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Published online: 16 Oct 2019.

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Unearthing the political: differences, conflicts and power in participatory urban design

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to advance the development of participation in urban design from a substantive standpoint. It departs from a prevailing focus on ideals of participation and describing participatory methods and processes. Instead, the paper stresses the need to acknowledge 'the political' nature of public spaces and how this challenges participatory urban design processes. This leads to a substantive exploration of differences, conflicts and power in the planning and design of public spaces, i.e., unearthing the political. The case of a participatory process in a neighbourhgood of Barcelona illustrates the theoretical discussion. This helps bring forward a much-needed critical and reflective, rather than idealistic, theorization and practice of participation in urban design.

Introduction

Involvement of local communities in public space projects is widely promoted as a cornerstone for democratic and just urban design. Calls for genuine or full participation are thus a frequent feature of urban design literature (e.g., Madanipour 2010; Faga 2006; Toker and Toker 2006; Sanoff 2006, 2000). Genuine participation is commonly understood in urban design as decision-making processes that, based on ideals of deliberative democracy and communicative rationality, follow three main principles: (1) *inclusiveness*, based on involving all stakeholders; (2) *power balance*, by giving participants equal say and influence; and (3) *consensus building*, where consensual decisions are reached through deliberation and facilitation (Calderon 2013).

Genuine participation is nonetheless exceptional, often linked to flagship or academic projects (e.g., Leddy-Owen, Robazza, and Scherer 2018; Kallus 2016; Toker and Pontikis 2011). In mainstream practice, participatory processes are predominantly public consultations that, although legitimate and informative, regularly lead to narrow involvement of the public, absence of meaningful deliberation, and limited influence of participants in decisions. Hou (2010) accordingly notes that 'while most practitioners, theorists, and the public generally support the moral and intrinsic value of participation, few are satisfied with the actual processes and outcomes' (p. 332).

In the fields of planning and geography, the difficulties of achieving genuine participation have led to a shift in theoretical discussions: from normative positions on how

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participation ought to be, to substantive explorations of participation and its inherit challenges to ideal principles (e.g., Calderon and Butler 2019; Bond 2011; Flyvbjerg and Richardson 2002). Similar discussions are slowly developing within urban design (e.g., Calderon 2013; Rios 2008). However, literature on participation remains predominantly normative and procedural, promoting ideal forms of participation and describing participatory processes and methods (e.g., Kallus 2016; Toker and Pontikis 2011; Hou 2010; Faga 2006; Toker and Toker 2006; Sanoff 2006, 2000). Such focus has resulted in limited substantive knowledge about the difficulties of achieving genuine participation, particularly in terms of the inevitable challenges that differences, conflicts and power pose to participatory processes. As this paper will show, although these issues are touched upon in more general public space discussions, they are seldom the explicit focus of research on participation, or are dealt with in a superficial and disparate manner. This prevents practitioners from posing and answering critical questions about participation in urban design and the challenges they face (see also Cuthbert 2007, and his more general critique to the lack of substantive theory in urban design).

This paper aims to advance the development of participation in urban design by engaging in a substantive exploration of challenges of genuine participation. To achieve this, the paper first describes how participation is commonly theorized within urban design. Following Chantal Mouffe's (2005) critique of ideal views of deliberative democracy and participation, the paper then stresses the need to recognize and engage with 'the political' and the antagonistic dimension of participation in public space projects. This leads to a substantive understanding of differences, conflicts and power, i.e., unearthing the political. The political is illustrated in a case study of a participatory process focusing on public spaces during the renewal of a neighbourhood in Barcelona. The paper concludes with assessing the implications that the political has for the theorization and practice of participatory urban design.

Participatory urban design and the need to unearth the political

The involvement of local communities in the planning and design of local environments has long been debated. Participatory ideas and practices originated in the 1960's and 70's with the rise of postwar political and academic discourses criticizing the disconnection between experts' technical rationality and people's everyday needs (Shapely 2011). However, participation with focus on urban design only emerged in the late 1990's with initiatives such as the Public Participation Programme led by the UK's Urban Design Group (UDG 1998).

Since then, and following the practice-oriented nature of urban design, the body of literature about participation in the field has been characterized by: criticizing top-down decision making processes, promoting the need to include users and excluded communities in such processes, promoting the benefits of such inclusion, reporting on best practice projects, and developing or describing participatory methods and techniques (see Calderon 2013, 44–49).

