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Commentary

Enhancing sustainable development by means of the Workbench Method

Sustainable development is a hopeful aspiration for most cities. However, the successful implementation of the sustainable development concept must be questioned, since our current environments are still characterized by urban sprawl, fragmentation, and quantity-driven urban developments, more than ten years after the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals. The Workbench Method was implemented in Amersfoort Municipality in the Netherlands, with the objective of enhancing spatial quality by means of participatory planning. In this commentary we argue that spatial quality is in many ways linked to sustainable development initiatives, and that the Workbench Method can thus also contribute to and enhance sustainable development, as it incorporates specific steps within a process of participation.

From spatial quality ...

As in most countries, spatial quality was not always the main focus of Dutch spatial planning policies. The Netherlands has experienced a shift in spatial planning since the 1950s (Leidelmeijer and Van Kamp, 2003) from compact-city approaches, with a focus on functionalism, to a focus on immaterial aspects, such as quality of life. The 1970s was the first time that the notion of liveability gained ground and it was not only professional expertise that was included in spatial planning, but local community inputs as well. The idea that 'everybody is an expert' (as local communities are the actual users of an area) enhanced the bottom-up approach within spatial planning processes. The 1980s brought the interconnection of natural diversity, social cohesion, and spatial planning (Hooimeijer et al, 2001), resulting in a shift towards a more interactive process in planning, focusing on long-term planning, that eventually linked to sustainable development initiatives. Since then sustainable development has manifested as a hopeful aspiration for most cities and one of the most fundamental challenges for humanity. In a global context, sustainable development implied that any economic or social development should improve, not harm, the environment (Newman, 2000). Development that is sustainable and not damaging is possible in theory, but in reality there is much politics and many challenges involved. In this commentary we aim to investigate the possibility of the Workbench Method being used as a planning tool to bridge the gap between theory and practice in sustainable development. Accordingly, the concept of sustainable development, in this context, will be elaborated, followed by an explanation of the functioning of the Workbench Method, its link to sustainable development, and the contribution it can offer.

... to sustainable development ...

The significance of sustainable development has been discussed extensively in the international literature, and it is one of the most diversely used concepts among academics and professionals in discussions about the future. It has cut across all disciplines and professions and has developed many complexities. All definitions of sustainable development imply that the world should be viewed as a system that connects space and time (IISD, 2010), inclusive of three core aspects that come from a global political process that has tried to bring together the most powerful needs of our time: (1) the need for *economic* development to overcome poverty, (2) the need for *environmental* protection upon which we all ultimately depend, and (3) the need

for *social* justice and cultural diversity to enable local communities to express their values in solving these issues (Newman, 2000). One of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development as described in Agenda 21's Chapter 23 (IISD, 2010) is broad public participation in decision making. Sustainable development and participatory planning should be closely interlinked in order to create future visions and shared decision making, as this poses a reminder of what planning is most concerned with: protecting the interests of all groups, addressing and resolving conflicts, and promoting a better quality of life for all (Abukhater, 2009). However, this objective is also problematic, as there is a lack of agreement about a desirable process (and level of participation) towards achieving sustainable development (Girardet, 1999), mainly due to people's ever-changing needs and the different perspectives of different cultures. The participation ladder (Breman et al, 2008) is usually used to guide the level of participatory planning processes, ranking them from informing, advising, consulting, and cooperating, to codeciding. But the desirable process of structured participation (as a requirement for sustainable urban planning and land-use management) is still lacking, and this was the methodology for linking the Workbench Method to sustainability initiatives. The Workbench Method was originally introduced as a planning tool to enhance spatial quality but, because of its successful participatory approach to designing qualitative living spaces, it is believed that it can also contribute to sustainable development.

... via the Workbench Method

The fourth ministerial policy document for Dutch spatial planning divided spatial quality into three elements: perceived value, user value, and future value. This notion of spatial quality was the basis on which Habiforum (a programme initiated by the Dutch government in 2005) created the Workbench Spatial Quality Method, a participatory planning approach towards spatial planning (Dauvellier et al, 2008). Underlying the Workbench Method was the assumption that spatial quality is dependent on many visions of different stakeholder groups and actors, who together can define spatial quality.

