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## Towards associative meaningfulness: Maintaining social capital in community development

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# Towards associative meaningfulness: Maintaining social capital in community development

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## *Introduction: the issue at stake*

As sentient beings, we humans aim at good life. Thus, we are not indifferent to the possibilities or conditions, or openings or closures of what the environment that immediately surrounds us stands us for. It is easy to prefer environments perceived as “good” to environments that can be regarded as inferior – provided that we can afford to choose.

But what actually constitutes “good”, not only as a phenomenological experience but particularly as a quality that can be communicated and hence transferred to others as an intersubjective *meaning*? The answer is linguistically rather straightforward: aversion of all things perceived as “bad”. This is at least a good start, strengthened, moreover, by the entire span of the humankind’s ethical sophistication from teachings of Aristotle or Buddha via the Golden Rule to the Categorical Imperative as its Kantian secular reiteration (Flanagan 2009, Kant, 2005). But beyond any wordplay, conveniently made respectable by appropriate cultural, historical and intellectual traditions, this paper aims at a bit more complex cognitive construction.

Transferable intersubjective meanings that contemplate on the ecological, technological and other elements of good life do stem from the first-person experiences of meaningfulness. Yet, to add the complexity of what is searched for here, strong institutional factors have from one historical era to another framed the individuals’ ideas of how the good, the desirable and – especially since the rise of the classical liberalism and the due utilitarian drive (cf. Mill 1980) with its necessarily consequentialist ethics – *the beneficial*<sup>1</sup> is perceived. The paper thus starts with the structural features that have a major effect on our ideas of what we collectively perceive as meaningful.

Institutional factors undergo and have undergone constant changes and transformations that can be traced *locally*, on a scale and level of geographically distinctive communities as the scope of this paper requires. Consequently, no reflections of these transformations to identifiable nations, transnational entities, or wider civilizations will be discussed. There are

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the hermeneutical categories of “sense”, “value” and “purpose”, accompanied by “meaning”, in which life itself is thought to find its expression (Bleicher 1990, 22).

good grounds for so doing. First, institutions referred to in next Chapter have typically mingled in the evolution of historical narratives of nations and their transnational arrangements. This tends to add a strong teleological and self-servicing emphasis to interpretations concerning these institutions. Second, for a lengthy period since the collapse of the Roman Empire, localities and urban agglomerations effectively moulded and (re)constructed the institutions that a few centuries later started to give the rise for broader national systems that, even later led all the way to global arrangements. Even if the perspective of this paper is on local developments, the phenomena approached from that close-up are clearly wider by their relevance yielding the scale of an entire civilization, if not the global space.

In this paper the pursuit of the meaningful (in a sense of the good, the desirable and the beneficial) will not be carried out as a mere theoretical exercise. This requires identification of processes with a proven track record on attempts to associate local dwellers in urban development processes. Unfortunately these are hard to come by. Examples of *formal* participatory processes do abound<sup>2</sup>, but they tend to provide rather negligible ground for approaching the sensation of meaningfulness among those whose opinions are heard. The practical transformation and development processes assessed here take place in the central business district of Lempäälä municipality. With 20 000 inhabitants it is among the fastest growing parts of the Tampere city region (pop. ca 350 000) and entire Finland<sup>3</sup>. To understand the weight given by the local dwellers and decision-makers to various elements in the locality's cultural landscape and its functional fabric, the paper starts with a brief review of the evolution of urban knowledge-systems, ideas of what has been perceived of constituting the good, the desirable and the beneficial.

A promise to dwell on (urban) knowledge systems is bold. The term is all too multifaceted for allowing a section of a brief text to shed but a rudimentary light on it. Moreover, the scope of items that have made the systems of knowledge as systems of *knowledge* (or *systems* of knowledge for that matter) have varied over time. Thus, it may be more to the point of speaking about some form of dynamic mental continuum (or continuity), in which only part of the layered elements of our experience of meaningfulness are cognitive. Thus, in addition to the systems of knowledge that clearly embody the rationalist heritage of enlightenment and the core elements of the modern era we can also identify the significantly earlier tradition with

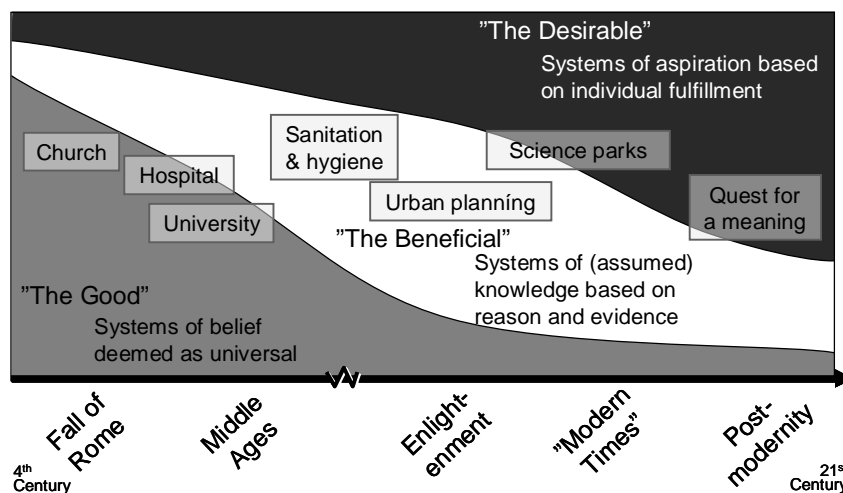
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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the world a hallmark of highly developed economies is their readiness to include in their legislation statutes that obligate public authorities to enable civic participation in processes with major impact on individuals or the environment.

