## Tessy Britton
Director of Participatory City
London

# City Neighbourhoods made by everyone for everyone

### Summary

In this talk Tessy Britton, founder of Participatory City, outlines her journey towards implementing this work at scale in one neighbourhood. Tessy describes the ideas and projects from around the globe that inspired their vision including the upsurge in citizen creativity and the corresponding shifts in city council regulation and infrastructure. Tessy outlines the analysis that led to an understanding of the gap between the desire to participate in neighbourhood projects (60%) and actual participation (3%) as a structural problem. This has resulted in the design of a new model to support the development of a dense ecosystem of accessible and attractive opportunities to participate that are beneficial to everybody. Tessy argues that it is time to stop talking about the ideal of participation and see if we can make it happen at scale in a neighbourhood and if doing that will transform a place for the long term.

### An idea, a road trip and an imagining

The starting point of this work is the idea of city neighbourhoods made by and for everyone. Embedded in this is the idea of properly inclusive participation. Lots of us have been working with participation in different forms for a long time and we know that it is not always inclusive. Many of us have been in the grip of this idea for many years. Whether we are politicians or practitioners working in health or mental health or regeneration or trying to reduce poverty, most of us think that people doing things together to make their neighbourhoods better will also make their lives better.

We have seen citizens being really creative and inspiring. Some of this is historical, there is a long legacy of people working together through co-operatives and that sort of thing. But over the last ten years we have the sense of a new generation of people working in communities together. There are examples in pockets of neighbourhoods across the country and around the world of inspiring and original things happening. This work started six years ago with a road trip to explore some of these. Examples such as the 'hacker mums' in Berkeley where parents created co-working spaces; in Rotterdam where people have taken corner shops and turned them in to community spaces where they share meals, have cups of tea with policemen and look after each other's children. We have seen a surge in 'play streets', in sharing skills, in gardening and growing and urban farm projects.

We started to imagine what all these pockets of ideas from different places might look like in one place? Imagine a neighbourhood with tens of hundreds of projects with people getting involved. It would change how that place feels to live in and it would start to create outcomes that we are all working so hard to achieve but often find very difficult. So this is the ideal and we think a lot of people would like to live in a place like this. We have spoken to over 5,000 people now around the country about this vision and they get inspired and fired up by it. It seems to be a universal vision that everyone can get excited about.

At the same time we have seen city governments being creative and inspiring and doing amazing things. There are quiet pieces of infrastructure that cities are starting to enable. Before this there were barriers to people doing things. Again a handful of examples:

**Urban Commons in Bologna** – They discovered that they had regulations that were stopping citizens doing things. They have re-written these to enable people to take action not only as parts of institutions or in groups but as individuals. Citizens now have a mandate to start shaping the city. They are forging a new pathway for Bologna especially around the idea of the commons and shared spaces.

**Gardeners of the Parisian Public Spaces** – In Paris this summer they put through new regulation which allows citizens to plant gardens in any disused spaces. You can apply for a permit and get it within 3 days.

**In Gent in 2015 they closed 16 streets for 3 months** – Citizens went a bit mad in the most delightful way. They opened street cafes, had play streets and gardens and communal meals. This was an early experiment and they are now doing a lot more.

**In Barcelona they are creating 'super blocks'** by closing the joining streets to traffic and making them available to the people who live there to become public spaces where citizen-led activity can happen.

These are just a few examples of supportive infrastructure that is happening. When you couple this with the surge in creativity in citizen activity there is an exciting mix of ideas bubbling up that we hope will gain ground.

There is also an escalation in ambition and in funding. For example the Bloomberg Mayors Challenge that gives out $10 million every two years. Similarly in Montreal they have raised $22 million for transformation work. We are seeing less of doing small things and prototyping new ideas and more of trying to create the conditions to scale up bigger ideas to have more of an impact. The aim is not just to improve the lives of people for as long as the programme runs but to actually change the place to make it more sustainable and a nicer place to live.

A quote we really like is: "What if we were able to build the foundations of a co-operative world, what would it look like?" All these little pieces of experimentation, all fragmented in different places are part of the exploration of what these foundations would look like. So the work we have been doing is thinking about how we can draw some of that together.

