

Community Engagement in Urban Experiments: Joint Effort for Sustainable Urban Transformation

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Abstract. The increasing complexity of urban regeneration issues has recently made multi-stakeholder collaboration an important part to solve policy problems. While residents form an important part in a variety of collaborative governance processes, approaches used are often criticized as too formal, and lacking more inclusive participation. Therefore, new informal mechanisms of collaboration are sought, to ensure a more effective engagement and representation of population groups. Although community-led participation is the approach that leads to a more effective collaborative process, issues of power and inequality are a challenge in many places in planning practice [13]. Ways of civic empowerment, communication, and negotiation provide participants with transformative learning opportunities so that not only their arguments change but also the participants of the participation process themselves [6].

In order to test urban development ideas, the notion of "urban experiment" has been developed in recent years as a recognized and effective approach. The urban environment is viewed as a creative laboratory for testing the implementation of diverse initiatives and innovations [8]. The inner-city neighbourhoods in many cities are struggling to ensure vitality and liveability, thus these areas often represent a widespread location of urban experiments. In addition to these questions, the problem of community representation manifests itself in many inner cities. The potential to transform city centre streets and vacant areas into user-friendly urban spaces and the impact of those transformations on the city's liveability were recently tested by Riga municipality. Urban experiments varied in scale and form, resulting in street pedestrianization, urban gardens, and other temporary initiatives, which allowed more space for walking and cycling, street sales, social events and other activities. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore processes of testbed planning with regard to the role of community participation in the designing, implementing, and analysing phases of the experiment. After presenting the findings, the article concludes with a discussion on factors that influence public participation in collaborative governance including communication, the balance of interests, and the degree of resident involvement in decision-making.

Keywords: community engagement, urban experiments, collaborative governance

Introduction

Community involvement has become an essential part of urban planning and place making activities. Community presence is assumed to be a positive, success-promoting factor that ensures positive outcomes of urban activities [3; 12; 23; 33]. However, the diverse meanings of the Community, the often-formal role in the processes of urban activities, as well as the ambiguous influence on decision-making, often prevent the full potential of the collaborative approach from being used [19]. The term "community" has been used in various ways over time to manifest, legitimize or popularize various initiatives in both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Its universal application shows that it can cover a wide range of meanings, among which "community as actor" is used in this article. The term is used to describe a particular actor who can make a difference in various types of actions and interactions with others. Often, directly or indirectly, community is meant as a category of 'society' in which networks and social relations connect people in different forms [43].

Community involvement is defined as the process by which communities are involved in discussion, decision-making or implementation. This process is based on consultative and/or collaborative methods. Designing and implementing interventions with community engagement approaches increases community capacity and social capital [29].

In order to test urban development ideas, the concept of "urban experiment" has been developed in recent years as a recognized and effective approach. The urban environment is seen as a creative laboratory for testing the implementation of various initiatives and innovations [8; 37]. Urban experiments have emerged as a means by which multiple actors attempt both to understand today's needs and opportunities and to model future visions [7; 9]. Both the state sector, professionals in the field, private companies and public organizations are increasingly initiating activities to test future visions in diverse areas - this may affect the development of

the local economy, environmental protection, provision of infrastructure, academic research and others [20; 26]. Experimentation forms a common thread running through today's otherwise disparate urban trends, from corporate attempts to create smart, low-carbon cities to citizen-led movements to make neighbourhoods more socially cohesive. Although urban experiments take many forms, they can be conceptually distinguished from conventional urban development or policy with a clear emphasis on learning associated with testing ideas or intentions in real environments [25]. Urban experiments offer a framework for arranging tools, materials, and people to promote change in a controlled way, and then to evaluate and learn from that change [20; 27].

While long-term planning processes have defined approaches and procedures for building a collaborative approach, in short-term activities such as urban experiments or temporary solutions, the role of the community is not clearly defined and can therefore be very diverse. The potential to transform city centre streets and vacant areas into user-friendly urban spaces and the impact of those transformations on the city's liveability were recently tested by Riga municipality. Urban experiments in Riga varied in scale and form, resulting in street pedestrianization, urban gardens, and other temporary initiatives, which allowed more space for walking and cycling, street sales, social events and other activities. The aim of the research is to explore processes of testbed planning with regard to the role of community participation in different phases of the experiment in Riga.

