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Individual Assignment

*Citizens' involvement in public spaces design process:
the case of Elgeseter Gate*

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Abstract

Elgeseter gate is in the heart of many projects for the municipality of Trondheim. There is a desire to increase attractiveness, to transform the area in a place at human scale and inclusive, to add some green areas for a safer future and to limit the use of cars. There is therefore an obvious challenge to rethink the area and its urban facilities and public spaces to offer a nicer, more sustainable and liveable area to its citizens.

This study question the participative approaches to design public spaces in Elgeseter gate. Based on a literature review and an experimentation of citizens' involvement, this study explains why participative approaches are a key element to make better urban designs that contribute to city life and residents' well-being, and it explores the different participative tools that could be relevant for the Elgeseter gate district.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Nowadays, more and more people move from the rural to the urban areas. This context of fast urban areas expansion enlightens the need to pay attention to the urban facilities and spaces and their design. Public places play a key role in the well-being of its inhabitants. Elgeseter gate is in the heart of many projects for the municipality of Trondheim. There is a desire to increase attractiveness, to transform the area in a place at human scale and inclusive, to add some green areas for a safer future and to limit the use of cars.

There is therefore an obvious challenge to rethink the area and its urban facilities and public spaces to offer a nicer, more sustainable and liveable area to its citizens.

1.2. Case study description

Elgeseter gate is an important street of Trondheim: it is the main road to the city center from the south. It goes from StudentSamfundet towards Lerkendal. It has a total length of one kilometre.

Historically, it was the road to enter the city from the south. Before the cars era, it has a width of 20 metres and the road was shared between tramway, bicycles and pedestrians. By then, it was a nice area, popular for living with dwellings and shops. With the arrival of cars, there was a paradigm shift and the municipality increased the width of the street to 34 metres in 1950.

Now, the street is the main access road to the city, it is connected directly to the main highways and to the E6. It is mainly designed for cars, there is no tramway any longer, and pedestrians and bicycles do not feel welcome and safe in the street. Citizens wish for a better quality of life with less air and noise pollution and nicer meeting places.



Figure 1: Location of Elgeseter gate in the city of Trondheim (*plan: Clémence Magnière*)

1.3. Scope and purpose of the study

Nowadays, Elgeseter gate is characterized by high traffic, a lot of noise, and air pollution. It also acts as a barrier for the area and is facing a lot of issues. The street and its neighbourhood are not welcoming for citizens: they do not offer nice public or meeting space.

However public space are central to political and social life in cities. (Collins, Stadler 2020) Public places can be defined as “space to which people normally have unrestricted access and right of way”. (Sendi, Goličnik Marušić, 2012) There are open places, publicly accessible where citizens can gather, and go for group or individual activities. There are the theatre of protesting, socializing and encountering difference. Public places are a key element for cities: they contribute directly to the well-being of urban residents and the reputation of cities for vibrancy and livability. (Collins, Stadler 2020) It is therefore essential to pay attention to public spaces in our cities, even more these days with more and more people moving from rural to urban areas.

Except Elgeseter park close to StudentSamfundet, the space landscaped next to Bøker og Bylab or Finalebanen which is a park but not directly related to Elgeseter gate, there isn't any public space proposed to the citizens in the area. The street is designed for cars and forgot citizens and their well-being.

There is a urgent need to rethink the city at human scale as authors such as Jacobs, Churchill, Gehl and others claim it. “It is the people who make the city” (Churchill, 1962). People are the ones who live and use the urban spaces every day. The city should be designed for and with them. Involving them in the design process of public spaces sounds obvious to make a better, nicer and more adapted city to its inhabitants.

If involving citizens in the design process of public places is obvious, the question is now, how and with the help of which methods could the cities involve the citizens?

This study focuses on the case of Elgeseter gate, and has been driven by the following research question:

How to design public spaces in Elgeseter gate by involving citizens?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Relevance of citizens involvement in public spaces design process

Public place contributes to urban life. Public spaces should be designed for and by the citizens. There is a dual interaction between people and the urban planner. (De La Pal, 2018) Good designed public spaces, made for the people, lead to the creation of a living space that inspire the people (Rogers, 2010). While, a project designed with the citizens contributes to a collective appropriation of the area and a positive identification of users with their own contributions. (De La Pal, 2018).

