

Dreaming for Real

Engaging socially excluded communities in the built and natural environment

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To dream for real

Once upon a time, somewhere back in your past, many of you dreamed of becoming an architect, or a landscape designer. For those of you who are from the privileged classes, your dream merged with reality. As long as you have reasonable ability and put personal effort into it, you had a good chance of succeeding. Socially excluded people are simply unable to dream, like you, for real. Their reality is that most of their wishes cannot come true. They have the forgetfulness of despair - their wishes have long fallen off the normal list which most of us carry around in our heads. Not only do they not aspire to professions, their life experience tells them no one is interested in them. Many socially excluded people do lead ordered lives, but at the price of moving within a very limited social space. They have low expectations. They seem to have no opinions about many life concerns and are unmotivated to transform their life circumstances. To varying degrees, many of them are disabled emotionally, spiritually, practically, and culturally. They are not consultable. What do they need in order that they too can dream for real ?

Who are the socially excluded ?

Let us come closer to the issues through telling some stories.

Not long ago I was visiting a lovely nature study centre in the middle of a park. A group of wildly excited school children were there. They were both white and ethnic minority children around 9 years old. I asked the teacher what they were so excited about. She answered, " Oh, they have just been told that there are 2 ducks on the pond, and most of them have never seen a live duck before. These children live mainly on a council estate within walking distance. However, with all the parental concerns about child abuse, none of them are allowed to play beyond the street where they live. They have never been here, and after today, I am afraid none of them will be able to or be allowed to find their way back."

A colleague of mine, who is now a well-known environmental consultant, grew up in a bleak urban area. She told me that the first tree she ever saw was in the pavement. Although since then she is a lover of the countryside and seen many wonderful wild areas of the world, she is nevertheless left with this doubt " Was the tree there first or was the pavement there first?"

A young Vietnamese woman told me that, before she was 21, her village had been burnt down 6 times. Each time they went into the jungle, returned and rebuilt their village. Here, among our ethnic communities, are people who know all about spaces, with valuable building and craft skills. But, we never ask them what they know. Imagine this community let loose on self-build !

A taxi driver, taking me to a conference venue in Bath, announced gleefully that at last he is going to retire and leave. He told me that the city has poured money continuously into the central tourist areas that I see and that just a couple of miles beyond it, where he lives it is really deprived. For him, the City Council has no interest in what people like him wants.

Coming to this conference I noticed no one balked at being surrounded by the Greco-Roman features of the neo-classical buildings of the civic centre of Cardiff. No one went around complaining of feeling like they were in Italy or Greece instead of the capital of Wales. The fact is that over time multicultural elements are absorbed into our overall consciousness. So, a challenge - why not consider culture specific features in our urban or rural landscape to mark the contemporary makeup of our multicultural society ?

A local authority rang us up because Asian teenagers had newly been regularly using one of the local green spaces to play football. Local white residents complained that they had “taken over”.

The Gateway Project in Wales enables a broad range of disadvantaged and socially excluded groups to visit and enjoy historic gardens. Their extensive list of participants is a revelation - the partially sighted, children with terminal cancer, carers, teenage mothers with their babies, the elderly, those with learning difficulties, a range of disabilities including those in wheelchairs, ethnic minority groups, schoolchildren from deprived inner city areas, those who are mentally ill, women’s groups, people with arthritis...

The Sheffield Ramblers, worked with working class primary school age children from council estates who have never walked on grass, their daily track being from the concrete of the estates to the tarmac of their schools.

A friend came to me telling me that the local authority is trying to improve the environment of their council estate. He said that they asked him what he would like, but he said to them, “ I know I want things to be better, but I really cannot tell you what to do”.

A young people’s group, coming back from a first visit to the countryside, was fired up with greening their local environment, because they loved how “ the wonderful green of the countryside just went on and on, forever” and they wanted some of it where they live.

These stories point to unfulfilled potential, lack of contact with nature, neglect, lack of vision and understanding of the mechanisms of social exclusion.

What do we need to do ?

We have now arrived at a time when, positively, the landscape professions recognise the need for consultation to inform and shape the designed environment. But, in relation to socially excluded groups, consultation only when something is about to be done to an environment is often too late. Over and over again groups are found to be unconsultable, yielding limited and low quality information. This is where local authorities and local professionals have a crucial role to play. There is a vital forerunning piece of work to be done - building and maintaining of an ongoing relationship to take socially excluded groups through the stages to meaningful consultation :

- Outreach without an immediate agenda, expressing a caring attitude and a commitment to building an ongoing relationship with socially excluded groups
- Nurturing interest, re-awakening lost agendas, and creating a sense of possibility - the most demanding developmental work of all. Here often the crunch point is the commitment of senior management to training professionals to work effectively with socially excluded groups and to resource them to imaginatively create programmes of activities which are relevant to the group they are working with
- Identifying, creating and resourcing opportunities for action - recognising the enormous significance of successful small scale first projects paving the way for progressive capacity building
- Capacity building and networking - implementing an enjoyable programme of awareness and skills, e.g. visits to a range of interesting examples of good practice, putting a group in touch with the appropriate expertise and facilitating the relationship between a group and a professional