In contrast to this normative and procedural focus, a more substantive and critical body of knowledge remains absent or in the periphery of academic discussions. This absence pertains in particular to what Mouffe (2005) identifies as the main challenge for deliberative democracy and communicative rationality: the lack of understanding of 'the

political', i.e., the antagonistic dimension that constitutes society and democracy. For urban design, the political emphasizes the idea of public space as an arena of constant struggles fuelled by differences, conflicts and power. The very idea of participatory urban design processes is to deal in a democratic manner with this antagonistic dimension (Madanipour 2010; Hou 2010; UDG 1998). Yet, in line with Mouffe, it is argued here that the lack of theoretical engagement and substantial understanding of the political in urban design is at the origin of most urban designers' inability to envisage and address the challenges that differences, conflicts and power pose for participatory urban design. Practitioners may be well aware about these issues in their everyday practice, yet they have little substantive knowledge that supports their conceptualization and approach to these issues (see also Cuthbert 2007).

Discussions about struggles shaping public spaces are not new. Urban geographers in particular have long viewed public space as a contentious product of conflicting and power-laden social relations (Staeheli and Mitchell 2008; Low and Smith 2006). Yet, as noted by Cuthbert (2006), the political dimension of public space is significantly neglected by urban design scholars. Although differences, conflicts and power relations are sometimes identified in case studies, substantial understanding of these issues are seldom the focus of research on participation in urban design. Thus, there is a significant need to substantially engage with the political. Using Mouffe's (Mouffe 2005, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 2014) conceptualization of the political as a general theoretical umbrella, the following sections focus on the theoretical understanding of differences including conflicts, and power in public spaces, and their implications for participatory urban design.

Differences, conflicts and urban design

Aiming for genuine participation tends to be recognized as a positively laden goal, targeting the involvement of a great variety of stakeholders. However, numerous challenges emerge when decision-making is opened to the multiple values and interests of all who have a stake in public space. Differences in the way people use and value public spaces, based on their own interests and preferences, have long been recognized. These differences often lead to disagreements and conflicts as parties make specific claims in order to pursue a desired activity or achieve a preferred state. Yet building on Mouffe (2005), what is substantively missing from discussions of participation in urban design is the thesis that in today's pluralistic societies there is an ever present possibility of antagonistic (i.e., actively opposing and adversarial) relations where differences, although legitimate, are often irreconcilable, leaving little common ground for mediation. This, constitutes a major hurdle to attaining genuine participation in urban design.

Differences in decisions regarding public space development are commonly linked to different social groups based on gender, age, class, ethnicity, lifestyle or world views (Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005). While no fixed boundaries exist between these groups, they imply multiple social identities with different values and claims concerning public space. For Mouffe, it is these diverse identities that makes antagonistic relations an ever present possibility and challenge for participation. Her argument is that every identity is relational, meaning that identities are always constituted by ' … the creation of a 'we' which can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'' (Mouffe 2005, 15). It implies the ' … establishment of

a difference, which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy, for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman, etc.' (ibid.). We/they relations are not always antagonistic ones. Yet Mouffe warns that there is always the possibility for antagonism ' … when the 'they' is perceived as putting into question the identity of the 'we' and as threatening its existence' (ibid).

Mouffe's empirical focus is on the antagonistic relations between political parties and identities. Yet antagonistic relations that threaten certain identities are easily found in public spaces. Access to public spaces and the particular ways that different people use and value them are well acknowledged to influence the formation of identities (Lewicka 2008). Thus, limiting such access or use can be understood as a way to question or threaten an identity.

Examples of antagonistic relations in urban design are abundant. Significantly antagonistic and clearly linked to issues of identity are the, sometimes tragically violent, conflicts resulting from decisions to remove confederate statues in the United States (Koger 2018) or protests contesting development plans that build on public areas, e.g., Istanbul's Takzim Gezi Park (Yigit-Turan 2017). The strong 'nimbyism' (not in my back yard) characterizing urban design nowadays, concerning for example, developers' interest in construction versus environmentalists' interest in preservation, or some residents' interest in green areas versus others' need for parking space, is also evidence of these kind of conflicts. Yet more common and subtle examples questioning or threatening identities in public space are when public space design and management (by choice or in ignorance) denies access and use to certain groups e.g., ethnic minorities (Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005), homeless people (Staeheli and Mitchell 2008) or teenagers (Németh 2006). The same happens when public space projects favour identities and behaviours associated with consumerism or the values of elite groups (Carr 2012).