<sup>3</sup> This positive development owes much to Lempäälä's serendipitous location on the southern fringe of the Tampere city region, adjacent to the most important national motorway linking two largest Finnish urban agglomerations, Helsinki and Tampere.

systems of *belief* in its core. Moreover, the postmodern turn acknowledges a new kind of “system”, with search for individual fulfillment as its key element. Not infrequently these systems not only coexist but overlap, often obscuring the debate on the drivers, arenas and plausible goals of societal and even human development, as it will be seen in the subsequent section.

For the sake of practicality it is assumed in this paper that the elements that have evolved over time have all left their mark in the contemporary human experience. Thus, they are also present in our contemporary situations where various decisions of societal governance are taken. In urban development and planning, the theme of layered recurrence of past elements into an eclectic collage is particularly present in postmodernism, an approach having affected the planning scene on its full force since the 1970s (Ellin 1999). Simultaneously postmodernism can be seen as one of the historical milestones for assessing the role and meaning given to the good, the beneficial and the desirable while setting the drivers of societal development. Figure 1 is an attempt to show the transformation from general and universalist elements of meaningfulness via the scientific, rationalist and utilitarian turn to the era with individualism as the formative element. Features of the figure are further elaborated in the Chapter below.



**Fig. 1.** Selected drivers of the historical development having produced the layered elements of the postmodern world-view.

***Even the Ancient Romans, or those who came after: layers of meaningfulness***

As it was noted above, in a sense it all started with the fall of the Roman Empire. Suddenly the urban system of Europe lost a central magnet that had given the direction and, indeed, the

very reason to the existence of the most influential population centres of the time – and to a large extent of our own time as well. However, out of the immediate chaos, a new order was to emerge: a process of institutional evolution that still continues. The most important institutions to mark that evolution, institutions that would set the tune for much of the development of (urban) knowledge-systems during the subsequent millennia were originated by the church. To name two of them with particular interest in the context of this paper it is natural to take apart the hospitals and universities, creations of the practical arm of local divine institutions (cf. Girouard 1985, 44-47).

But first there was the church as the leading representative of a system of belief strong enough to stand for a universal idea in a violently splintered terrain that only gradually and with great pain was taking the shape of more substantial and territorially coherent polities. Towards the end of the first millennium CE, constitution of nations was already taking decisive steps (cf. Williams 2010) but still centuries away as strongly institutionalized entities. Facing the secular rule of the often unsteady, frequently ephemeral, and, while both solid and abiding, local forms of governance, the church had been at least by and from the 6<sup>th</sup> century capable of creating an institutional order with remarkable territorial reflections. During the centuries that mark the early middle ages, churches as nodes of worship were often regarded as *buildings per se* somehow supernatural. (Harrison 1998, 37-41.) Due to this capacity they were highly respected by the secular powers with distinctive consequences. They were *free zones* beyond the reach of secular power, often enjoyed by more or less genuinely repenting fugitives of the secular law and order. The boundary between the divine free zone and their secular surroundings constituted a borderline between different institutional orders.

For the medieval communities the church was thus the key signifier and for their individual members a primary source of meaningfulness, a mythical encounter with the founding ideas of the entire civilisational framework (cf. Armstrong 2006). However, as the centuries passed, more and more of the respect enjoyed by the mighty divine free zones were directed to the institutions that had due to the church's own initiative blurred the once watertight institutional boundary: the hospital and the university. Once the hospitals had been the key platform for the Christian charitable mission, and all members of the academic community were automatically members of the clergy, but this was to pass. The two great *e*'s of the past, empiricism and enlightenment finally made the old, however well entrenched order crumble in a way that gave rise to new domains of knowledge systems that chanted the name of science. Elements conducive to the beneficial were to a growing extent colonizing the predominance of the good as an appropriate motivation of deeds.

Fight against all things foul was reborn<sup>4</sup> in an institutionally well-organised way in European cities soon after the Black Death had ravaged them. In London, precise legal norms stipulated the collection of rubbish more than 600 years ago, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, construction of sewers was seen as a means to flush not only the urban wastes but also the outdated ideals of the pre-industrial aristocracy (Reader 2004, 208-214), leading them to particularly engineered sites for scientifically grounded treatment. Hygiene and the palpable betterment of the human condition with new knowledge whose relevance was empirically justifiable now emerged as a novel urban ethos. In due course, institutions to produce, test, and put into practical use medical knowledge became its temples of deference and appreciation – if not actual *worship* – but also of awe. A new sense of meaningfulness was able to stem from this progress aptly described by Braudel (1993) as a European success story: governance of the extreme oscillations in human populations entailed in the past by diseases, bad harvests or other unmanageable blights.