Everybody should have the right of an urban life, the right to the city. (Lefebvre, 1966) Recreating and rethinking the city should be part of a common and collective mission, supported by the city.

Involving citizens in the process is important. Cities have to find a new role and strengthen the citizens' role in public projects and in the decision-making, without losing the meaning of the democratic nature of urban planning. (De la Pal, 2018) Architects and urban planners also need to accept the evolution of their role. "The architect is no longer fundamentally a technocrat at the service of government, in order to become associated with local organisations that mediate between the state, civil society and economic players, often in opposition to the latter and also to the state". (Sanchez de Madariaga, 2000)

Involving citizens in the design process of public spaces means listening to them, their needs and ideas for the cities. They are the ones who live and use the city in the everyday life. It seems essential and obvious to take into account their ideas. Combining citizens' desires with architects and urban planners knowledges can create rich and complete projects and public places. If every stakeholders come from broaden horizons and bring what they know best to the project, it gives it a transversal approach and it enriches it a lot.

2.2. The need of public spaces according to sustainable development goals (11)

The United Nations established 17 sustainable developments goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all its members. Among all these goals, the goal number 11, sustainable cities and communities aim to provide better urban areas.

The objective of the goal 11 is to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". In other words, with the actual context of fast urban areas expansion this goal

intends to give to everyone an access to essential resources and services: food, water, energy, dwelling and transport. It also focuses on air pollution and supports resilient solutions including sustainable development and participative approaches.

In the perspective of Elgeseter gate, this goal is relevant as the street is lacking some nice areas. It is also a great opportunity to experience participative approaches.

3. Methodology

This chapter of the study introduces the methodological choices made for this project. To study and work on the research question, the methodology was developed into two parts: the first part was a literature review, which has for main objective to establish references of citizens' involvement in the design process of public spaces and the tools we can use for citizens' participation experimentation. Then, the second part of the methodology was an experimentation. The objective of this experimentation was to design a public space in Elgeseter gate for and with the citizens.

Combining these methods led to a general overview of the relevant tools for citizens' participation for Elgeseter gate and gave the opportunity to process one of them.

3.1. Literature review

At the beginning of this study, a literature review was established. The purpose of this literature review was to gather references and tools about citizens' involvement in the design process of public spaces. Reading through these scientific articles helped to identify which solutions and tools could be considered regarding the case of Elgeseter gate.

Moreover, scoping with the literature review was also relevant because it permitted to identify the gaps or lacks in the themes covered by this study.

The ideas and tools relevant for Elgeseter gate and identified through the literature study are introduced in the chapter 4.1 of this study.

3.2. Participative approach: experimentation

One of the aim of this study was to contribute to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal number 11 "sustainable cities and communities" which encourages to develop participative approaches. In this perspective, this study developed a qualitative method based on an experimentation involving citizens regarding public spaces in Elgeseter gate.

The objective of this experiment was to involve citizens in the design process of one chosen public space in Elgeseter gate.

3.2.1. The relevance of an experimentation

The question of this study is "how to design public spaces in Elgeseter gate by involving citizens?". After reading through scientific articles introducing tools of citizens' participation, it was relevant for this study to propose an experimentation to illustrate what could be a participative approach in Elgeseter gate.

3.2.2. The different steps of the experimentation

Developing a participative approach to enrich this study with a real experiment for Elgeseter gate required organization. It was essential to proceed step by step and ensure that every step was clearly defined. The following figure 2 shows the different steps which will be introduced afterwards.