The key challenge posed by antagonistic relations to genuine participatory processes is that they tend to create situations where differences and conflicts regarding what is considered socially or environmentally significant, what should be deemed as appropriate use or behaviour, or what should be prioritized in urban design projects, are often irreconcilable. Accordingly, Richardson and Connelly (2005) claim that even when there are strong intentions to achieve genuine participation, in reality differences and conflict lead to a potential range of practices that inevitably exclude certain participants, claims and outcomes. Power is central to this exclusion, as differences and conflicts are inextricably penetrated by power (Mouffe 2005). Understanding the way that power operates in urban design is thus central in furthering understanding of the political.

Power and urban design

Very few studies in urban design explicitly engage with power. Those that have, mainly focus on the levels and sources of power held by different actors (e.g., politicians, developers, designers or users). For example, Bentley (1999) and Carmona et al. (2010) discuss how the power of different actors results from knowledge or socio/economical capital. Building on this understanding, literature on participation in urban design focuses mainly on how power operates in the binary interaction between experts and the public and on balancing power through facilitation (Calderon 2013). Yet substantive

understandings of power are generally absent from discussions on participation in urban design. This is evident, for example, in Hou's (2010) chapter on participation in the seminal book Companion to Urban Design where he briefly and normatively refers to power only in terms of empowerment.

Building on Mouffe's (2005, 2000) understanding of power in the political, what is substantially missing from discussions of participation in urban design is the view of power as structural and constitutive of social order. For Mouffe, the political is intrinsically linked to the establishment of a hegemonic social order, i.e., the predominant and specific configuration of a society, of what is considered common sense, natural and acceptable, in a given time (for similar reasoning see Foucault 1979). The differences and conflicts characterizing the political create a context of contingency, which implies that in society, as well as in urban design, things could always be otherwise. Hence, every order is based on the exclusion of other possibilities. Power is constitutive of that order, as it privileges some of these possibilities while repressing others. Urban design unquestionably is conditioned by, and contributes to, the establishment of the hegemonic order referred to by Mouffe. It prioritizes specific ways of living, moving, socializing or relating to nature while excluding others. Thus, urban design practices and decisions are intrinsically penetrated by power.

Laclau and Mouffe (2014) emphatically link today's social order with the hegemony of neoliberal and market-orientated discourses, which have shaped people's day-to-day and taken-for-granted beliefs and actions. This includes urban design where the understanding of problems, formulation of solutions and evaluation of results are increasingly recognized to be determined by logics of supply and demand and measured according to economic contribution (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015; Brenner and Theodore 2005). Hence, within this social order, power caters to the needs of groups and interests and values linked to market rationality, while excluding and marginalizing others that may focus on environmental performance or local identity (Low and Smith 2006).

Differences, conflicts and power relations are crucial for understanding the political nature of urban design and thus the challenges faced by efforts to achieve genuine participation in public space projects. In the following section, a case study is used to illustrate the political in a participatory process regarding the planning and design of public spaces.

The case: differences, conflicts and power in the participatory process of La Mina

This section presents a case study of a participatory process focusing on public spaces within the renewal of a neighbourhood in Barcelona called La Mina. The case was selected to illustrate a process where genuine participation was attempted, but where significant challenges arising from differences, conflicts and power were encountered.

Semi-structured interviews covering process implementation, challenges and results were conducted with local residents, community leaders, public servants and architects involved in the renewal of the neighbourhood. This was complemented with a series of in-depth interviews with the organizers and the main facilitator of the participatory process, providing detailed accounts of the challenges they faced. Official and unofficial

documents regarding the neighbourhood and its renewal and detailed reports and publications on the participatory process were analysed. Material from local media containing numerous opinions about the process were also reviewed.

Background to the case

La Mina was built during the 1960s, close to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, at what was then the periphery of Barcelona. Planned for approximately 10,000 inhabitants, the neighbourhood began a process of decay soon after its construction as a product of high population density, high rates of unemployment and poor provisioning of services. By the end of the 20th century, La Mina was among the most deprived neighbourhoods in the city. Its diverse population included middle- and low-income households with a relatively uniform age and gender distribution, with one-third of residents belonging to or descended from Spanish Romanies and small proportions of immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East.

