. To fundamentally and permanently change the situation of ‘advanced marginality’ of these areas however requires that broader and structural socio-economic issues beyond the local scale be addressed. Local development projects must be integrated in coherent and inclusive regional urban revitalisation programs and without far-reaching changes, which can break the trends toward polarization of the urban social geography, local empowerment strategies are likely to fail in the long run (Andersen and Larsen, 2004).

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