### A structural issue

Research shows that 3% of people are involved in a neighbourhood project in the UK while 60% of people say they would love to be involved in neighbourhood projects. Why is there such a gap? Is it a people problem or a structural problem? This work has been focusing on the structures.

We think we need to redesign participation structures and models. We need to mainstream and scale participation to make it attractive, accessible and convenient. To try to bring it out of the fringe and make it central to everyday life. This is how we will make participation inclusive.
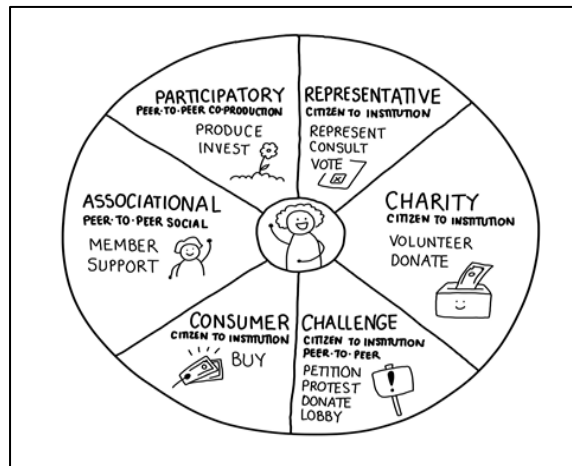
When we started this work we thought workshops were the answer to everything, But, as many people know, they are not. By and large people who come to workshops are at the top of the continuum for time, commitment and confidence. We overestimate how confident people feel. We are not criticising people who come to workshops or do neighbourhood

planning or community businesses. It is just recognising that these structures attract and are aimed at a smaller group of people with more confidence or time or education.

People often say that this type of activity is very middle class, but this is because we have structured it that way. So what kind of structures do we need for people who have two jobs, children to look after, elderly relatives to care for, who are trying to manage their mental health and get enough exercise? What kind of participation would suit these people who have a lot of demands on their time and how would it benefit them? Can we make participation attractive and beneficial to everybody?

If you were sitting at home and thinking about how you could participate in society you would see a number of possible ways. Essentially you can be a representative such as a councillor; you can work in charity, volunteer or donate money; you can campaign against things; you can buy things; you can be a member of an association or club. Then in addition there is a new type of participation that people have been inventing over recent years. It is a different model which is much more peer-to-peer and co-produced. It is practical and productive – people make things. We think a new model has emerged and time will tell how it works. The originators are a younger demographic.



There is a big difference between the demographic of local councillors (mainly over 55 and White) and people participating in these peer to peer projects.

The first five models are very well established. They have well designed and understood practices. We know how to fundraise, volunteer and campaign. These models are culturally embedded. People recognise and know how to operate them. There are also a number of professional practices associated with them. So our question was: What is the infrastructure for participatory projects? If we go back to the idea of neighbourhoods with lots of these projects built in to everyday life, what kind of structures do we need to support that and what kind of professional practice can we develop to support this?
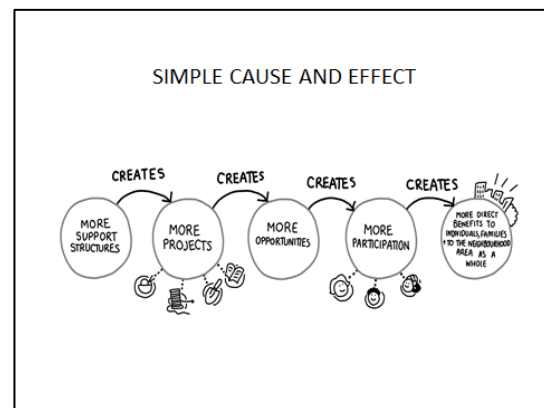
**Designing two interconnected systems**

These questions led to something unexpected. We separated out what was needed to support projects to start and grow and what was needed to participate. It became clear that these two systems have different components and different design principles. For example the components for the participatory system are a collection of many and varied participatory culture projects. The support system consists of various elements including spaces, design, digital metrics etc. We thought about what kind of support system we could create that would not require everyone with a single idea to become a mini-organisation. That is what we do at the moment, we require anyone who has an idea to get a constitution, a bank account and public liability insurance. What happens if they don't have to do that? What happens if there is a shared infrastructure that looks after insurance and metrics gathering and things can be promoted together?