Methodology

This research is based on a three-step approach to data collection, processing, and analysis. This allowed analysis of the urban experiment process from a diverse perspective including wider public, professionals and community groups (NGOs).

Identification of Experiment Phases

“Urban planning has been recast as a dynamic and fluid process that needs to be constantly adapted to the interactions between “people, place and capital flows” [14]. There is a tendency for public engagement processes to proceed with public consultation after main critical decisions have been made. For this reason, there is a need to understand at which points and how the public is expected to contribute [1]. Urban experiments may work as just one important step in a multi-phase collaboration process. Based and adapted from AlWaer et al., 2021, the following phases and the approach of stakeholder engagement in an urban experiment are analysed (Fig. 1):

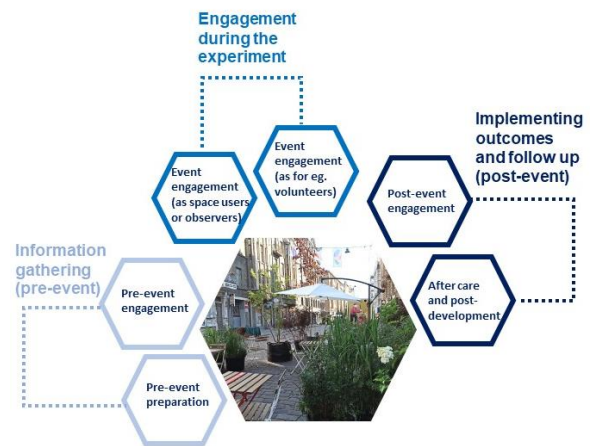


Fig. 1. Urban experiment phases
[A.Korolova based on AlWaer, et al. [1]]

- **information gathering (pre-event)** - to identify issues to be addressed, decide on the type of processes and activities, devising inclusion strategies, publicising the event, agreeing with local stakeholders on intended aims, objectives and outcomes, etc.
- **face-to-face collaboration / engagement during the experiment**
- **implementing outcomes and follow up (post-event)** – important as allows to create shared ownership of the follow-on activities and their outcomes.

Up-to-date Urban Challenges and Case Selection of Urban Experiment Process and Results

Raising concerns related to climate change caused challenges and a growing awareness about the positive features of car-free urban zones has driven a growth of interest in summer urban experiments around the world. Moreover, car-free settings are proven to have a positive impact on human health, by providing opportunities for physical activity, social inclusion and creating more liveable urban environment [2; 15; 24]. Walking safety and comfort for pedestrians makes the essence of a liveable city, therefore smooth pedestrian routes avoiding interruptions and unnecessary kerbs increase both citizen's satisfaction and traffic safety [36]. Cycling is known as a sustainable mode of transportation which is affordable and has no environmental impacts [32; 46]. Furthermore, cycling can have a positive impact on health as it promotes physical activity and encourages spending time outdoors [41; 42]. It is widely recognised that nature in cities provides various health benefits, having a positive effect on physical and psychological wellbeing [34; 44]. Thus, also integration of community gardens has gained increasing attention as a space that has a positive impact on health, fosters a stronger sense of community and supports social inclusion [35; 38].