Science can rightfully claim its entitlement to guide or even lead the humankind in its assumed progress. Its ethos of knowing more rather than less – or knowing better rather than worse – is a respectable means of solving the challenges that humankind made of sentient beings meet. But, as it often is the case, science is not enough. It is easily blamed of having led the humankind and its home planet to their *current* state and not to some alternative one, regarded by the scientists and laypeople as less regrettable. And, while competing against alternative systems of belief that console the distressed individuals, it easily obscures its own character as a system of *knowledge*. This is the war cry raised by Mary Midgley (2002; 2005, 129) who criticizes scientists and indeed *science* of too readily compromising the fundamental elements of rigorous consistent reasoning – just to make their message more appealing to the general public. By so doing, science risks to reduce itself to a system of belief, a kind of semi-consistent religion, a secular faith.

What we have gathered this far is a layered structure of culturally embedded sources of meaningfulness. We have the original sense of community based on ancient free zones and the boundaries within which the rules deemed as important for “us” and separating *us* from *them* apply. We have the urge to know more and have equipped ourselves with deliberately crafted ways of producing the knowledge we think is important. And, without warning, there comes the challenge of *knowing differently*. Part of this knowing differently is to know collectively, aided by network technologies (Sunstein 2008). Part of this knowledge-creation happens to-

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<sup>4</sup> Also here the Romans but presumably also the Mesopotamians as their early predecessors left their original mark in the development of urban sanitation.

gether with members of a particular reference group (or social network) that may set the value-based limits for determining what is worth knowing and why (Karppi & Mälkiä 1999). Here we find another expression of an often secular faith, which in a sense closes the circle and brings us back to the original foundations to the sense of the community. What we also see is a process where the beneficial has been gradually forced to give more and more leeway to the desirable as a source of legitimacy for what and why things turn out as they do.

To what extent science needs to be anxious about the alternative systems of knowledge and belief can be debated. The role, impact and even the very function of knowing that stems from sources other than rigorous analytical exercise *can* be explained from stern scientific grounds. Loosely-grounded belief into whichever issue or phenomenon can have a function that makes it worthwhile to an individual. Neuroscience, to give one and certainly scientifically sound example, provides us with a good degree of reassurance. It is not too complicated to show the biological mechanisms through which the chemical gushes, released by the actual deed of entering into systems of belief in an aptly oriented personality, meet the pleasure circuit in one's brain, giving the host of that personality a scientifically solid sensation of pleasure (cf. Pinker 2006, 30-31). Unfortunately, to many science skeptics this kind of attempt to settle the disagreement between the varying approaches to issues such as “knowing” or “sensing” only underlines the idea of how badly science *is* astray.

What we see as of happening around us (and, in fact, as of *having happened* around us for some thirty to fifty years) is a breakthrough of an economy whose functioning seems to be to a greater and greater extent separated or at least distanced from its material foundations, which are also the domain of neuroscience. To take only one example, the volume and predominance of financial markets have extended far beyond the “thermometer of economy” function that used to appear in the economics textbooks of the post-war Keynesian heyday. Now financial markets rule, not reflect, as one could crystallize Zizek's (2009) arguments as he comments on the urgency to rescue some of the key financial actors from the turmoil of the 2008 crisis. Other arenas of de-materialisation include the increasing knowledge intensity, capacities to communicate and hence an enhanced emphasis of the human capital in the economy – but also issues such as tolerance, creativity, recreation, or cultural amenities seeping in the core of how and where business can be made (cf. Clark 2007). These developments effectively challenge the existing ideas of what (and how) science should know what is relevant in the new circumstances. Moreover, it appears heuristically plausible<sup>5</sup> that less and less of the

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<sup>5</sup> But only heuristically, because, as argued by Flanagan (2009) with amply clinical support from researchers of consciousness (e.g. Damasio (2000), or Pinker (2006), as noted above in this text) giving meaning to anything

sense of meaningfulness can be straightforwardly attached to what an individual captures from the material domain of science.

New approaches have abounded, feeding the immaterial aspects in the structured discussion on drivers of societal development. Various markers such as indexes that seek to capture the content or percentage of phenomena such as “creativity” or “knowledge” within a given territorial unit are produced to help those that are in charge of development procedures to benchmark their success or even relative positions. Yet, as Andersen et al. (2010) or Karppi and Takala (2007) maintain, even if internationally applicable comparative data exists to facilitate the construction of creativity or knowledge intensity indexes, they do not capture the multidimensionality of the issue at stake. Understanding the actual solutions that make up the place-specific operation environments requires understanding of factors that enable the “creative” or “knowledge intensive” environments being brought about. The answer of the age of science was to create a wide array of science parks and business incubators to secure the cognitive basis for high technology industries. They can be seen as descendants in the extensive institutional tradition of catching and harnessing the spirit of the age as a source of particular meaning in developmental processes. The role they play is not too different from the ones played by the church, the university and the design of healthy environments at earlier stages of urban development.

However, institutional evolution traced in this paper does not stop in science parks and the model of knowledge creation they represent. Ideas of a creative class and urban amenities that are thought to be particularly appealing to the broad, liberal and tolerant minds have become serious tools in the pursuit of new elements of growth. Moreover, these postmodern tools of institutional development often mingle with extensive industrial traditions and even their physical premises that may have remarkable local cultural significance (Karppi & Pihlajamaa 2010). Science-led pursuit of success had science parks or technology centres as its apogee, at least as far as public development policies carried out in cities and communities are concerned. Their next stage is much more complex. It is often built on strong entrepreneurial spirit (cf. Karppi 2012) and a combination of a sense of community, broad social networks and a youthful ideal of autonomous individuals who only get involved in activities (business included) they find worth the effort. This ethical stance tops the technical and innovative qualities that need to be there to back up the young professionals’ yearning for autonomy and lib-

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takes place in a fundamentally material environment of tissues, receptors, transmitters and due cerebral structures.



erty from the claustrophobic boundaries of formal organizations and regular wage-labour (Jacques 1996).