The neighbourhood's deprivation was strongly manifested in its public spaces. High levels of vandalism and drug-related activities were evident in areas like Besos Park and the boulevards in between the neighbourhood's high-rise buildings (Figure 1). This limited the areas available for public use and led to clashes between different groups of residents and users who competed for space to carry out public activities.

After the turn of the century, solving the problems in La Mina became a political priority. The well-known renewal of Barcelona's coastline reached the surrounding area of La Mina, bringing with it projects such as museums and conference centres that could boost real estate development and attract capital investment (Calderon and Chelleri 2013). This provided strong political and economic support, leading to a 10-year urban renewal plan, The Transformation Plan for La Mina (TPLM).

The TPLM entailed drastic transformation of the existing urban fabric, replacing a large amount of public facilities with the construction of: (i) a *rambla* (a wide street with
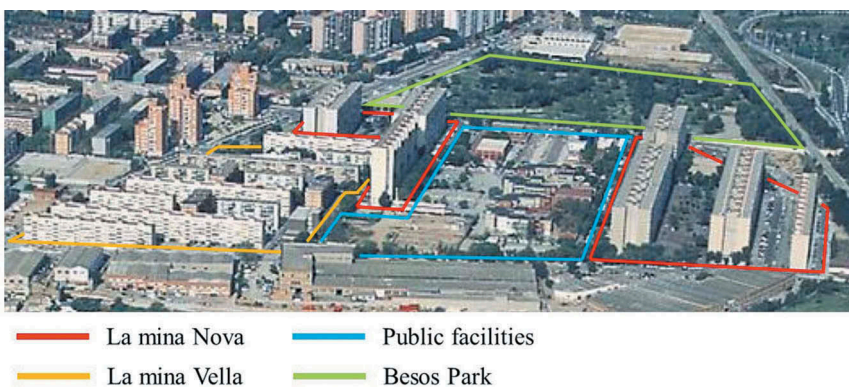

Figure 1. Morphology and areas of La Mina. La Mina Nova is characterized by 12-storey buildings and boulevards between buildings, while La Mina Vella is characterized by five-storey buildings with small squares and gardens. Public facilities include a cultural centre, two schools, a church and sports fields. Besos Park occupies 65 000 m^2 (adapted from CBLM 2006).
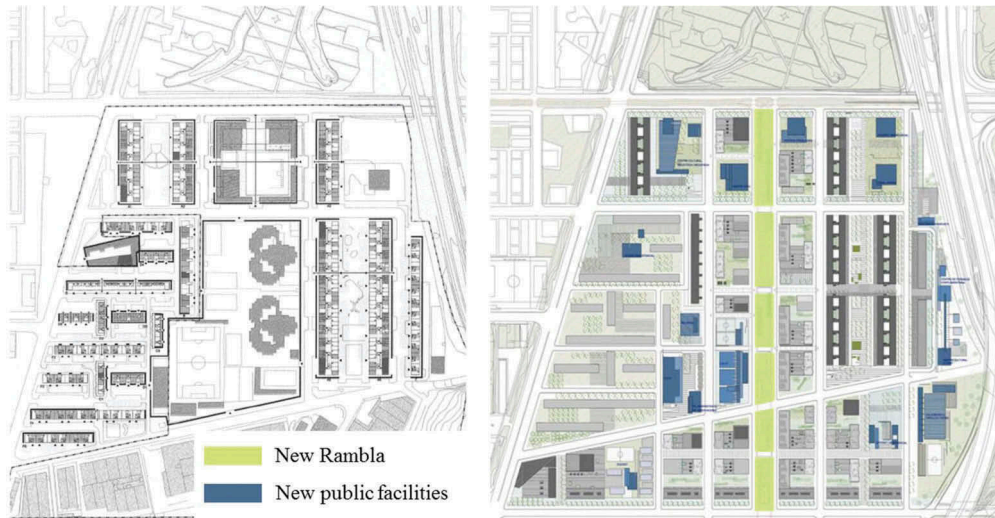
Figure 2. Urban structure of La Mina before (left) and after (right) renewal (adapted from CBLM 2006).

a promenade in the middle, typical of Barcelona) running across the neighbourhood; (ii) new residential buildings with commercial premises on the ground floor; and (iii) new city-scale public facilities for both residents and outsiders (Figure 2). The *rambla* was considered the most significant component of the TPLM, conceived as a new landmark that would resolve the conflicts in existing public spaces and as a place where existing and new residents could socialize and revitalize the neighbourhood's public life (CBLM 2006).