So the support system is generating the participation system. Having separated these two things out, we have a better chance of scaling participation. Because some people don't

want to design and initiate projects but they will turn up to do things that are helpful and useful to them. Starting community projects is really hard. We see lots of projects dying because people get exhausted. We rely heavily on this idea of leadership and heroic people. What we are trying to do is make it more accessible and easier for people to invent things and to participate. To make it easier for people to move in and out as they have time, an hour this week, a couple of hours another week. Allowing some projects to fade and come back, some to grow and replicate. Seeing it as an ecology of projects rather than the static mini-organisations we have been intent on creating.

This can be summed up in a very simple diagram that took six years to figure out. The more support structures you have the more projects are created. The more projects you have the more opportunities it creates to participate. The more opportunities you have the more participation you get. And the more people participate the more benefit they get out of it. It seems very straightforward but it took a long time to get this level of clarity. At every stage of development we have relied on residents telling us how this benefits them and what the barriers are. We see these projects as generating excuses for people to come together, spend time in the same space and build social capital and all the things that go with that as well as saving money on meals and learning how to cook and those kind of things.



The idea of having lots and lots of opportunities to participate is fundamental to the work. When we get to scale we hope to have 70 opportunities every week, within 15 minutes of where people live, to do things with their neighbours. We are hoping to create a density of opportunity using a cup of tea or just watching people do things as really accessible starting points. Then people can plug in at whatever level of confidence and skill they are at and from there growing their interest and enthusiasm to participate further. We think it is fundamentally important to create this inclusive participation, really accessible so that everyone can benefit. So we are building structures and ecosystems for mass participation. We are not just scaling projects or programmes or consultations. We are trying to build something that will have a long life.

Building on all we have learnt from the work in Lambeth we are hoping to start at scale later this year with Barking and Dagenham in East London as a demonstration neighbourhood. We have looked in detail at the demographics and political make up and it is a fascinating place. We are in the process of raising the £7.5 million to see the project through for five years. The challenge is to show what it takes to make real this dream of "neighbourhoods made by everyone". We think it is going to take a lot of facilitation, digital thinking and learning.

We have a co-production design team that works with the council to see how this new ecology of participation and projects will work alongside services. We are moving the centre of gravity from the town hall into the neighbourhoods. We will start with five very local hubs and build mini-hubs around them and then redesign what the council does around their centre point. Making sure that the work is integrated with what is already there is an important part of this vision.

We are also trying to create a new set of indices and metrics which will be public and as clear to residents as to funders. We see residents as the frontline evaluators. If they participate and see a benefit they will turn up, if they don't, they won't. We want to show these metrics to the people who live there so they can see the progress of the transformation effort.

This was the moment when Costa Rica ceased all funding of the military and handed the funds over to the education and environment departments. The people of Costa Rica are still benefitting from this and the country is usually close to the top of the wellbeing and environmental global indices. This is just a reminder of timescale. Rather than two or five-year projects we are thinking about changing places for our grandchildren.



1 DECEMBER 1948

JOSE FIGUERES

PRESIDENT OF COSTA RICA

"The President of Costa Rica takes a mallet to the Department of Defence building, 1948."

So this is where we are at. We need to be bolder, to think at a much bigger scale and to think about much larger sums of money. We have been talking about participation and how valuable and important it is for a long time. It is time to put our money where our mouth is and say "can we do this?" Can we restructure and make this happen and can it be transformative? Because if it isn't we should stop talking about it so much. Having the resources is really important. Even though we live in times of cuts and austerity there is money out there. It has taken 18 months and 450 meetings, but we are almost there with raising the funds. There are all sorts of ways that these projects can be built, and I encourage you to think big.