It appears that the grand narrative in the evolution of local preconditions for development has shifted towards active individuals as drivers for change. Simultaneously, the sources of meaningfulness have come shifted from the level of a broad shared cultural platform – religion, church, and via science – towards an individual’s moral choices on commitments within business and employment (cf. the “virtual onion model” as referred by Gallivan & Srite 2005, 301). Cast in the context familiar to urban planners this poses a veritable challenge: how to deal with the active citizenship with a plethora of first-person perspectives and approaches to developmental situations and how to work them as a productive force in the pursuit of a collectively shared goal: a good environment. In other words: how to design platforms for individuals’ meaningful association in community development processes to create environments that engender the good, the desirable and the beneficial?

### ***Current developments: experiences in Lempäälä, Finland***

This chapter is, mainly to the extent of some technicalities, based on a prior paper that described a process to create a shared vision for the future planning of the administrative and traditionally also the commercial and service hub of the municipality of Lempäälä in South-western Finland (cf. Karppi & Takala 2008). For it a stepwise process of qualitative and interactive/participatory data collection was designed in co-operation with expert representing important fields of visualising information needed for planning and managing the data flows with highly diversified contents. The research task emphasised planning of physical environments as a process where a maximally open communication among different stakeholders of planning and various citizen groups was seen as a tool to enable the use of creativity that stems from individuals’ own expertise in issues that they deem as particularly relevant – or meaningful.

The overall reason for renewing the Lempäälä municipal centre, or the central business district (CBD), with the necessarily remarkable financial burden to saddle the local taxpayers with has been discussed in our prior paper (*ibid.*, 42-47). Thus, it may only be worthwhile to note here that the external operation environment of the municipality had changed remarkably just before the Christmas sales season of 2006. Finland’s largest shopping centre, called from the very beginning boldly as a “commercial town”, or “business city” to give a

word-for-word translation from the Finnish *liikekaupunki*, was then opened to an excellent location for a more general South Finnish accessibility and only a few kilometres away from the Lempäälä CBD. It was obvious that the new Idea Park complex posed a major challenge to the businesses and even public services that gravitate towards dense customer flows. Faced by this fact a process was prepared in late 2005 for identifying and envisioning alternative futures for the CBD. By the early summer of 2006 the process was at full speed.

This was not the first time that the Lempäälä CBD was a subject for major restructuring. The old municipal core had been dramatically redrawn in history with both Finland's main north-south railway line (1876) and a regionally important inland water canal being built between 1867 and 1873 to cut it in sections (Masonen & Hänninen 1991, 54-56). As far as natural geography is concerned, the CBD is located on an island, even if this is sometimes hard to fathom not only due to the sectioning effect of the traffic infrastructure but also due to the lush greeneries that fringe the central island's built environment in all directions: the view especially to the surrounding lakes is effectively blocked. Later on, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and particularly from the 1960s on a new administrative centre was built in the very core of the CBD, to aptly symbolize the extending responsibilities taken by the public sector, both local and state authorities, to carry out the new welfare policies that jointly constituted the Nordic or Scandinavian model of societal governance (sc. Peters 2011).

After these transformations that left their marks in the local landscape, several planning exercises were commissioned for finding alternatives to the prevailing layout. What is distinctive is that even if it is hard to find local dwellers who would not insist that something needs to be done to the CBD as it still largely is, none of them led to a broad enough consensus for the guidelines of what to do in order to improve the quality of the local planned and built environment. The landscape was and still is strongly dominated by the modernist (one could possibly call it "poor man's reduced functionalist") mass of office buildings that occupy the focal point of the entire CBD, so one could feel inclined to argue that *any* step to any direction would have been a step towards the better. Not giving too much weight to single opinions, it would be tempting to explain the lack of any action after the plans with an argument from a long-time member of local council and one of the key actors in local economic development:

*"The plans simply missed a human touch and perspective. The needs of the motorized society were always well met, but those that stemmed from the human perspective were not."*

With respect to such sentiments, it is no wonder that now, with a fresh start and a different team of actors to help the local dwellers and decision-makers to identify the issues that would

then be turned into a vision for future developments, themes like quality of life or creativity were raised to the discussion early on. Envisioning Lempäälä CBD as a “life-quality centre” is clearly constructive to the nurturing of any activities that require particular creativity, but the entire scale and perspective for the visionary work need to be set anew. They need to be recognizable to individuals and their entire collectives capable of turning creativity as an individual trait to action leading to tangible outcomes. The distinctive feature of a Lempäälä-style non-metropolitan<sup>6</sup> environment could be the human-size scale, solid and highly functional community structure, the reciprocal folding of natural environment and cultural layers, and, importantly, peculiar local stories derived from them.