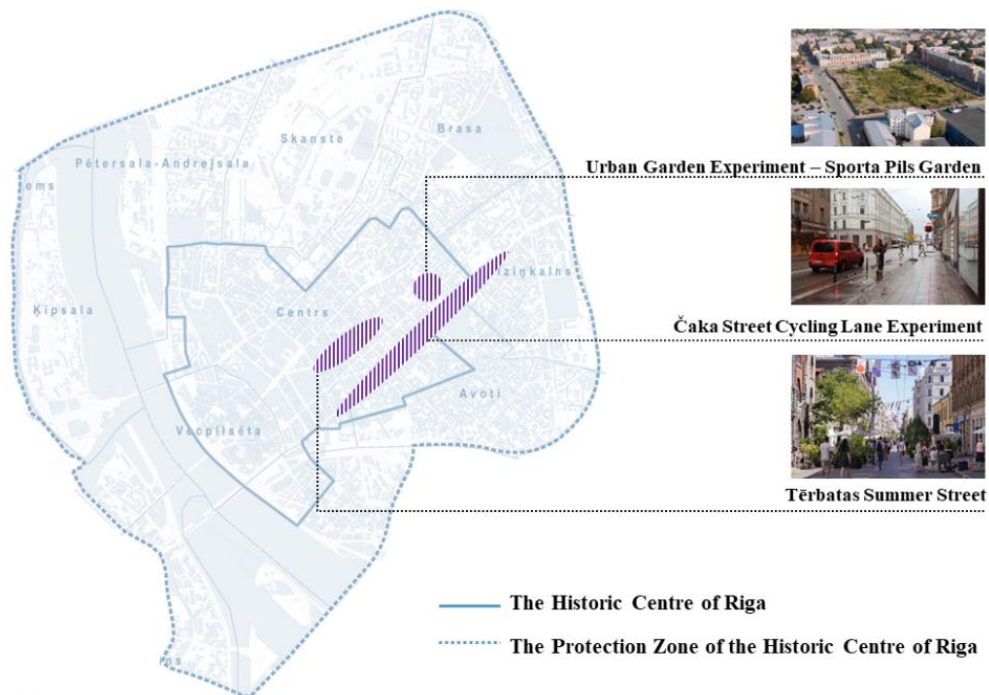


Fig. 2. Location of urban experiments in the Historic Center of Riga and its Protection Zone [figure by A.Korolova]



Fig. 3. Tērbatas street experiment I 04.01.2020 [photo by S. Treija]



Fig. 4. Tērbatas street experiment II 14.08.2020 [photo by S. Treija]

Selected cases (Fig. 2) are located in the inner city of Riga and differ in size, duration and type of the main organiser.

- *Tērbatas Summer Street Urban Experiment* - organised by Riga City Development Department.

- *Čaka Street Urban Experiment* - organised by Riga City Transport Department in cooperation with “City for People” organisation.
- *Urban Garden Experiment Sporta Pils Garden* - organised by an artist and a group of activists and volunteers.

Survey Among Urban Activist Groups

In the last decade there has been a growing interest from community in forming new and joining existing NGOs: neighbourhood associations, associations for liveable cyclist and pedestrian friendly environment, etc. Those NGOs represent an active part of a community, expressing their interest in urban regeneration processes. For this reason, this group was selected as a survey focus group. In total 17 NGOs participated in the survey.

Case study areas

Tērbatas Summer Street

Following the movement of a car-free zones, also the City of Riga tried this approach by closing to cars part of Tērbatas street for one month in 2020 and creating a liveable environment for walking, cycling and enjoying street life and cultural activities (Figs. 3 and 4). The Tērbatas street is located in the Riga Historical Center zone, and the street section from Elizabetes street till Stabu street was closed for traffic from July 17 till August 16, 2020, with the exceptions of residents and delivery access to retailers and gastronomy. This experiment was following the one-day car-free urban experiment in January 2020. Experiment aimed testing the



Fig. 5. Čaka street transformation after the experiment, 2023 [photo A. Korolova]



Fig. 6. Čaka street transformation after the experiment, 2023 [photo A. Korolova]

suitability of Tērbatas street as a pedestrian street, and evaluating the impact a car-free setting would have on local community and local businesses.

Čaka Street Cycling Lane Experiment

In Riga cycling is growing in popularity thanks to numerous urban initiatives to promote this mode of transport and free time activity. Still, cycling infrastructure especially in the inner part of the city is raising debates about necessity to invest more in development of new cycling paths, and transformation of streets towards more cycling friendly.

Thus, the experiment, which was held in 2021, aimed at testing integration of cycling infrastructure on Čaka street and evaluating the opportunities and challenges it may cause for traffic, local people and local businesses (Figs. 5 and 6). Part of the Čaka street is located in the Riga Historical Center zone and the other part in its protection zone. Originally, experiment was planned to be conducted from the 1st of December 2020 till the 1st of April 2021, still to gain more data and evaluation of seasonal changes, experiment was prolonged till the 1st of September 2021. One of the main challenges was to combine two priorities: public transport and cycling infrastructure and avoid development of traffic jams.

