Rethinking Sherbrooke West: How local knowledge can enhance planning and design processes

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Research Aims:
How can locals become more involved in the planning and design of their communities and how can their knowledge be used to create more “user-friendly” plans? It is widely acknowledged that conventional methods of soliciting citizen participation do not always achieve the goals of widespread participation and, in some cases, may actually hinder citizen participation. Despite stated commitments to planning “for and by the people”, in many cases local populations only learn about projects that will affect them once the projects are already well underway and their ability to effect change is weakened. Moreover, even when the public is invited to participate, their role is often limited to responding to well-developed plans.

In response to the shortcomings of top-down planning models, new techniques have emerged; these focus on dialogue and inclusion in decision-making processes. Planners are increasingly moving beyond the attempt to “plan for” the public and adopting more collaborative efforts to “plan with” the public (Klosterman, 1999, p. 1).

As part of the Green, Active and Healthy Neighbourhoods (QVAS) project conducted by the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre in conjunction with Mobiligo, Centre de gestion de déplacements, Rethinking Sherbrooke West is interested in exploring possible ways to transform the physical space of the street to make it more friendly for pedestrians, cyclists and other forms of active transportation. The main objectives of Rethinking Sherbrooke West are to explore local users’ (merchants and shoppers) perceptions of a series of proposed traffic calming measures for the street, with the goal of aiding local communities in the development of implementable urban design strategies for a more “user-friendly” Sherbrooke street (public space, shared road space for active transportation, etc). The traffic calming proposals were co-developed with urban planners and professionals (7 participants), in response to problems identified by local residents in a public meeting (30 residents). Residents subsequently provided feedback on the proposals in a second public meeting (20 residents). A final round of feedback and validation of the proposals with urban planners and stakeholders is in the process of being completed.

Key results to date:
Research has shown that by making local users part of the development process, we can:
- provide increased agency for local populations,
- empower local stakeholders,
- enhance social cohesion around common projects, and,
- improve the quality of plans (Brody, S. D., Godschalk, D. R., & Burby, R. J., 2003).

The following two proposals were created during a community-based design workshop in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood and will be further validated by local residents through a survey (both online and offline). Researchers hope to compile 100-150 surveys, with a dual purpose of gaining valuable data for analysis, while stimulating reflection about street design in the community of users of the urban space.

Proposition #1

Proposition #2