A consortium of local and metropolitan government agencies, the *Consorci del Barri de La Mina* (CBLM), was established for managing the TPLM. Around 63% of the funds for the TPLM came from the local and metropolitan government. Half of these funds comprised public land allocated to the project. The remaining 37% were comprised of the projected profits from private housing developments (29%) and funding within the URBAN II programme of the European Commission (8%) (CBLM 2008). For the latter, funding was conditional on the TPLM following a participatory approach. This, together with the magnitude of the problems present in public spaces in La Mina, led to a complementary participatory process for the TPLM that focused on the neighbourhood's public environment. CBLM established a collaboration with researchers from a local university specializing in participation in public space projects. CBLM provided the funds for implementing the process and the researchers became the process organizers, leading its design and management. The participatory process was called '*Cartografías de La Mina*' (Cartographies of La Mina – CLM).

Goals and design of the CLM

CLM was conceived as an inclusive process where different actors could come together to discuss and make proposals regarding the neighbourhood's public areas. The principles of genuine participation, i.e., inclusiveness, power balance and consensus building, were not

explicitly stated in the design of CLM. Process organizers nonetheless recognized these principles in the goals for the process: (i) involving and collecting experiences and opinions from all actors involved or affected by the project; (ii) using methods that would give flexibility to the process and allow greater involvement of different actors; (iii) empowering participants from the community, providing them with information and tools for analysing their territory and making feasible proposals; and (iv) facilitating the exchange of information and ideas between different actors concerning proposals for improving the neighbourhood's public spaces.

Working within a limited budget, the process design comprised two stages. The first stage aimed to analyse the neighbourhood's public spaces and public life, mapping problems and opportunities. The second stage focused on the development of social programmes and design proposals. The design of both stages followed a series of charrette-like workshops with different groups of residents and community-based organizations. A five-day open house event targeting a broader number of residents and users, plus civil servants and technicians was planned at the end of each stage.

Differences, conflicts and power in the implementation and outcomes of the CLM

Throughout the four years of its implementation, from 2002 to 2006, the participatory process proved to be heavily challenged by differences, conflicts and power dynamics. In the first stage, the process organizers faced great difficulties in getting residents and community leaders to participate in the planned workshops. This, despite open and direct invitations and the fact that the activities took place in the neighbourhood. The process only managed to involve a limited number of participants, unsuccessfully representing all the social groups present in the neighbourhood. Partly this was caused by a widespread mistrust of the government based on negative experiences from previous projects. Yet, also contributing to the low involvement was the neighbourhood's large and diverse population. This not only made it somehow unfeasible to involve all actors, as remarked by critics of genuine participation (Richardson and Connelly 2005), but also led to differences and conflicts that made it difficult to bring different stakeholders together, as discussed below.

In the first phase, three series of workshops, each of three to five sessions with 12 participants on average, were held with three different groups: a group of teenagers from a local school, most of whom were of a Roma background; a group with leaders and members of different community-based organizations; and a group with members from a community-based women's organization. During the workshops, participants used group-mapping exercises, photo surveys and facilitated discussions to identify and ana-lyse problems and opportunities present in the neighbourhood's public spaces. Aware that participants did not represent all voices in the neighbourhood, the process organi-zers also joined several community events where they interviewed residents and gathered additional opinions about the neighbourhood's public spaces.

The results of the workshops and the interviews showed how the pluralistic nature of La Mina led to significant antagonistic relations such as the ones described by Mouffe (2000, 2005) and exemplified earlier. For example, the everyday activities of teenagers, such as large or late-night gatherings, were considered by other residents to be

disturbing. The high and permanent use of some public areas by residents from the Spanish Romanies or by immigrant groups felt excluding and intimidating for people who did not belong to these groups. A public space highly valued by some of these groups was a place that others would not dare to use or would cross rapidly. As noted by one of the organizers 'We found a total dichotomy, a contrast, almost a war, over some of the neighbourhood's public spaces'. Accordingly, the results of the workshops illustrate Mouffe's antagonistic relations, displayed in the relationship between diverse social identities, their contrasting ways of using and valuing public spaces and how this can limit some groups' access to public space.