Complex questions will now follow. *First*, how can one take into account the variety of strengths embedded in the combination of well established built environment and cultural/natural landscape, while designing a competitive, yet human-scale space for central business and administrative functions for a rapidly growing municipality? *Second*, how can the legitimacy of the process be secured in the eyes of the local community? It is of vital importance that a major transformation does not become blocked through the preventive mechanisms guaranteed by a democratised planning regime (cf. Leino 2005). *Third*, how to induce a great transformation and simultaneously make the community members feel that it may succeed in articulating the unique historical and physical features of the place? These are easily blurred by many layers of the past developments, the combination of changes in cultural and natural landscape, as well as functions and flows that prevail today. *Fourth*: how to convince those in charge of leading an already prosperous and by many indicators successful community<sup>7</sup> of the need to make most dramatic changes to the prevailing CBD design in order to raise the odds of the municipality to be successful also in the future?

These questions were presented to a multidisciplinary team of researchers as the project on searching and co-designing a common vision for a future CBD for Lempäälä was outlined in 2005-2006. A solution, described in the following with a methodological emphasis, was to let the people tell themselves. At the first stage, two rather standard architectural illustrations of theoretical design alternatives for the CBD with differing *leitmotifs* were created. They gave the community members an idea of the scale magnitude, and densities of the built

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth keeping in mind that Tampere city region is the core of Finland's second-largest urban agglomeration, which means that even the mildly interpreted features of a “metropolitan” economy are more probable to be found from the urban core of the city region than from its sub-centres.

<sup>7</sup> In 2007 Lempäälä was nominated as Finland's most creative municipality by Finnish Inventors National Federation, Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities and Federation of Finnish Enterprises (MTV3 2007). This obviously reflects to Lempäälä's regularly high ranking among the country's most enterprise-friendly municipalities, which in turn has its reflection in the healthy and solid local finances.

areas in the possible solutions. Yet, from the very beginning the idea was to encourage the respondents to describe which kind of new elements should be added and criticise those included in the visions. The method to collect the ideas of how the community members felt about their own CBD was thus based on very broad open questions. What should be the leading ideas concerning the future development was a remarkably more detailed an issue and would thus be dealt with in the subsequent stages of the data collection and processing.

From these preliminary stages the findings were worked on in different respondent groups. Different methods were used, but the leading idea was kept clear. What the entire exercise was for was to *envision*, not to plan. The longer-term aim of the envisioning process was to secure a firm ground for future planning processes that, in time, would be formally regulated by the Land-use and Construction Act (132/1999). Thus the scale and scope of the empirical stages of the research were calibrated more to the level of various community members as users of the CBD functions and the urban space, and not to one of architects and professional planners. This made the process and discussions thereof more tangible to the members of representative bodies, who were not flooded with technical planning jargon at a stage when it was appropriate to speak about the needs, dreams and fears associated with the future transformation of a familiar environment. The term meaningfulness was not explicitly used at the time of working with the respondents, but the issues that were dealt with were the elements that constitute meaningfulness encountered in the everyday environment.

Communication that ensued between the municipality leadership and the local dwellers revealed that citizens are not accustomed to those who hold planning monopoly and their consultants to step to the public with ideas that still are “merely” ideas, to be discussed as some kind of mental parameters of urban planning. When the findings of the research process, a tangible visualization (up to a 3D animated short film made of an eventual Lempäälä CBD) created with the help of community members’ opinions, were publicised, something not at all uncommon happened. The visualisations were welcomed and regularly referred to as “a plan” that was to be implemented in one form or another. That may well happen in the foreseeable future, but entering a planning stage brings in another degree of institutional status. It will be a legally binding process with huge impacts on, for instance, property values. Thus, at that stage in the future it would be of crucial importance that the community members could still recognise the features that were developed to the plan based on their own input. Whether or not this will be the case, is currently studied at the University of Tampere School of Management.

But what actually happened in the empirical process can be summarized like this. The empirical analysis was carried out in the autumn 2006. The data was collected with different strategies that ranged from an internet-based inquiry to focus group sessions. All stages of data-collection included some element of interactive and participatory processing. An internet-based qualitative inquiry was organized in two rounds. In the first round answers to a range of open questions were collected from 230 respondents, while in the second round 123 respondents put arguments formed on the basis of the first-round answers to rank orders. The first round included the two illustrations as described above and the results of the entire internet-based inquiry were processed further in focus groups to deepen the findings. Participants to the focus groups drew also maps to visualise their ideas on the needs for redevelopment and to localise the attributes that citizens attach to the Lempäälä CBD. These illustrations were used in further group discussions, and they summarized information on the particular hotspots for development in a valuable manner.

Simultaneously with these data collection phases the pupils in Lempäälä secondary schools were asked to write short stories and draw pictures on their ideal (or, for that matter, dystopian) CBD as they envisioned it to be in 2020. All this information was summarized or otherwise processed with the elected council members and leading civil servants in early November 2006. The mere timetable of the empirical work with the data gives an indication on how hectic the process was and how a bulk of interpretative work was still to be carried out after the respondents and decision-makers had had an opportunity to leave their marks on the vision. A slightly more detailed description will follow for those interested in how the different stages were carried out.

