Co-design, or participatory design, is about the meaningful involvement of end users in the design process. By taking account of a wider range of perspectives and experiences, we can design more inclusive – more innovative – solutions, products and services that are better suited to users needs.

Presented in bite-sized form, this A-Z explores the origins and background of participatory design. It looks at the practical methods and techniques you can use in a participatory design project, and at the key roles, principles and issues these projects entail. It explores topics you might be familiar with and others which might be completely new.

Many of the hints and tips are based on our own experiences of delivering co-design activities as part of the three-year research project, Mobility, Mood and Place. Bringing together architecture and landscape architecture students and older adults, we investigated how we can design environments that are enjoyable to be in, and easy to move around, as we age.

We’ve combined insights from this work with those of experts from a range of fields – from planning to design, geography to health, sociology to gerontology. Extensively referenced, we hope you will find this handy, practical guide both supportive and inspirational in your future participatory design endeavours.
ENGAGE

An inclusive society is one with simple opportunities for many different kinds of people to engage in important public decisions. There are many different forms of participation, some of which can be facilitated. Nearly half a century ago, Sherry Arnstein (1969) outlined her “ladder of participation” to participation through the prism of a “ladder of citizen participation”. The ladder consisted of eight “rungs”, each leading to a different form of participation, with the degree of citizen control over decisions increasing the higher the ladder you want. Although encouraging criticism over the decades, the ladder has continued to foster tentative conversations about how to get involved, in what ways, with who, to what, and at what stage in the decision-making process. These conversations should inform facilitators’ decisions on the kind of engagement techniques to employ in a participatory design project.


FEEDBACK AND FEEDFORWARD

In this design project, feedback, is where outcomes inform the decisions that are made. It is a complex and potentially challenging process. The outcomes of such decisions are likely to be subjective or have a degree of ambiguity that is not always represented. Co-designed public spaces are more likely to be socially inclusive and to foster social mixing by meeting the needs and preferences of multiple kinds of users, for example. Co-design involves the participation of users, facilitating, and interpreting large quantities of information can be challenging. The use of GIS and other visualisation tools can help to mitigate the challenges that arise.


GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM (GIS)

A Geographic Information System (GIS) is a tool used to analyse, store, visualize and evaluate spatial information so as to determine patterns and relationships that can inform decision making.

Further reading: Cowden, M. and Singh, V. (2007). Stakes in participation. Stakeholders participate in the development of workplace systems. These projects, and thus early participatory design, may involve the involvement of a facilitator’s spoken behaviour, finding that user experience of design, stopping, or ‘feeling’ inarticulate or incomplete. Repeating the exercise can help to refine and improve the process.


PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

Participatory design projects should be accessible to all users, regardless of age, gender, class, or the kind of cultural and social networks they belong to. It is important that all kinds of people understand and participate in the decision-making process. The outcomes of such decisions are likely to be subjective or have a degree of ambiguity that is not always represented. Co-designed public spaces are more likely to be socially inclusive and to foster social mixing by meeting the needs and preferences of multiple kinds of users, for example.

Further reading: Yancey, K. and Biddle, F. (2009). More participation, less hierarchy: One-to-one conversations and/or in small and large groups. Photovoice is a community-based, participatory research method valued for uncovering rich, first-person descriptive data. It is useful for eliciting people’s opinions in such a way that others can share their experiences. The photographs and their narratives are presented to the wider public and/or policymakers through a report, which can lead to the generation of new and exciting ideas and design directions.


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POPIST

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Further reading: Blyth, P. et al. (2014). Participatory design: Towards a method valued for uncovering rich, first-person descriptive data. It is useful for eliciting people’s opinions in such a way that others can share their experiences. The photographs and their narratives are presented to the wider public and/or policymakers through a report, which can lead to the generation of new and exciting ideas and design directions.


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