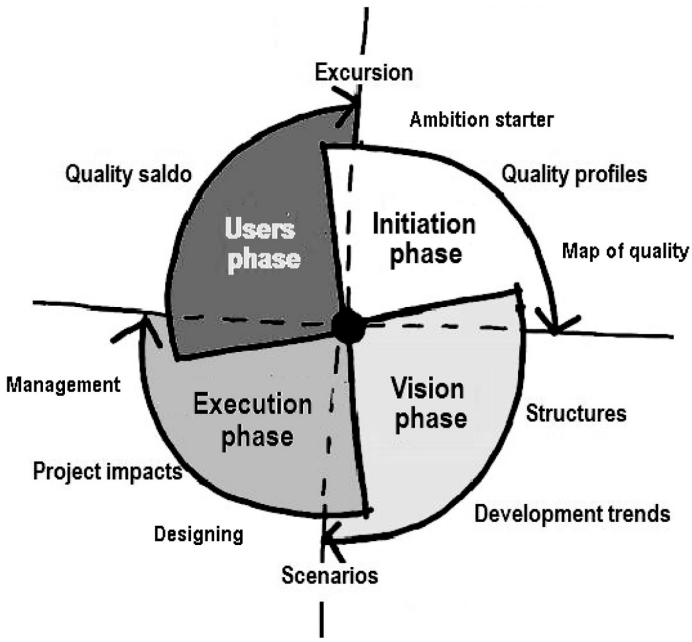

Figure 1. Phases of the Workbench Method.

The Workbench Method was thus introduced as an interactive planning method, involving multiple stakeholders in the spatial planning process. The main objective was to organize the creative spatial planning process in order to produce spatial quality. This was done by gaining an integral view on the use and experience of a certain area, from the perspectives of different stakeholders (investors, landowners, local authorities, users, experts, etc) and their different interests. Participation was central throughout the circular process containing various steps (shown in figure 1), based on (1) how the area is currently being used (determining user value: suitability and functionalism); (2) how the area is currently experienced (determining experience value: diversity, identity, and beauty); and (3) how the area should be used in the future (determining the future value: sustainability, management).

As part of the European VALUE project (Valuing Attractive Landscapes in the Urban Economy), an INTERREG IVB North West Europe Project, the Workbench Method was evaluated on the basis of two case studies in Amersfoort (the Netherlands): Vathorst and Park Randenbroek (Cilliers et al, 2010, page 32). A quick scan of nineteen cases where the Workbench Method was applied in the Netherlands, between 2001 and 2007, was also conducted. The case studies revealed the following.

Vathorst consisted of 245 ha of open space where future developments were being planned. The municipality of Amersfoort introduced the Workbench Method as part of an interactive planning process to involve the local community in future extension and development plans. Sixty stakeholders were involved in the three-day planning process. Questions were raised with regard to the level of involvement of stakeholders, evaluating whether the Workbench Method only contributes to the development of a common vision between authorities and communities in terms of future development, or whether it could also be used as a tool for implementation of the designs in practice. The Vathort case proved the necessity of community participation throughout the entire process, and as part of the final design and implementation. It proved, based on the participation ladder (Breman et al, 2008), that if the Workbench Method was only used on a level of 'informing' (implying communities inform authorities with regard to their needs and views so as to seek a common vision on future development plans), it would result in a loss of the social capital that was built up during the participation process. In light of this research, it was therefore recommended that the Workbench Method be applied on a 'cooperating' level (implying shared decision making by both communities and authorities).

Park Randenbroek, a city park in the centre of Amersfoort, was set to be redeveloped, and again the Amersfoort municipality used the Workbench Method to involve stakeholders. However, this project had more political issues to deal with, due to various subprojects, including the relocation of the hospital adjacent to the park and the expansion of the Sports Club. The redevelopment project started in 2000, but in 2002 the process was paralyzed temporarily, due to the municipal elections, but also because of community resistance to the plans. Communities believed that decisions had already been made by the authorities, without consulting the stakeholders. It was only by the end of 2004 that discussions were held and the process revived. In 2007 a new participatory trajectory was started and communities were invited to take part, guided by the Workbench Method. This time only residents took part in the process, without the cooperation of authorities. The Workbench Method was thus used on an 'informing' level, for the inhabitants to voice their opinions, but the outcomes of the process could not be incorporated into the eventual design, as they were too far adrift from the (already approved) plans of the municipality. Based on the findings of this case, it was recommended that the Workbench Method be applied from the beginning of the planning process to enhance cooperation between residents and authorities.