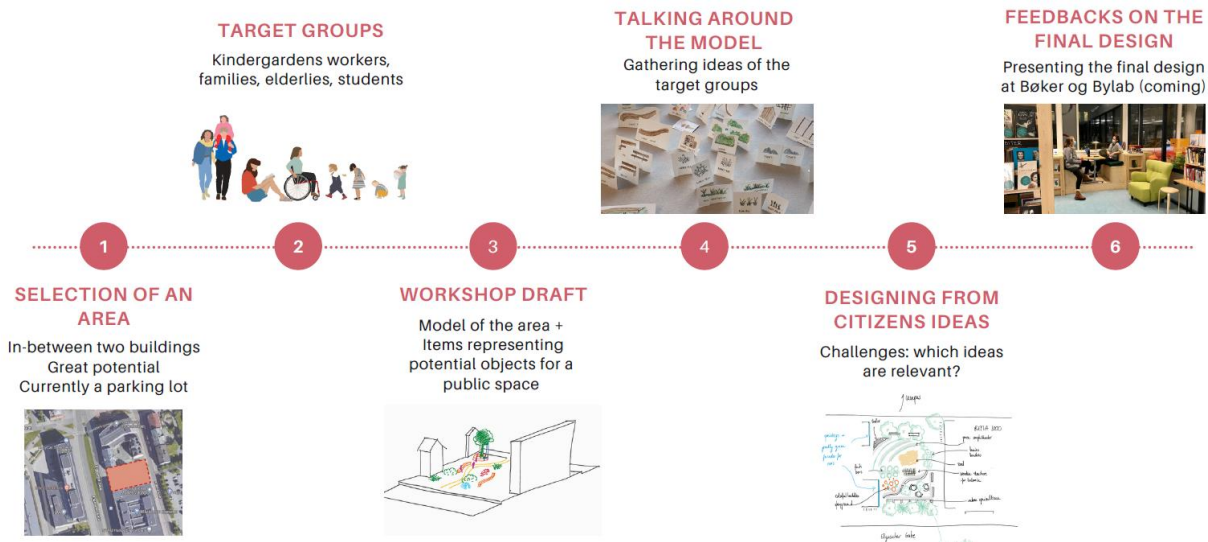


Figure 2: Timeline for the experimentation

Selection of an area for the experimentation

The first step was to select an area with a great potential to welcome a public space and justify why this particular area is relevant for this experiment.



Figure 3: The selected area for the experimentation identified in red on the picture (source: google maps)

The selected area is located on Elgeseter gate 53, as shown in the figure 3. It is currently a parking lot which is underused: during week days, there are up to ten cars and a lot of empty space next to it. What is more, there is a big outdoor parking lot next to it and another indoor parking lot in the neighbour building. This space has a huge potential to connect Elgeseter gate to its surroundings and to welcome a nice public space for people. It is close to Bøker og Bylab, the shop Rema 1000, NTNU facilities and the bus stop Hesthagen.

This area is a good opportunity to show that empty space between buildings have great potential to welcome public space and contribute to urban life.

Identifying the target groups

Then, it was important to identify the target groups of this experimentation. The target groups are the citizens concerned about a public space in Elgeseter gate, so basically all the people walking through the selected area and who could possibly stop by. After some talks with the Silje the coordinator of Bøker og Bylab Elgeseter gate, the following target groups were defined as relevant for the experimentation: the kindergardens workers, the children and the families, the elderlies and the students.

People working in the area were not defined as a target since they visit only their office buildings and leave the area as soon as their work day is over. Whereas elderlies, families and children are relevant target groups as they express a lack of public spaces in the area to stop by. Students were also defined as a target group since a lot of NTNU facilities are located in the surroundings.

Defining how to involve citizens

Once the area was selected and the target groups identified, it was essential to define in which way the citizens would be involved in this project. It was decided to develop a tool not found in the scope of the literature review: involving citizens by having an interactive talk around a model of the area. A little model at scale 1/75 of the area was built. Some potential objects for a public space were also created. The idea was then to bring this model and little items to the citizens, talk with them about the project and let them put on the model the objects they would like to see in the public space and ask them why.

Meeting the citizens

After defining the participative tool for this project and building it, it was time to meet the target groups identified. Meeting the citizens and get the opportunity to talk with them about what they would like to see in a potential new public space for Elgeseter gate was a really enriching process for the project.

Organizing a workshop with all the target groups were too demanding within the given time. It was therefore decided to meet the different target groups separately. They all gave a lot of feedbacks and ideas and were quite enthusiastic about the project.



Figure 4: The model and its items used during the experimentation (picture: Clémence Magnière)

Designing from citizens and getting feedbacks on the final design

Once the ideas from the target groups were gathered, the real challenge was to design the public space from the citizens' ideas. Their ideas didn't match with each other's. The challenge was therefore to find a balance between ideas and create a place where each target groups could find something. This part will be further developed in chapter 4.2 of this study.