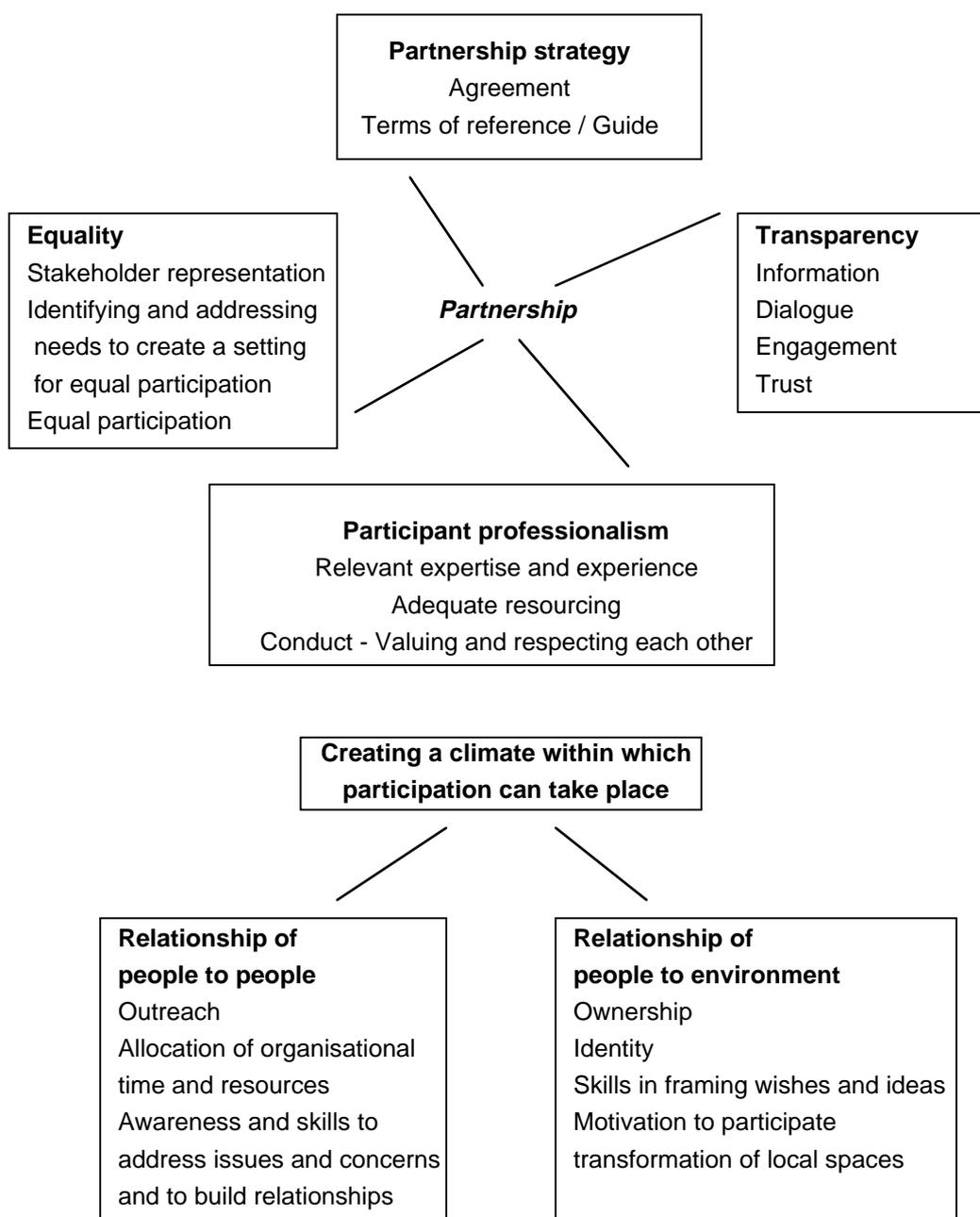
To dream for real, people need to :

- Have a sense of their own potential through acquiring knowledge and skills

- Have a sense of possibility and personal power through having connections to networks of expertise and power
- Have access to a critical minimum amount of resources to take action and gain experience
- Have faith that they are included in society's future plans

Beyond consultation to partnership

Working together involves learning for both sides. For example, alongside consulting client groups, professionals need to build their ability to read the messages which bleak environments have shouted at residents for years in order to set the comments in context. Partnerships around the public space agenda demands enormous patience and commitment, as it takes time to absorb the many different sectoral concerns which feed into it.



The diagram here is intellectually obvious, but in order to be effective, it needs to be specifically expanded to address the many complexities which I hope the stories illustrated. Those who acquire the awareness and skills to work with socially excluded groups will know that there is no set formula but you have truly arrived when in any scenario, you find that "The situation always tells me what to do, loud and clear !"

One last word - fun is inevitable in any community project when you are doing it right. Make an essential contribution to society, to a vitally needed social cohesion, and enjoy yourselves !

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