



# Rebels in their own job: How digging into a municipal mystery turned invited youth participation in an urban planning process into uninvited activism

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## Abstract

Youth participation has become an important mechanism in many aspects of society, research and democratic institutions and in urban planning specifically. Yet, the ideal of participation often collides with the realities of planning as practice. In this article, we outline the halting process of transforming an old villa owned by the municipality into a youth house, and how youth trained as co-researchers transitioned from being invited participants to becoming uninvited activists wanting to hold decision-makers accountable for the delay. The empirical findings from Oslo, Norway highlight the complex *processes* of ‘thick’ participation practices to strengthen local democracy building.

## KEYWORDS

activism, municipalities, thick participation, urban planning, youth

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will outline the process of an actual municipal mystery: how a group of local youth employed as ‘Youth Ambassadors’ and trained as co-researchers took part in solving the puzzle—and how they were sanctioned when insisting on accountability. An old villa owned by the municipality of Oslo, the capital of Norway, was being renovated into a youth house, but the work had halted. No one seemed to know why, and this ‘institutional amnesia’ kept the renovation process at a stalemate. The youth that had been involved in participation processes to influence the design and program of the youth house, were kept in the dark—as were the employees in the municipal district.

To assist us in revealing what happened and how the youth involved experienced taking part in this process of solving the municipal mystery, we engaged one of the former Youth Ambassadors as our research assistant and co-author of this article, Bjørk Brøndmo Engerbakk. She shares her reflections on the transformative process she was part of, beginning with this recollection:

Working as a youth ambassador, our job was to choose what to do with granted money from the municipality, especially directed to youth. For instance, youth parties with different activities such as dance contest, singing contests or a quiz, a Halloween party and making a festival. During the job interviews we were told only our imagination should stop us when it came to wishes for activities. However, from a point of view of an adult, or a citizen planner, I am under the impression of the job being an arena for youth to get included in the work society. Which it turned out to be.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

Together with Bjørk, we identify the transition from invited youth participation to uninvited *activism* within a planned participation process in a local community in Oslo. Often defined as action to achieve results to bring about political and/or social change, activism seems to require an active, conscious act of activism on behalf of the youth, although some scholars question whether this excludes a significant portion of practices of activism (Taft & O’Kane, 2023). What we describe in this article is *the becoming of youth activists*, as told from the point of view of one of the youths themselves and us researchers involved in the process as partners in a national action research project. We make use of the conceptualization of activism as expressed by co-author Engerbakk as a direct consequence of working on this article: ‘The first time I felt like an activist was when I went against what was asked of me, and I felt engaged in the subject itself’.

In this article, we will investigate processes of what we call ‘thick’ youth participation involving co-research competencies and perspectives that can bring forth such unexpected practices of youth activism. We will discuss the paradoxical situation that occurred *after* the young co-researchers presented their findings to the involved political actors and the dilemmas that we unintentionally created by involving young people already hired by a municipal district in Oslo to be ‘Youth Ambassadors’, in our action research process. What informal sanctions are youth subjected to when they cross the lines of expected and accepted actions of participation and what strategies do youth and collaborating partners have at hand to respond to and challenge such sanctions? To conclude, we argue that the notion of *what participation is and can be*, needs to be reconsidered in collaboration with youth *if we aim to take the youth’s own experiences seriously*. We also suggest recommendations for policy, practice and future research on urban planning, participation processes and youth involvement.

Back to the municipal mystery: The renovation process of turning the old villa into a place for youth to hang out had been decided by local politicians with the backing of the municipal administration in 2014. The 'process' had thus been ongoing for years, already in motion since the first politicians and local media published suggestions that the villa would be a perfect location for local youth. It had been standing empty for years, and for a brief period, it was occupied by a small DIY urban gardening group of young adults. The negative media attention brought forward when the police forcefully evicted the young occupiers, worked as a catalysing factor on the politicians' will to act. They approved the budget for the house renovation. The renovation of the old villa was meant to take only a few years, and several youths from the neighbourhood junior high school were enrolled early on in participation activities as future users. Then the process suddenly stopped. No one knew why. And no information was given. Even the municipal officers did not know why the municipality had halted the renovation. The municipal employers of the Youth Ambassadors gave the group the task of investigating digital archives, interviewing municipal actors and looking for who oversaw the renovation process and why it had mysteriously come to a halt, in collaboration with the research team co-authoring this article.

## OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: TRANS-DISCIPLINARY ACTION RESEARCH

The collaboration between the municipality and the researchers was first established in 2017 when a research group at the Oslo Metropolitan University designed a project and received a grant from a health foundation to do co-created research on youth participation in urban neighbourhoods in Oslo. We were approached by officials in a municipal district, with a relevant case for testing new art-based methods and tools: How to engage local youth as participatory actors in the renovation process of an old villa that local politicians had decided would become a youth house? The research group was a transdisciplinary team, consisting of a photographer, an artist and an architect, in addition to several social anthropologists and a human geographer. Our approach builds on *participatory action research (PAR)* and *citizen social science* (Albert et al., 2021; Raanaas et al., 2018), and we consequentially applied and tested a multitude of methods like walk-alongs, narrative embroidery, drawing sessions, co-created visual inquiries and informal, participant observation of workshops with youth and municipal officials involved in the renovation process (Hagen & Andersen, 2021; Hagen & Osuldsen, 2021; Tolstad et al., 2017; Tolstad & Dalseide, 2021; Vestby, 2020). In a continuation of this project, we received funding to partner with eight municipalities and districts in and outside of Oslo. The data gathered consisted of participant observation of physical and digital meetings, workshops and events organized either by the municipality or the research team, formal and informal interviews with youth and municipal officials on district and city levels, email correspondence between the researchers, youth and municipal officials, physical and digital materials from workshops and media and communication content produced by both the youth and the municipality (e.g., post-its, drawings, photos, maps). The data collection methods and approach were approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, and informed consent was secured from the participants in the project.

The research group followed the renovation and participation processes in the district for 5–6 years, with a short pause between project funding. In the latter period another young research assistant in her mid-twenties, Lorenzen, co-author of this article, joined the team. The trans-disciplinary team collaborated closely with 2–3 municipal workers from the district, their leader, and several communication advisors from the municipal city level, in addition to the

group of about 10 youth in junior high and high school age. As action researchers, the team simultaneously collected data that forms the basis of the empirical descriptions in this article and were involved in the testing and application of co-created and co-research methods together with the municipal partners.

Below, we outline the context of youth participation and urban planning in Norway before we describe the empirical case in more detail. We show how the inherent, yet tacit power relations in municipal planning and the lack of a common understanding of what participation is in practice, can lead to youth becoming sanctioned rather than seen as assets in urban development by the municipal officials responsible for inviting youth into the process.

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN NORWEGIAN URBAN PLANNING

Youth participation has become an important mechanism in many aspects of society, research, and democratic institutions in general, and in urban planning specifically. Yet, the ideal of participation often collides with the conflicting realities of planning phases as practice (Andersen et al., 2020; Cele & van der Burgt, 2015). The understanding of what constitutes meaningful participation is much debated (Alparone & Rissotto, 2001; Wilks & Rudner, 2013). Here we build on a definition of participation in urban planning as both the right and the opportunity to participate in and influence decision-making processes (Bygdås & Hagen, 2022). Despite the progress made in many countries in focusing on youth in laws and regulations through newly established arenas for participation, young people still occupy too few positions to make an actual impact (Bessant, 2004), also in urban change processes (Mansfield et al., 2021). There is a lack of knowledge on *how* youth can be included in decision-making and participation spaces in urban planning (Crowley & Moxon, 2017).

Youth participation in municipal planning has recently become part of a discourse about modern citizenship, in accordance with the development in most Western governments, ‘so much so that it has become a policy cliché to say that “increased youth participation” will “empower” young people, help build community and remedy a range of social problems’ (Bessant, 2004, p. 387). This shift is linked to the integration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) into national laws and regulations. In Norway, this integration took place in 2003. Participation has accordingly, at least in theory, become an important mechanism in international as well as in Norwegian urban planning. When it comes to influencing the planning of local communities, Article 12 in the UN convention is particularly relevant: Children have the right to express their views ‘*freely* in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being *given due weight* in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (our italics). Also, Article 13, on the right to be informed, is influential when looking at the barriers to youth participation. Several official Norwegian guidelines explicitly mention the state regulations on participation, and both research on planning and the Norwegian national policy guidelines for children and planning argue for the importance of participation, also early in the planning process (Hagen, 2021).