**The internet-based inquiry.** The different actor groups' opinions and comprehensions about the Lempäälä CBD were formed with a questionnaire filled in the internet. Respondents were informed of this possibility with adverts published in the local newspapers, leaflets distributed to mailboxes by the research team and direct phone/e-mail recruiting that focused on different residential areas. The aim with the targeted recruitment was to get a more broadly-based picture of how the local population perceived the CBD and the functions/services found there. Entrepreneurs, decision-makers as well as various actors and pressure group members were also contacted and asked about their opinions. Furthermore, the political leadership of neighbouring municipalities as well as representatives of major construction companies and real estate development agencies was asked to join the panel. The municipal service desk provided

technical assistance in filling the online form to all who did not have an own internet access or felt that assistance was needed.

The first of the two rounds concentrated on collecting wishes and general ideas concerning the CBD in general and its eventual development in more particular. The informants were asked to give their reactions on the two alternative illustrations about the city centre. Open questions were used to chart the desirable CBD attributes and the particular challenging issues in the CBD. Furthermore, there was a range of questions about services, traffic, housing, social encounters as well as a feeling of safety and security. During the second round of internet-based data collection the informants gave preferences to 15 statements compressed of the open answers. They gave the first rough identification of attributes that should be particularly highlighted in the future planning of the Lempäälä CBD.

**Focus groups.** A focus group interview is a facilitated group interview that focuses on a given topic. Typically, a particular target group is collected for processing the thema. Focus groups give a possibility to collect more in-depth data about the topic, going into the “whys”, “hows”, and generally the experiences and attitudes that the participators have on the discussed topic. In addition to its virtues as a method that integrates features of an interview and an observation, it can, if well facilitated, be highly favourable for mutual learning. As to the analytical use of focus group data, by comparing ideas processed in different groups it was possible to identify the likeness and unlikeness of ideas, trends and patterns that emerge to signify the issues discussed in the groups.

Eight focus groups with altogether 37 participants discussed thoroughly the ideas processed in the Internet survey. Recruiting of the groups was done by telephone, and e-mail reminder notes were sent to the participants prior to the meeting of a respective group. The participants were sampled to match the functional and geographical areas of the municipality. The groups were formed homogenously by each theme in order to avoid unnecessary inequalities within the group. Yet, they were multifaceted as regards political ideologies or the places of residence. With the exception of two external specialists, all group members shared a common attachment to Lempäälä as a daily environment, which formed a strong linkage between the group members. The groups were as follows

- Decision-makers: representatives from different parties to tie the process organically to the decision making process and/or strategic planning
- Resident groups 1-3: representatives from different residential areas and resident associations
- Designers of the built environment: representatives from the local planning board, planning officials, senior staff of construction companies, and environmental groups
- Actors: representatives of local entrepreneurs and recreational activities

- Youth board: representing the municipality's future
- Senior board: representing experience and tradition

All sessions were recorded with an approval of the participants. It was therefore easier to afterwards identify the speakers and possibly define the unclear points. The sessions took approximately two hours each, and were arranged in the facilities of local development agency in Lempäälä CBD to assure a neutral locale. The well-motivated participants raised plenty of new developmental issues and approaches.

**Brainstorming.** A third tier of the data collection drew even closer to a joined dissemination of results and policy-relevant processing of findings that took place simultaneously as new information was collected and added to the existing body of knowledge. Before the findings were analysed and turned into a final visualisation they were thus thoroughly brainstormed in a three-hour session with the Lempäälä decision-makers. After that the conclusions were disseminated in several forums by the decision-makers and planners themselves, putting their acceptability in a test. The research team members participated in an “official reporting-back evening” arranged for the local dwellers whose participation was necessary for any degree of success.

In all these events a major advantage was taken from drawings and brief but illustrative texts produced by the secondary school pupils as they saw the Lempäälä CBD of their future. These visualizations, revealing as they were in their straightforwardness, were typically run as a slideshow in events where the results were processed further, discussed with the citizens, or presented to various audiences. They were also used in the brainstorming session where the local council and executive board members together with the leading civil servants categorised the ideas that were to be turned into deliberate action. The categorization was carried out with two dimensions:

- (1) the time span needed for the implementation; and
- (2) the degree of the municipality's own activities are needed to secure the implementation.

The brainstorming thus contributed to the final analysis by providing a clear structure and a decision-making logic vis-à-vis the functions attached to the overall visions. Moreover, it helped the team to design a summary of findings that was then brought to an open discussion with the public.

**The interdisciplinary impact.** A crucial feature of the entire visionary exercise stems from the dynamics of how the process itself unfolded. The fact that several disciplinary approaches were involved nurtured the work of the team. Another vital element was the continuous inter-

play between the eagerness to know as the fundamental feature of basic research and the willingness to facilitate soundest possible decision-making as a motivator for participating practitioners. For academics participating in such processes may be at their best tremendous learning experiences, and this is the least that can be said of the Lempäälä-case described here. For the practitioners, civil servants and political decision-makers, the particular value reached from the multitude of perspectives is an unusually broadly-based platform for subsequent choices and decisions to be made for community development. The last chapter is an attempt to assess the possibilities and pitfalls for moving on in the Lempäälä CBD development process.

### ***To conclude: the way forward***

Every researcher with an involvement in a highly action-based and interactive research setting naturally entertains a wish that the way ahead of the point that was once reached would be largely indicated through and prepared with earlier research. In the appraisal of the results we came to a tentative conclusion that a more open, participatory and hence also communicative approach to community development can indeed make the difference (Karppi & Takala 2008, 52). As we noted some years ago, the process triggered an unheard-of enthusiasm among some local decision-makers that originally were suspicious towards “yet another attempt to structure the Lempäälä CBD development”.