Urban Garden Experiment – Sporta Pils Garden

While urban gardening in Riga has more than 100-year traditions, with the first allotment gardens being introduced already in the beginning of the 20th century, community gardens here are a recent



Fig. 7. Sporta Pils Garden site before urban gardening experiment [photo A.Korolova]



Fig. 8. Sporta Pils Garden during the experiment [photo from facebook.com/Sportapilsdarzi]

phenomenon. Pilot projects, as well as community gardens on university, kindergarten or NGO territories started to appear during the last ten years and inhabitants started to understand the positive impact gardening can have on the quality of urban environment and on human health.

The community garden experiment is located on the territory where previously was located Riga Sports Palace (demolished in 2007). Developer planned to revitalize the territory by developing here business and residential premises. Still, due to the economic crises that started in 2008 development plans have been postponed. The territory stayed unused till autumn 2020 when a group of activists with a support of the local community and Riga city started the urban gardening experiment here. R. Lagzdina, who is the author of this idea, has managed to negotiate with the landowner to use the territory for urban gardening from 2020 till 2023. The territory was cleaned with the support of volunteers and prepared for the community garden (Figs. 7 and 8).

Results and Findings

The experience and outcomes of the urban experiments in Riga have been evaluated in at least three categories – among the residents, entrepreneurs, and the community partners – urban activists. The experiment results of *Tērbatas Summer Street* showed a significant increase in public open space use, thanks to the introduction of new green recreation spots. The use of outdoor cafes and other areas developed by private entrepreneurs

grew from 1,6 to up to 99 times, and 80 % of entrepreneurs observed profit increases or no changes in profit [28]. Therefore, also interviews of local entrepreneurs showed that 67,1 % of them support the idea of a totally or partly car-free street. On-site surveys of street users showed that people support closing this street to cars for certain periods, still a permanent transformation into a car-free street was perceived with uncertainty [22]. Residents' survey results in *Čaka Street Cycling Lane* experiment showed that 35 % of respondents support integration of cycling infrastructure on Čaka street, while 65 % are more likely against. 61 % of surveyed inhabitants and 58 % of surveyed entrepreneurs were supporting creation of cycling paths on other streets in Riga city centre, considering

Čaka street being not the best option. Following this data and analysis of cycling path use intensity, Riga City Council Transportation Department decided to create a permanent cycling path only on one side of the street, moreover, new public amenities and greenery was created. *Sporta pils dārzi* became one of the most recognized urban experiments because of a longer – 3 years long implementation period. Already in 2021, the territory offered 150 gardens, 12 m² each, being arranged to local inhabitants. The experiment area allowed space and urban gardening opportunities for about 200 people. The area had also a spot for public events and picnics. The project got an international recognition and was selected as a Finalist of the European Prize for Urban Public Space, 2022.

TABLE 1

Overview of the themes and sub-themes included in the survey of the neighbourhood activists focus group [developed by authors]

Theme	Sub-theme
Overall attitude towards urban experiments and the role of community engagement	Impact of community engagement on development of the city
	Community engagement in urban experiments
	Importance of certain urban experiment phases
Attitude, experience and desired changes related to community engagement process in urban experiments in Riga	Urban experiment engagement experience
	Desired community engagement in urban experiments
	Specific recommendations

