academy

EUROPEAN U R B A N INITIATIVE

Lessons from a neighbourhood-based renovation project in Tallinn

Author: Ruxandra Aelenei Project: SOFTacademy Tallinn, Estonia - visit our website Zoom-In #1, January 2025

### 1 Introduction

Tallinn needs to renovate 5000 old apartment buildings in the coming years, but the current renovation speed is too slow to meet this goal in time. To speed up renovation across Tallinn, a new approach must be adopted whereby the renovation process is not set up building-by-building but rather neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood. The SOFTacademy project, led by the City of Tallinn, aims at setting neighbourhood-scale renovation in motion, where two or more buildings (and, when possible, the space between them) are renovated according to the New European Bauhaus principles. This approach not only helps to make buildings more sustainable but also to build a more cohesive community. One of the innovative approaches forming the backbone of the SOFTacademy project is 'Participation and Inclusion' (read the previous article on the innovative building blocks on Portico

As the name of the project itself implies, SOFTacademy is not only looking at technical and design solutions needed to increase the energy efficiency of the modernist areas. The focus also lies on the 'softer' component of renovation and renewal interventions, looking to activate communities, use local knowledge to produce the best-fitting solutions and empower residents to take an active role, contributing to a lasting change in their behaviour and approach.





## Context

Public participation and inclusion in planning processes (especially for renovation projects) are gaining ground in Tallinn, although there is a reduced capacity at both the administrative and community level. In Estonia, in areas with a soviet modernist built-fabric, a common view of the residents is that home starts from the apartment door. That complicates co-creation and co-decision processes, and delegates participation to the margins of many urban projects. An essential part of the SOFTacademy innovative solution is developing a community engagement model that supports various stakeholders collaborating to achieve a high-quality spatial outcome. The project's participation and inclusion strategy is based on a four-helix model, incorporating the engagement of civil society alongside the participation of established stakeholders representing the public administration, businesses, and academia. The ultimate purpose of this approach is to spark a wave of renovation initiated by apartment owners (and housing associations) while providing all those involved with the knowledge and instruments to support broad community participation.

The first phase of the participatory process resulted in achieving agreement regarding the renovation solution for the buildings, through active engagement. As the project enters its second year, the focus will shift to co-designing the solutions for the public space between the buildings.

# Community engagement steps and tools (focusing on solutions for renovating the buildings



#### Location-wide surveys

As a first step, two rounds of surveys were

organized, targeting all four participating

buildings. The first survey focused on

collecting the opinions of the inhabitants about the buildings, the quality of the public space and, in general, the quality o life in the broader neighbourhood. The goal was to establish a baseline, collect socio-economic data, and understand the current issues and the level of commitment of inhabitants. The second round was devoted to obtaining a deeper understanding of the challenges related to the shared-use courtyards faced by apartment owners and went more toward presenting possible future scenarios. Different tools were used for the surveys: simple online form in the first round and a more complex online tool (https://www.maptionnaire.com/), alongside onsite consultations and workshops in the second round. Whereas

the overall participation rate dropped in

the latter from 45% to 6-8%, the resulting

feedback was more specific.

#### On-site opening event

The on-site opening event, attended by the inhabitants of the four participating buildings, kicked off the project and introduced its goals, solutions, and timelines. The community had the opportunity to meet and engage with all project partners, to understand their role in the project, and to ask questions about the steps and activities to come. This event also marked the opening of the SOFTbox, the multifunctional repurposed shipping container that will be in use throughout the project.

Approximately 70 residents participated in the event, which was well-received and positively embraced by the community. Beyond the long-term installation of the SOFTbox, the event also saw permanent changes in the public space, such as installing barriers to stop car traffic and parking on pedestrian routes and areas.



## 60

#### Focus groups

These events were geared toward informing the inhabitants about the renovation possibilities, discussing the pros and cons of various design options, and catalysing the community and offering opportunities to engage with each other. The process focused on agreeing on a renovation package and design specifications—information needed for applying for the extra funds available.

The project could not have proceeded without the external funding, therefore, working towards a final design decision was crucial. The focus groups worked intensively with peer-to-peer discussions, giving the participants a feeling of ownership over the process. Participation was relatively low during the first focus group (4-5 people per building), but interest increased over time. While working towards a final decision, by the end of the second focus group, the representatives of each building had selected two alternatives that would further go through a voting

#### Voting process for renovation

Ultimately, to apply for extra funding (the available renovation grants), a voting process needed to be organized to choose the renovation package for each participating building. The previous steps allowed neighbours to get to know each other better and gather enough (technical) information to make wellfounded decisions that fit their needs and wishes. Since renovation costs are relatively high, with apartment owners needing to provide a large share of the investment, this process has not been simple. The chosen renovation packages were different for all four buildings, with two of the buildings also choosing to install elevators as an extra element Ultimately, the voting process was finalized on time, and the funding was granted, with some conditions. The next step is to continue with a public procurement process for the final design and construction. The renovation works will start soon!



# Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969)

Citizen control

Delegated power

Partnership

Placation

Consultation

Informing

Educating

Manipulation



Stakeholders have the idea and set up the project

resources and responsibility given to citizens

Stakeholders have direct involvement

Goal created by a facilitator but

in decision making

Stakeholders shape ideas, but final

decision sits with facilitators

Stakeholder views are sought but decisions made by facilitators

Stakeholders are informed on decisions but no opportunity to contribute

Assumption that the stakeholders are passive receipients

The illusion of participation when actually power is denied

Drawn by Juliet your

### The SOFTbox - social infrastructure from a repurposed shipping container

To create a common area where the inhabitants could meet, play and work together, a repurposed shipping container has been installed in one of the courtyards of the project area. The SOFTbox has been in use since the beginning of the project, serving as an adaptive community centre that is flexible and meets the changing needs of the project and the people. It works as a multipurpose area, being simultaneously a field office for the project's team, a workshop area, a stage, a storage, and a project information centre.

The community contributes directly to the content and the functioning of the container.

# 1 Key take-aways

- Participation is a messy process, and it should be adaptable and flexible - it is NOT a straight line.
- When working with digital tools, adapt them to the level of digital literacy of the participants
- Provide training and information on the use (and usefulness) of digital tools
- Language can be a barrier in areas with mixed ethnical population; therefore, provide information in several languages
- People above 60 or under 16 are more challenging to reach, so develop a strategy (special activities) focusing on those target groups - games, small (drawing) competitions for the youngsters, or socialising activities for the elderly
- Identify potential ambassadors for your project within the community and provide them with the tools to 'spread the word' and catalyse the community further

- They will also be the people who will do the most within the project, so take care that they don't burn out and step out of the project
- Building a community and consensus takes time. Time was limited for this project (due to the application for funding deadlines), but the project gathered interest from inhabitants rather easily, given its pioneering character. For future similar neighbourhood-scale renovation interventions, allowing more time for co-creation activities is of the essence.
- Be critical about what you want to achieve don't overwhelm the community with too many meetings and activities
- If there is a voting procedure necessary, give a voice to the people who are less extrovert and assertive as well - ensure that everybody gets a say by facilitating and moderating discussions
- Tell a compelling story and communicate the benefits for the community but also for individuals.

The Ladder of Participation was used throughout the whole community engagement process as an instrument for reflecting on progress made. While the aim is not necessarily to reach the highest level on the ladder, the organized activities aimed to incorporate various levels of engagement, providing the inhabitants with enough information, tools, and knowledge to proactively contribute to their neighbourhood transformation and generate a long-lasting change.





Photo credits: Aron Urb and Tallinn Municipality