The first plan was to present the final design of the project to the involved citizens at Bøker og Bylab, in order to introduce them the choice made and get their opinions on the final design. Due to a lack of time, this part has been postponed to January 2023.

The methods introduced previously will provide results that are presented in the next chapter. The complementarity of these methods permits to propose a global and rich approach to the research question.

4. Presentation and analysis of the results

This chapter introduces the tools and outcomes of the experimentation found in the research part based on the methodology presented previously. The results are divided into the two main methods used to answer the research question.

4.1. From the literature review

Quality of life is linked with the ability of the communities to determine their conditions of everyday life. In Potenza, in Italy, they transformed a parking into a garden with children playground, spaces for walking, reading and welcoming some cultural events. They organized a workshop where they encouraged the citizens to build themselves the public space. Small actions and workshops were organized among the project. On site, citizens had to explore their needs through their senses and map everything. Citizens felt responsible for the public space they renovated. They felt useful and considered as important actors for the project. They invested themselves in the project, to fill it with the local culture.

Many cities organize meetings and debates when they want to involve citizens in their projects. If this is a good way to get an overview of what the different stakeholders would wish to see or get their opinions, it is important to make sure that the people taking part in these meetings and debates are representative of the citizens.

In United Kingdom, in 2002, a program entitled People Making Places was created by Public Arts. The idea was to push cities, towns and districts within the county to work together to create sustainable communities. It was a participative approach with the attempt of involving a wide range of people to improve the quality of urban design. They created a moving festival which celebrated particular public space and would contribute to generate consideration for the future. They transformed temporarily some spaces and roads. Reply cards were prepared to give the visitors the opportunity to discuss their opinions, comments, hopes and dreams for their district. This project attempted to gather local citizens and to encourage them to get involved for their own communities.

Other methods such as games are also often used by municipalities. They are particularly efficient when they want to involve children. It can be either games during a workshop, or games on site during a visit or a walk.

Placemaking is also a key notion in this issue: it is a hands-on process which attempts to improve the quality of public spaces and their access by focusing on the physical, cultural and social identity of the place. It is a participative approach to shape and design public space. It was developed by the urban planner Fred Kent in the 1970s. It begins at the smallest scale and involves citizens in all kinds of projects. "When people of all ages, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds can not only access and enjoy a place, but also play a key role in its identity,

creation, and maintenance, that is when we see genuine placemaking in action” were saying Project for Public Spaces in 2020.

Many tools to involve citizens exist. They can be adapted to each project. They can evolve and become unique to make the best out of the participative approach. But they are really important because they are a key element to gather the desires and wishes of the citizens about their towns, streets and public places.

4.2. Experimentation: involving citizens in the process of one public space in Elgeseter gate

4.2.1. Feedbacks from the citizens with the model

Silje, the coordinator from Bøker og Bylab was the first person to take part in this experimentation. Her main wish was to see more green and wood in this public space. She said she would like to see the place as “a green lung for Elgeseter gate”. She also said that she would like to have some berry and fruit trees in the area. She added that the design should avoid toxic or dangerous trees as a lot of children would probably go to this public space. Then, she also wished for benches to sit and have a rest or a break. Finally, she was really enthusiastic about urban agriculture, she thinks it could be really nice for elderlies and is convinced that it could be a good way to encourage people to involve themselves for their district.

During one of my time at Bøker og Bylab, I had the opportunity to discuss with a group elderlies living in the district before their sport session. They wished to have a quiet place, “no, we don’t want to see these kind of playgrounds in this public space” said one of them when he saw the little item representing playground for children, he continued saying “they have plenty of them in the city, we need a quiet and peaceful place”. They imagine buying a coffee at Rema 1000 and then coming to the public space, sitting on benches around a little fountain and drinking peacefully their coffee. One of them placed the trees on the model in order to create a barrier to protect the public space from the visual and noise pollution of the street.

I also had the opportunity to discuss briefly with a dad and his son. They basically gave me the same ideas, but they would love to see a playground in the public space. The child was playing with the items on the model.