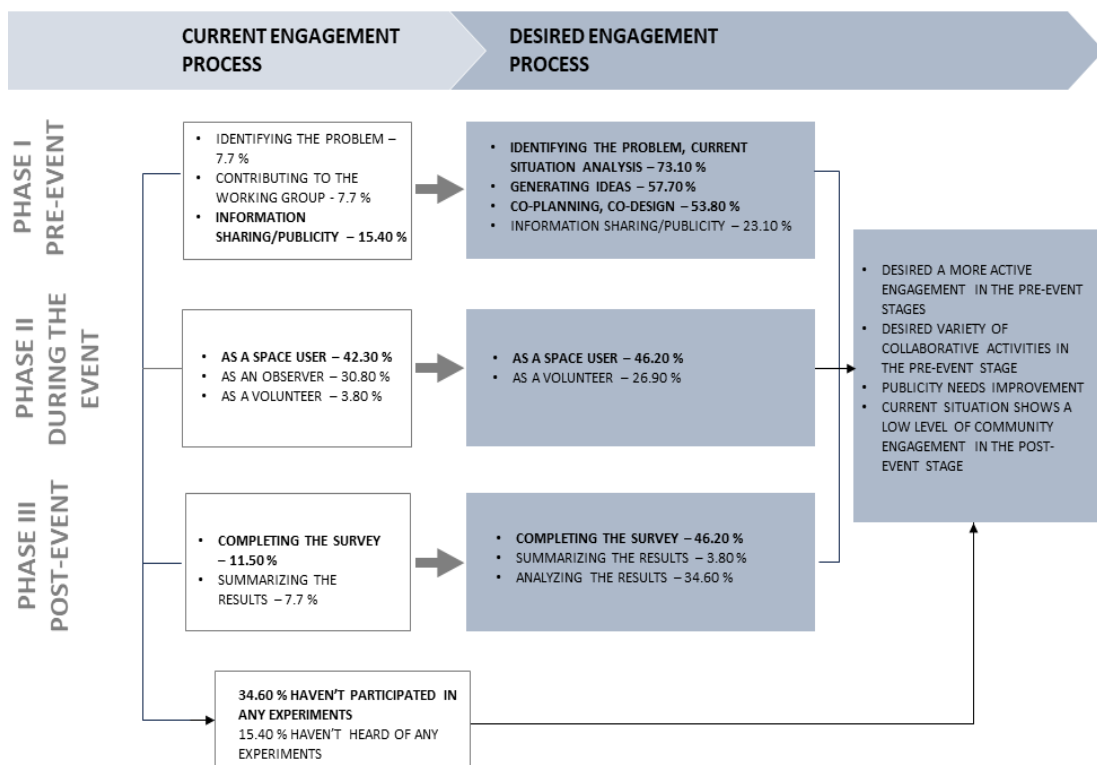


Fig. 9. Summary of the current and desired community engagement in urban experiments' process [A. Korolova based on the survey results conducted by authors of this article in 2023]

The activity of the community participation differs from case to case and from phase to phase, showing stronger engagement of the community partners in the early phases of designing or implementing the project rather than in the final phase of gathering the outcomes and analysing the results and impact of the project. To evaluate the urban experiments' outcomes and to identify the role of the communities in the preparation and implementation of them, a focus group survey was held among the neighbourhood activists in the summer of 2023 (Table 1). About 70 % of the respondents considered the preliminary phase of gathering information to be the most important for a successful urban experiment process, while about 20 % preferred engagement during the experiment, and the remaining 10 % saw the importance of the final – post-event phase. Most respondents admitted that they have participated in urban experiments as users of public open spaces or observers, pointing out that community engagement is an important instrument of urban development nowadays, and no decision-making can be considered qualitative without it. Some critical remarks were expressed about not always clearly understanding the expected outcomes, weak monitoring, and insufficient analysis of mid-term results. Some reflections indicated that the city is not a place for experiments but a place that should offer a good and inclusive living environment; and, while community involvement is an important element, neighbourhood development needs to be planned by professionals as a complex approach. The overall evaluation shows that more than 80 % of the respondents consider community participation to have a positive impact on the city's development, and up to 90 % consider urban experiments encouraging community participation.

Comparison between the current engagement in Riga experiments and the desired one showed, that respondents prefer a more active engagement in the pre-event phases, and with a more diverse choice of pre-event activities would likely contribute to several ones. Currently, there is a low activity in the post-event phase, still the survey showed that there is a potential to have more response from community, as almost half of the respondents would likely complete the post-event surveys and more than one-third would likely contribute to analysis of collected data (Fig. 9). Publicity can still be considered as a point requiring improvement, with the need to disseminate information about all experiment phases and engagement opportunities.