The identified differences and conflicts were not addressed during the workshops of the first phase. The contrasting values and opinions were circumvented by the process organizers in their synthesis of the results of the workshops into more general themes, including, everyday public life, public space design, physical con-nections between the neighbourhood and its surroundings and local identity. These themes were presented during an exhibition that took place during a five-day open house event that concluded the first stage. Each theme was presented in several posters including images, maps and other materials that resulted from the work-shops, as well as quotes from participants expressing their contrasting views.

In total, 350 people attended during the five days of the open house event. Many of these were organized excursions from local schools. Visitors were encouraged to give opinions about the themes or add any issues they considered missing. They were also asked to prioritize the themes. It was found that: 67% of participants gave first priority to social problems such as antisocial and illegal behaviour in the boulevards between the high-rise buildings and in Besos Park; 24% considered the physical and aesthetic condi-tions of the neighbourhood to be its main problem; and 9% highlighted the relationship between the neighbourhood and its surroundings as the main issue.

Concluding the open house event was a public hearing led by a panel of com-munity leaders, technicians from the CBLM and the main architect of the TPLM. The process organizers decided to focus the discussion on the new rambla given its significant role. In the discussion, the architect and technicians prioritized the rambla as they viewed it as a solution to the problems in the existing public spaces, to connect the neighbourhood with its surroundings and for attracting new residents and users. However, echoing the results of the exhibition, residents in the audience disputed this and expressed the need to prioritize improvements in existing public spaces, tackling the social problems present in them. Given the format of the public hearing, the different claims were only voiced and not explicitly addressed. Still, these contrasting opinions exemplify another aspect of the political, where opposing understandings of problems and of what ought to be done to solve them are equally legitimate, yet difficult to conciliate.

To cope with the conflicting opinions, process organizers gave community leaders the possibility to influence the selection of projects to be developed during the second phase. The selection included plans and designs for specific public spaces of the neighbourhood, such as Besos Park, the boulevards in between the neighbourhood's high-rise buildings and the new rambla; as well as social programmes and measures to promote local identity, security and civil behaviour.

Direct invitations to charrette-like workshops for developing the selected projects were sent to representatives of the CBLM and the municipality, as well as leaders of community organizations and the public in general. However, involving and bringing together different types of stakeholders again proved difficult. Given the existing tensions between CBLM and residents, members of the former abstained from participating in the workshops arguing that there was no need for them to join before the concluding public hearing. Leaders and representatives from different community-based organizations also refused to work together due to rivalries concerning possible participation in, and funding opportunities from, the social programmes resulting from the process.

Due to this situation, one of the organizers noted that 'it became really hard to work collaboratively for the improvement of the neighbourhood in a situation where there is a constant confrontation between the different actors'. To cope with this, they decided to work separately with different groups according to the theme that mostly motivated them. This led to smooth discussions during the workshops, with outcomes including several programmes for solving problems related to littering and security, design proposals for the new *rambla* and for a new bicycle network, a toponym study that suggested names for new streets and public spaces based on the neighbourhood's history and identity and guidelines and suggestions for improvement of Besos Park, the boulevards in between the high-rise buildings and the main streets crossing and surrounding the neighbourhood.

To conclude the second phase, process organizers wanted to arrange additional activities where representatives of different stakeholder groups could discuss the different proposals from the workshops. However, the sum of challenges encountered throughout the first and second phases took hold on the limited resources available for the process. The CBLM was not able to provide additional funding, leading to the cancellation of the open-house event that was in the CLM's original design.

The limited resources that were available for the process and the unwillingness of the members of the CBLM to join the workshops relate to Mouffe's conceptualization of power and its connection to social order. At the time of the CLM, there was no legal mandate to carry out participatory processes beyond public consultations, nor was it common practice to do workshops or activities as the ones implemented so far. Similarly, the funding conditions from the EU were vague, without detailed suggestions of what a participatory process entailed. Accordingly, there was no incentive nor pressure for the CBLM to continue with the process or for its members to be active in it. In fact, one member of the CBLM expressed that they 'had already done more than what is common and felt very satisfied with the process'. Following this reasoning and the traditional consultative ways of undertaking participation, the CBLM commissioned the process organizers to summarize participants' proposals in an action plan for improving the neighbourhood's public environment. In this sense, participant's influence and power over final decisions became dependent on organizers' interpretation and documentation of the process outcomes; and on the inclusion of the action plan in decision processes occurring beyond the CLM.