Of course, after such a multi-faceted exercise one is bound to assess its outcomes with mixed feelings. The open, free-formed process has been turned into a formal planning procedure, and the professional planners in charge of it constantly make reference to the findings of the original exercise, “keeping the fire of enthusiasm burning”, as it was recommended. Many members of the original team are still called in to assist the planning team, to give presentations to its members. They also contribute by spreading the original team spirit that was a key ingredient in the operating and continuous mutual learning in the multidisciplinary research group. Also, and importantly, the tacit knowledge accumulated in the process but never becoming formally reported on the sometimes heuristic solutions that were to be made and fitted in-time and in-place can be communicated to the planners. On the other hand, and essentially for the challenge of keeping the fire burning, one must acknowledge the often lengthy timetables in which decisions are made and governance is brought about. Even some of the most basic issues, deemed by the local decision-makers as “immediate” and “executable with the



municipality's own activities" are still pending – five years after a majority of decision-makers jointly structured the list of first activities for renewing the CBD.

What I want to emphasise here is highly symptomatic to many if not all participatory processes. First the optimistic account. *If* the ideas and wishes of the local community, discussed and disseminated at the various stages of the process, reflect in the implementation of the forthcoming plan, the community members may accept major changes to a large-scale design of their everyday environment. The first durability test is the formal planning stage where broad stakeholder groups are allowed to make legal appeals against the plan – an entitlement frequently and readily used in Finland. If the legal processes remain moderate, relative to the scale and scope of the envisioned renewal, the approach and the process may indeed have made a difference.

*However*, there is the second, more pessimistic account. Time defies enthusiasm. The original ideas start to dissipate as a function of time if new and often narrator-specific versions of them are reiterated. And this may not be the worst option. *If* the narrative is not cast anew by whoever finding it fit to use the original ideas for his or her own good (Currie 2010)<sup>8</sup>, but is constantly presented in one and authorized form, what may follow is not more and more nurtured enthusiasm but institutionalization of one official view of what to do and how to do it. Oblivion and ossification: the Scylla and Charybdis of the offspring of great original enthusiasm.

But, luckily, this is not the end of a story. Time may defy enthusiasm but not exceptional *individuals with a firm belief* in what was attempted with the original process of finding creative ways for creating visions for future development. What was said earlier above of the entrepreneurial spirit to spur the development of value-creating institutions in business can be extended to those who wish to create societal value through better-functioning communities (cf. Etzioni 1995). These individuals seek to find ways to constantly feed in the formal planning process the messages derived from the original visionary exercise, and experience has shown that they can be endowed with a wide array of institutional and personal backgrounds.

As it was said, a few years after the visionary work the plan of the Lempäälä central island was taken in the formal preparation, and, as it now appears to be the case, some form of grand narrative of “planning a CBD with a difference” has proved to be sticky enough. All of us,

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<sup>8</sup> Such a use of stories is brilliantly described by Gregory Currie (2010, xvii), who summarises the opening lines of his recent work on philosophy of stories in the following way: “Narratives are intentional-communicative artefacts [...] that work by *manifesting the communicative intentions of their makers*” (emphasis added by IK). The power of narratives is in their capacity to simplify (Taleb 2010, 63), but while so doing they also may give us a false feeling of security caused by our imagined understanding of how bits and pieces or observed reality fit in a bigger picture, the storyline deduced thought the narrative.

irrespective of our roles, who invited the local dwellers to formulate their ideas about what should be taken particularly in the account while developing the CBD area owe them something. We need to contribute to the kind of “planning with a difference” that can also include an idea of planning with a keen eye on things that are particularly meaningful to individuals, and to find ways to help individuals to communicate these experiences with one another. Good news is that a visionary planning team that has been formed wants such a contribution to be made.

As the top local decision-makers have given their approval to the participatory process all through its way and taken certain pride of its good acclaim among their peers, the gates *are* basically open for broader participatory processes in the actual planning stages than the planning legislation would require. And, as it was suggested above, this time the scope of participation and influence is in details, in the actual small-scale elements of designing good urban environments, in issues that may have particular meanings to local dwellers. Time for formulation of general arguments on the overall form of the CBD is over, as some key decision-makers in Lempäälä have clearly implied. The stakes for the methods and techniques of association are hereby raised.

This is also the spot where the urban development ethos that willingly builds on individual initiative and entrepreneurial spirit embedded in the multifaceted sense of community comes to the view. Now urban dwellers, equipped with a plethora of technological solutions, actively developed by technology producers who want to increase the service content of the information processing devices, can access and create forums for sharing their ideas for developmental prospects. What is deemed as meaningful<sup>first person</sup> <sup>9</sup> becomes communicated to a wider community. Furthermore, ideas that are, as an outcome of this communication, turned into collective action become meaningful<sup>third person</sup> to a wider community and, hence loaded with political potentiality of the pursuit of the good, the desirable and the beneficial. That, I argue, should be in the core of planning with the proclaimed “planning with a difference”.