Discussion

The growth of successful examples of citizen-initiated urban activities indicates a paradigm shift in relation to the circle of urban creators and their role [5; 18]. Policy makers are now interested in moving to horizontal partnerships between the state, citizens and civil society organizations [29]. Consequently, such approaches can also be suitable for institutionalized planning processes, especially since there are increasing cases of synergy between informal and formal processes, in which citizen activism can be one of the driving forces [4; 39].

Experimental activities are often formed on the basis of a broad socio-political movements. They are often related to the specific needs of small groups of residents in a local context, such as the creation of a playground or the improvement of sports facilities. Over time, these practices can expand to a wider urban and regional scale, turning into full-fledged socio-political movements. Examples of such activity are increasingly the efforts of engaged culturally motivated groups that aim to collaborate with urban authorities on specific spatial events or projects [10].

Since experimental activities can be diverse both in terms of the goals to be achieved and in terms of the actors involved, their impact on the institutional context is also different [45]. Urban experiments can lead to wider institutional changes. Often this is precisely the impetus for urban experimental activities, during which justifications for new forms of governance are found, or social interests are given greater powers [7; 16; 31].

The strategic approach to stakeholder engagement stems from the experimental nature of the activity [21]. The participants of the experiment can be both multinational corporations (e.g., in experiments dedicated to the theme of Smart cities) and local communities (e.g., Transitions Towns activities). It is precisely as a result of urban experiments that the balance of mutual forces of the involved parties can be changed, giving both additional knowledge and opportunities to influence the results [17; 20].

Although the practice of urban experiments initiated or directed by urban activism is gaining more and more importance in many places, they are often excluded from urban policy processes due to their informal and rebellious nature. Consequently, the internal organization of communities and their ability to cooperate with public and formal institutions becomes a prerequisite for a successful outcome [30; 40].

Conclusions

Urban experiments provide diverse intersections between practice and theory. They increasingly shape the activities of cities trying to transform themselves and occupy the efforts of scholars from across a range of traditions to understand this process.

Community engagement in street experiments involves different phases: brief and focused pre-event preparation, pre-event engagement and briefing, engagement during the experiment, post-event engagement, aftercare, and development. To ensure the successful preparation, conducting and analysing the experiment results, involving the citizens in each phase is essential.

While urban experiments aim to test transformations towards a more liveable, greener urban environment, a higher satisfaction with the

process and its results comes along with a higher level of community engagement in all experiment phases.

Urban experiments comprise a variety of experimental logics and thus can be organised in diverse ways, leading to contradictory ideas of what constitutes an experiment. Regardless of the type of urban experiment, it should follow a precise aim and define expected outcomes so that it's apparent to the community because an experiment in a particular place should happen.

Limitations of urban experiments should also be considered: representative structure of involved parties' group, available timeframe for these experiments as well as a problem of a long-term sustainability and assessment of impact.

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Kopsavilkums. Sakarā ar pilsētu reģenerācijas jautājumu pieaugošo sarežģītību, daudzās pilsētās tiek meklēti jauni neformāli sadarbības mehānismi, lai nodrošinātu efektīvāku iedzīvotāju grupu iesaisti un pārstāvniecību pilsētvides kvalitātes uzlabošanā. Lai pārbaudītu pilsētvides attīstības idejas, pēdējos gados kā efektīvs plānošanas instruments tiek attīstīts jēdziens "pilsētvides eksperiments". Pilsētvide tiek aplūkota kā radoša laboratorija dažādu iniciatīvu un inovāciju ieviešanas testēšanai. Rīgā pēdējo gadu laikā ir testētas iespējas pārveidot pilsētas centra publiskās ārtelpas par lietotājam draudzīgām pilsēttelpām. Šī raksta mērķis ir izpētīt pilsētvides eksperimentu plānošanas procesus, ņemot vērā kopienas līdzdalības lomu eksperimenta plānošanas, ieviešanas un rezultātu analīzes fāzēs. Pēc izklāsta raksts noslēdzas ar diskusiju par faktoriem, kas ietekmē sabiedrības līdzdalību sadarbības pārvaldībā, tostarp komunikācijā, interešu līdzsvarā un iedzīvotāju līdzdalības pakāpi lēmumu pieņemšanā.