When asked about their influence in final decisions, most residents and community leaders reported that many of their proposals were presented differently in the action plan. Process organizers' admitted that despite their attempts to be neutral (something

that is typically required by proponents of genuine participation (Sanoff 2000)) they omitted ideas and details of proposals that could have been important for some participants. In retrospect, and in relation to Mouffe's understanding of power, process organizers recognized how their views of what is normal and acceptable in urban design affected their neutrality.

> When you are interpreting the workshops, when you are doing the report, of course you sometimes give more emphasis to some things and fail to recognise others. You try to do your best. Sometimes you get it right, but for sure you also get it wrong (…) we were not a neutral or innocuous element with absolutely no influence over the process or its results (…) we were one actor more in the game of actors.

Residents and community leaders were nonetheless more upset that their suggestions were not included in what CBLM ultimately implemented. For example, the toponym study, which participants considered important for enhancing local identity, was never used and different names were given to new streets and squares. A similar situation arose with the design of the new rambla. As stated by a community leader,

> We worked for more than a year, making proposals about how we wanted our rambla to be. We were then surprised to find out that, without any consultation or discussion, there was a final design that was closed to modifications. It does not matter if the new design is better or worse, or if we like it or not. The problem is that this is how the municipality works, throwing away all what we did (…) it was the same for many of the other suggestions we made (…) Where are our proposals? What was the reason for our participation?.

Residents' discontent with the design of the rambla, echoed their general resentment of decisions that prioritized new residents and the new housing areas instead of improvements to existing and problematic areas. This prioritization followed the TPLM's argument that one of the main problems of La Mina was lack of social mix and of public spaces and activities for attracting high-income and well-educated groups. Accordingly, residents felt that instead of considering their needs and claims, improvements responded to the financial strategy of the TPLM, which was dependant on profits from private developments and followed more general market-driven discourses and real estate dynamics in the city. This included the design of the rambla which conditioned its vitality on the commercial activities planned for the ground floor of the new buildings (Calderon and Chelleri 2013).

The prioritization of decisions targeting new and different residents and users shows, following Laclau and Mouffe (2014), the social order created by market-oriented discourses and the power they have in understanding problems and the formulation of solutions. This is particularly problematic in cities such as Barcelona and economically valued areas such as La Mina, where the strong focus on economic growth often causes urban design to operate within a narrow scope of possible (pre-defined) outcomes. This suggests, as argued by Wilson and Swyngedouw (2015), that participatory processes are hardly ever free from unbalanced power relations.

Concluding discussion: towards the development of participation in urban design

This paper departed from the prevailing normative and procedural focus on theories of participation in urban design, where principles of genuine participation such as inclusiveness, power-balance and consensus-building are emphasized. Instead, following Mouffe's (2005, 2000) critique of ideal views of deliberative democracy and participation, the paper engaged in a substantive understanding of the political and illustrated how differences, conflicts and power challenges attempt to achieve genuine participatory processes.

The case study exemplifies a new reality in which urban designers increasingly need to engage in contexts characterized by deep differences, conflicts and power dynamics. In La Mina, differences included conflicting ways of using public spaces, contrasting perspectives on the value of different areas, on what constituted a problem and on which improvements should be prioritized. It also included competition for resources among community-based organizations and contrasts between economically driven solutions focusing on long-term city scale agendas and residents' proposals based on local and immediate needs. These conflicts, show how participatory processes are often challenged by fundamental disagreements that are not easy to mediate or resolve, hence making it difficult to achieve genuine participation. This follows Watson's (2006) argument that very often 'we find ourselves dealing with seemingly irreconcilable gaps (…) where there is no obvious hope of constructing dialogue or reaching consensus' (p. 32).

Similarly, the case study shows how solutions to these conflicting differences are shaped by complex power dynamics conditioned to the hegemonic social order of what is normal and desirable in urban design in a given context. The case study illustrates how this can affect the neutrality of process organizers, leading to the prioritization of information and outcomes that may differ from what is valued by participants. It also shows how this can result in decisions that prioritize designs linked to market rationality, while excluding proposals focused on social problems and local identity. Accordingly, there is a need to look beyond the narrow understanding of power in urban design, with its focus on different actors' levels and sources of power, and how this can be balanced through facilitation. Instead, it points to the recognition that participatory processes are seldom neutral and shaped by power dynamics beyond the actual process, which are difficult to balance or even anticipate (see also Flyvbjerg and Richardson 2002).