The quick scan conducted by Habiforum of the other nineteen cases in the Netherlands where the Workbench Method was applied between 2001 and 2007 (Dauvellier et al, 2008), was evaluated on the level of spatial planning of the case itself (local, provincial, or national level) and on the number of different stakeholders involved. It was found that only one of the cases completed all the steps of the Workbench Method (initiation, vision, execution, and user phase). This meant that the Workbench Method was mainly used at an 'informing' or 'consulting' level. Furthermore, it appeared that fewer spatial qualities were mentioned and economic value was the most prominent category of value, when only authorities were part of the planning process, the reason probably being the rigid way of thinking about and focusing on the development problems and current values, and an inability to imagine creative solutions or invest in social capital and future values. Based on the findings of the quick scans, it was recommended that diverse stakeholders be involved in capturing a wider range of values, and that more local stakeholders be involved, to prioritize green areas and future values, as local stakeholders are the actual 'users' of an area, and thus more connected to qualitative values.

The contribution

In theory, the Workbench Method is a successful participatory planning method that enhances thinking about qualities, which should, in future, result in spatial quality. In practice, the Workbench Method is still being implemented in diverse situations, and therefore its actual contribution to sustainable development and to bridging the gap between theory and practice, cannot be estimated. However, the Workbench Method is currently used as an informational tool for future development initiatives, and linkages between its current function and sustainable development objectives can be found, as captured in the matrix shown in figure 2, composed of the different values of spatial quality deriving from the method itself (perceived value, user value, and future value) in comparison with the sustainable development parameters derived from literature (social, economic, and environmental).

The following conclusions were made with regard to the Workbench Method and the contribution it can offer to enhancing sustainable development.

Social focus: The Workbench Method is based on participatory planning, thus enhancing public participation within spatial planning processes. The perceived value is captured by means of facilitation processes, stimulating communication and social interaction between different stakeholders. This in itself contributes to the social focus

		Spatial quality		
	Workbench	**Perceived value**	**User value**	**Future value**
Sustainable development	**Social**	Communication	User determines	Qualitative spaces
	Environmental	Appearance	Recreational needs	Integrative planning
	Economic	Decision making	Compliance	Feasibility of project

Figure 2. Contribution of Workbench Method to sustainable development and spatial quality.

as planning processes are driven by the particular expertise and needs of local communities, the actual users of a space. The involvement of local communities leads to a feeling of ownership, resulting in higher responsibility and shared efforts which, in the longer term, results in qualitative spaces.

Environmental focus: The Workbench Method enhances the needs of communities, which give preference to green-space values, as they are more connected to the location itself. This results in more attractive places, enhancing the appearance and perceived value. Communities seek space for recreation, relaxation, and rest (user value), whereas policy makers are more likely to consider economic values. The Workbench Method introduces a platform for this interaction between stakeholders, stimulating integrative environmental and spatial planning.

Economic focus: The Workbench Method enhances decision-making processes, resulting in coordinated planning and municipal spending. It enhances compliance as stakeholders are more knowledgeable about, committed to, and supportive of regulations, which have economic spin-offs. Communities have input with regard to future development initiatives, through the participatory planning process, enhancing the feasibility of the end project.

The recommendations

Sustainable development is a fine balancing act, as it is not merely development that can be sustained, but development that would allow the achievement of a state of sustainability. The development of qualitative spaces is a means of ensuring this state of sustainability: by planning for spatial quality, one also contributes to sustainable development. The Workbench Method, although initially created to enhance spatial quality, can contribute to enhancing sustainable development initiatives based on social (feeling of ownership), economic (time-efficient planning), and environmental (attachment to place) aspects, but most importantly in terms of transforming current top-down approaches into participatory planning approaches, transforming short-term planning into long-term planning for spatial quality, and transforming current approaches to spatial planning (and mindsets) to understand that 'everybody is an expert' when dealing with qualitative planning, and green spaces. It is recommended that the Workbench Method be used in participatory planning processes, as it proves to contribute to the planning of qualitative spaces (based on perceived values, user values, and future values), and can be linked with sustainable development initiatives. It is a tool that stimulates integrative planning, acknowledging all stakeholders and providing the platform for interaction, which is believed to result in the planning of feasible, sustainable, future living spaces.

Elizelle Juanee Cilliers
Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, Wageningen University and Research Centre (The Netherlands) and North West University, Potchefstroom Campus (South Africa)
Emma Diemont, Derk Jan Stobbelaar, Wim Timmermans
Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, Wageningen University and Research Centre (The Netherlands)

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