At the moment it is obvious that in Lempäälä a key source of innovativeness and creativity associated in the CBD redesigning process is new planning technology. Techniques such as the *Smartboard* are used to link various experts and stakeholders in the shared planning sessions irrespective of their geographical location. In the same time the CBD development task force that meets every Friday afternoon in a particularly designated project house

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<sup>9</sup> The indexes refer to the individual, intersubjective or collective properties of the experience of meaningfulness. Some features that constitute the experience of meaningfulness, typically those imposed by the culture may be shared by broader communities, being thus meaningful in a “third person” sense, whereas some experiences of meaningfulness may be limited to one individual only, his or her self, “first person”.

assesses, among other things, the potential display technologies (large screens for collective viewing, portable displays for personal use, etc.) to be used by the local dwellers as envisioning aids for formulating ideas of the alternatives for planning. Participation in a sense of *potentiality to participate* in planning procedures is hence turned into a *deliberatively associative* setting for working on what is deemed of primary importance in the alternative developmental setups.

While speaking about techniques and technological solutions used for planning and designing of urban environments are not value neutral. Instead, it can be claimed that they evolve attached to their social environments. Hence, they essentially mould the political contents that develop in these environments. As it has been shown by science studies (e.g. Feenberg 2010), many technical innovations have evolved far beyond the scope envisioned by the original innovators. Some of the findings are extremely interesting in the scope of using technology to record and circulate ideas in yet possibly unknown ways. This happened to such information technology devices as telephone or the French *Minitel*. Both of them were originally thought to serve as channels to distribute information from one particular central nodes to the public. Instead, they were turned by their users as means of horizontal communication. Putting such an emergent and user-centered technology-reworking tendency in the community context makes it possible to speak about some form of a smart community development scheme (cf. Karppi & Mälkiä 1999).

There are thus no reasons to resort to an idea that current and future devices designed to support community planning remain as any kind of single-use rational(ist) tools, however thoroughly they were thought to be used in a given particular way. Instead, they may and most probably do spawn new, hitherto un-imagined uses. This spawning of uses, however technology-centred, will in turn transform the social and political content of planning processes, requiring thus much more in-depth analysis on its dynamics than most participatory planning studies have until now managed to turn out.

Thus, the prevailing paradigms are challenged – at least locally. But is there a message that can be conveyed from the local findings to a broader audience and for a global learning? For the first, there is nothing intrinsically contradictory in the existence of localities and the global as arenas of various processes. However, a huge number of localities around the world face extreme difficulties while trying to link the global flows of value or the drivers of global knowledge-based economy (Anttiroiko 2009, 258). Localities vary, however, both in time and space. Manchester is an interesting case here, showing the interplay of local prospering and

global turbulence, as shown by Johnson (2002, 33-42). After having originally emerged as a Roman outpost in England it diminished for centuries after the fall of Rome, found its new *raison d'être* in the Middle Ages as the industrial centre of Europe wandered towards the North Sea area and its textile production, flourished and suffered hand in hand with the rise and fall of the industrial age, and searches now for a new identity from culture and leading-edge research.

But how about Lempäälä? With its peripheral location and mostly receptive role in the face of major industrial changes, lingo-cultural detachment from civilization's main evolutionary currents, and the tremendously briefer timescale allotted to any finite urban or community development scheme it can hardly be compared with the *longue durée* as exemplified by the sometimes cataclysmic transformations of Manchester. Not discouraged by these facts, a decision has been made in Lempäälä to put together the necessary resources from local and external research funding to thoroughly analyse its development process. Reasons to this are twofold: (1) to better understand what is taking place locally and (2) to turn out innovative solutions in the governance of urban development processes to be used as found appropriate around the world.

In early September 2011 the exercise was given a name that explains the scope of the ambition: "*Urbi & Orbi*: from local excellence to global solutions in urban planning. Creativity, trust and collaboration models in ecologically sustainable urban development". As the title indicates, its lead idea is to use experiences derived from the local Lempäälä case – seen to have unique benchmark value – for the benefit of the global community of urban designers and regional developers. Building on the accumulated knowledge from the past project as described above, it aims at introducing new techniques and planning methods for the professionals and decision-makers. The entire process is to be built on the creativity that stems from individuals and their experiences of what constitutes the community, its sense of place and potentials, or what may be seen as conducive to the good and the beneficial, and, to a greater and greater extent, the desirable so that life can be experienced as meaningful.

*Urbi & Orbi* will analyse and apply data collected with varying techniques with a user-centred manner, bringing different techniques and processes to use them to the people, individuals as well as groups. It will combine the results of recent and ongoing basic research carried out, once again, by an interdisciplinary team mixing academics and practitioners to a partnership of public actors, enterprises and individuals. Embedded on local excellence, tested in a real urban development case – the Lempäälä CBD – the *Urbi & Orbi* project will produce

globally relevant expertise further analysed and developed with a team of international partner institutions. Moreover, there is an explicit attempt to productise this expertise to exportable urban and community planning services.

Institutional features differ from country to country, but as the work is firmly based on the material foundations of an individual as a sentient being, a common denominator of the human experience emerges to be applied throughout the humanity – or globally. Much of the rest to spread the word around is intrinsically a feature of the academic profession. The process has been deliberately designed as research-led, which means that networks of the scientific community not only transmit but will modify the knowledge to match different situations with the institutional context and specific needs that materialize in them. This, if anything, is a true global component that has hatched from the original process of reconstructing the CBD of a mid-sized Finnish municipality: striving for local excellence has the potential for making the difference even globally.

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