The differences, conflicts and power dynamics such as the ones found in La Mina, made it difficult for the CLM to achieve its goals and realize the ideal principles of inclusiveness, power balance and consensus. This does not suggest that the ideals of genuine participation are undesirable nor impossible to achieve. They may well be possible in contexts where communities are relatively small or homogeneous, where it is in actors' own interests to collaborate and overlook their differences, or where processes are provided with sufficient time, resources and political support. However, participatory processes are primarily implemented and required in contexts with high levels of complexity, commonly operating with limited resources and time (Faga 2006). Accordingly, the case study gives light into why, despite the many calls and attempts, genuine participation remains uncommon in urban design projects. La Mina is also a good representation of the increasing pluralization and neo-liberalization processes happening in most western cities (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015; Calderon 2013; Low and Smith 2006; Watson 2006; Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005; Sandercock

2000). These processes can yield the antagonistic relations and power dynamics stressed by Mouffe and illustrated in the case study. Hence the substantive understanding of the political, and its challenges to participatory ideals, is considered here key for furthering theories and practices of participation in urban design.

By unearthing the political, the paper does not suggest that urban designers should stop pursuing participatory processes. On the contrary, its main purpose is to contribute towards more participatory and democratic public space projects. Yet, the main message of the paper is that in order to achieve these goals it is not sufficient for theories of urban design to focus on normative and procedural approaches to participation. It is also essential to substantively acknowledge and understand the challenges present in participatory urban design processes, particularly in terms of differences, conflicts and power. By doing so, it is expected that urban designers would be better equipped to explicitly and reflectively engage with these issues, instead of merely trying to naively achieve ideal principles of genuine participation. The latter can be seen in the case study, where the process organizers only reported the differences and conflicts that they encountered but did not address them in a direct manner or avoided them by working separately with different groups. This relates to Mouffe's (2005) main problem with the idealistic views of deliberative democracy and participation, where conflicts and power relations are normally regarded as an obstacle to consensus and democracy, leading practitioners to conceal or avoid the challenges that they bring about.

Acknowledging and engaging with the political implies striving towards genuine participation, but doing it in a way that is more open to and honest about conflicting differences, power mechanisms and different forms of exclusion that emerge during decision-making processes (see also Bond 2011; Richardson and Connelly 2005). Not doing so can lead to the all too frequent public condemnation of urban design projects promoted as participatory and beneficial to all, yet in reality characterized by limited involvement and exclusion of issues and outcomes. The greater risk with these types of processes is that they can delegitimise institutions, practices and actors, including urban designers, that are essential for more democratic and participatory urban design, as argued by a resident of La Mina:

> After a while you realise that for the municipality, all this participation is done as a form of placation and prevarication (…) they promote it and are proud of it, not because they have the interest of using their outcomes, but in order to keep the community occupied so that they don't interfere with their interests and plans, the decisions that they have already made and how they normally manage the city.

In practical terms, this paper's engagement with power implies greater awareness of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations that determine the specific configuration of a society and urban design at a given moment. It entails acknowledging the mechanisms by which power, as structural and constitutive of social order, can lead practitioners to make unconscious and assumed choices and actions that are excluding. It also implies recognizing that other social orders and forms of designing the city and its public spaces are always possible and desirable. Hence, the paper's engagement with differences and conflicts suggests that these are not only legitimate but necessary for the contestation of unjust or unsustainable hegemonies (Mouffe 2005). It also implies that there will often be irreconcilable gaps between equally legitimate claims of different social groups, challenging the possibility of finding impartial and consented solutions to complex public space issues. This would then require participatory processes to focus on shifting antagonistic relationships to agonistic

ones (Mouffe 2005) by helping participants better understand (the legitimacy of) their own claims and those of their opponents, unpacking the roots and types of differences and conflicts that may exist and finding tailored ways to manage them, without having to necessary aim at, nor reach, consensus. Also, being more reflective and honest about who wins or loses with decisions and state what should be done about this in the future.

This paper has attempted to set a path where urban design theory, instead of promoting normative ideals of participation, provides knowledge for practitioners to work critically and reflexively, rather than naively and unconsciously, within the intrinsic political nature of participation in public space projects. This can better equip practice to include disruptive elements that challenge, but are also essential for, the legitimacy of democratic processes (Mouffe 2005). Thus, the invitation to other urban design scholars is to join this theoretical endeavour, as a means towards the development of participation and democracy in urban design.

Disclosure statement

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