After these rich talks, I went to Gartneriet barnehage with the model and the items and discuss with two workers from there. They were really enthusiastic about the project. They think there is a big need of public space in the district, especially to welcome children and their families. They wish to see a lot of colours in this public space, playgrounds, they liked the ideas of a wooden structures, suggested some specific playgrounds by showing some references on their phones. They asked if it would be possible to put a shelter in order to bring the children eating

outside but being protected in case of bad weather. And finally they said that children really enjoy playing in the sand and going up and down from structure. They also like to hide themselves, so that it would be nice to have some element where the children would think they are hidden but that the parents or kindergartens workers would still be able to keep an eye on them. They also suggested an artist intervention for the blind façades, to make them funnier. In the end, they enlightened the fact that it would really important to create a barrier which would keep the children from going to the street, as Elgeseter gate in safe for children.

Finally, I also discussed with some students. They wished for a nice place with green areas, some places to sit, hang out with friends and have a drink.

All these feedbacks were really interesting. Discussing with the different target groups to understand their needs and mind-sets about their district was enriching.

4.2.2. Designing the public space from citizens ideas

Once the ideas from the target groups were gathered, it was time to design the public space from the citizens' ideas. Here was the real challenge. Elderlies wished for quiet and peaceful areas. How could it match with the playground imagined by the kindergartens workers?

The challenge was to find a balance between the ideas and create a place where each target group could find something. It was impossible to put all the ideas in the project and it wouldn't have make any sense. Choices and decisions had to be made.

The main idea was to use vegetation as a structure for the public space to give each target group the atmosphere they wished for. Trees and urban agriculture would also play a key role in protecting the children from the street by creating a vegetal barrier. Paintings on the façade and colourful playground would play a key role in creating a sense of identity to the place. Then, everyone could find something: shelter to go in case of bad weather, playgrounds, trees, fruits and berry trees, table and benches, wide space to sit in the grass, sand and wooden structure.

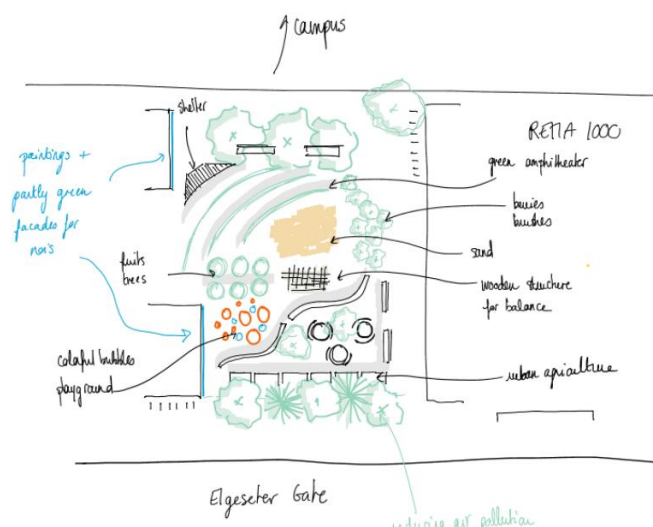


Figure 5: One of the first sketches made after gathering the feedbacks

4.2.3. Including the group research in the design

Designing this public space was also the opportunity to include results and recommendations about how to tackle air pollution, reduce noise pollution and offer safer areas to pedestrians, from the group study. It was therefore decided to include vegetation to one of the blind façade, in order to reduce the impact of noise pollution. And the trees were carefully chosen in order to tackle air pollution.

5. Discussion

This chapter aims to discuss this study. First, there is an overview of the process implemented for the experimentation: the chapter 5.1. introduces the positive feedbacks but also the limitations of the process, and some suggestions to improve it. Then, the chapter 5.2. introduces the different methods relevant to involve citizens in Elgeseter gate.

5.1. Positive feedbacks on the experimentation and limitations

The process of involving citizens in the design process of one public space for Elgeseter gate was enriching.

Interacting around a model of the area was relevant: it helps them understanding the volume and the space of the area. They felt involved and listened to. A real desire to participate and contribute to the transformation of the area by explaining their ideas and visions for the district appeared.

The small objects to put on the model helped them to stimulate their ideas and they were really enthusiastic about this project. Feeling involved, listened to, made them confident and willing to participate in the design of this public space. They had a lot of ideas to share, even some new ones that were not necessarily on the objects, but that they could show from pictures on their phones for instance.

What is more, it was really nice to get the opportunity to get feedbacks from different target groups for this project. It definitely made it more complex to design, but it enriched the project and made it more realistic.

However, if this experimentation was mainly a success, it had also some limitations.

Having some individual meetings with the different target groups was on the one hand interesting because it permitted them to express themselves freely and really say what they wish and imagine for the project. But on the other hand, they did not get the chance to understand each other's needs and they could not build the public space together. To enrich the process, we could imagine to start with individual meetings as it was done for this study and then organize a global workshop where the ideas of everyone are presented. At first, every target groups would have the opportunities to think and talk freely, but then they would face the reality and the desire of each other's. Together, they could try to debate and talk to understand and find some common grounds.

The model of the area was maybe too simple: at first, citizens were expressing their ideas orally, so we had to place the items on the model ourselves to then initiate them to do the same. To improve the process, the model could be a bit more detailed and show a larger part of the surroundings: that would help the citizens to identify the area and feel more realistic.

The language may also have been a barrier: we were speaking in English with them, it could have been a barrier sometimes for them to say precisely what they imagine.

Finally, within the short amount of given time, it was not possible to expose and present the final design to the citizens, to get their feedbacks both about the process they have been involved to and their opinions about the final design. This is planned to be done in January 2023 at Bøker og Bylab Elgeseter gate.

Offering a participative approach through an experimentation was enriching for the project: citizens felt listened to and involved. They gave great ideas and were enthusiastic about the project. Interacting around a model of the concerned area is relevant but some details could be improved to make this process even better and more efficient.

5.2. Summary of the different methods to involve citizens in the design process of public spaces

The following methods to involve citizens are relevant for Elgeseter gate:

- Interacting around a model and little items: process which permits to help citizens visualizing the area and stimulating their ideas
- Games: very inclusive, children can be involved and families and kindergardens were identified as target groups for Elgeseter gate study
- Digital tools: realistic, but can cut off the imagination of citizens
- Meetings and debate with different stakeholders
- Workshop and walking on site
- Encouraging citizens to build by themselves urban objects

We could also imagine to create a temporary festival or urban exhibition which could suggest curiosity and initiate the citizens to questions themselves about their district.

This study came up with different method to involve citizens in public spaces design process. Many tools exist and can be used to propose a participative approach in public projects. Depending on which kind of the project the city wants to involve its citizens into, there is a need to identify and define the right tools. The tools can also evolve to adapt to each project.

6. Conclusion

Elgeseter gate faces a lot of issues. To tackle them and create urban life in this area it is essential to involve citizens in the process of public projects. The city has to give them the opportunities to express their wishes but it also has to encourage them and to empower them with a sense of common and collective mission to rethink and redesign the urban spaces. Citizens are the end-users of the city's projects, they have the right to give their opinions and express their ideas.

Citizens' participation is obvious and needs to be implemented more and more in the coming projects if Trondheim wants to propose areas that are well-designed for its inhabitants, at human scale and which contribute to their well-being.

Public places are a central element in our cities: they contribute to the creation of a urban life, participate in the well-being of the citizens and are the theatre of many group or individual activities. What is more, nowadays, people move from the rural to urban areas and Trondheim keeps seeing its population growing. It is therefore essential to pay attention and put some efforts on the public places of the cities.

Public spaces should be designed for and with the citizens. Combining citizens' ideas with the knowledges of architects and urban planners enrich the project. It leads to spaces made for the citizens, contribute in generating a sense of community and identity for the residents and is efficient from an urban perspective. For Elgeseter gate this is really relevant: the area lacks of identity. Involving citizens makes them willing to see and participate in the transformation of the area. They can identify themselves to the project and to the area.

As this study as shown, there are multiple ways to involve citizens in the design process of public places. Workshops, meetings, debates, games, any interactions with citizens can enrich a project. Each methods has some pros and cons. The key to succeed and to make the most out of a participative approach is to choose carefully which tools will be used to involve citizens in the project. The chosen tool has to be adapted to the type of project, the area, and the identified target groups. If the project is complex, a combination of different method can be relevant.

This study focuses on participative approach for the design process of public places, but it could be interesting to enlarge it to public projects and to question how the city could involve citizens in public projects.

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