Yet, the ideal of participation is more often rhetoric than instructive of a rigorous practice of continuous involvement of young citizens. Planners and politicians argue for children’s participation from a democratic point of view, but in practice, it is often seen as inefficient and disturbing to the planning process (Khakee & Barbanente, 2003). The good intentions can hide power hierarchies and, in many cases, make children and youth involuntarily part of the adult’s agendas and exclusion mechanisms (see Mansfield et al., 2021).

There is a growing market for consultancy services on children and youth participation activities since municipal and private actors that are required by law to uphold a minimum level of engagement often lack the competencies or resources needed. This way of professionalizing participation (Kelty, 2019) coincides with the influx of another type of consultancy services, that of communication consultancy for the public sector, to address citizens, the media and the private sector. We will see below that municipal bureaucrat's actions at times function as gatekeeping serving the local politicians over public interest, even in instances of invited youth participation, in ways that went against the principles of Article 13 in the UN convention of the rights of the child.

This lack of clarity of what participation *is* in laws and regulations and thus also in practice is part of the challenge for such—often unintentional—violations, leaving municipal workers at a loss to navigate youth participation with self-confidence and methodological rigour (Hagen, 2021). The confusion we argue is partly due to underdeveloped theorizing and immature definition-building, among both scholars and practitioners of youth participation in the Norwegian context. This leaves the youth vulnerable to contradictory expectations and at risk of receiving informal sanctions when they go against what is asked of them by adults, like the Youth Ambassadors experienced when they began to define the agenda themselves, as co-researchers and emerging activists in their own borough.

## EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND: THICK PARTICIPATION AND THE YOUTH AMBASSADORS

Article 5 of the Norwegian Planning and Building Act (2008) states that ‘the municipality has a particular responsibility to secure *active participation* from groups that require special facilitation, including children and youth’ (authors' translation and italics). The word active is meant to reinforce the responsibility to engage youth in planning processes beyond the bare minimum requirements (see Hagen, 2021). Yet, there is no definition proposed as to what *active participation* should look like in practice, or whether there is a maximum limit as to how ‘active’ this participation can be before turning into something else—like activism.

In our attempts to clarify this somewhat murky terminology, we have earlier introduced what we call ‘thick participation’ (Rosten et al., 2021). Hopefully, this notion will enable a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between agency, empowerment, participation and acts of activism. Thick participation, we argue, is based on the following three components: (1) thick relations, (2) thick understandings and (3) thick descriptions (Rosten et al., 2021). *Thick relations*, or multiplex relations (Christie, 1982; Eriksen, 2010), imply that people know each other in several different ways or capacities, something which both strengthens and complicates the bonds between them. With *thick understanding* we mean understandings that go in depth rather than in width, to gain enough information to portray and present recognizable knowledge about and to people, also when generalizing the insight to apply to more than the few people studied (Stewart, 1998). *Thick descriptions* are about presenting people's everyday experiences in a way that gives the receiver an understanding and experience of the complexity of their lives (Geertz, 1973/1993).

As we began experiencing and identifying the barriers to meaningful youth participation, we shifted our focus from solely developing new methods and tools to looking at the enablers and potential impacts on systems and structures hindering youth involvement in policy change. The collaboration with the Youth Ambassadors became a driving force for this renewed focus,

although unintentionally. Bjørk recalls how she was introduced to the assignment as a Youth Ambassador hired by the municipality:

The work with the youth house was also one of our responsibilities in the job. It turned out to be a lot more relevant part of the job than it first seemed like. We were told we would participate in sharing ideas and wishes for a youth house that would be built during the next years.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

According to Coles (1995, 2000) participation is the applauded way of becoming a citizen-as-worker, with the authorities seeing youth participation as extended training or schooling, supporting their integration into adulthood (Bessant, 2004). Like Bjørk and her young colleagues experienced, the efforts to engage them in public planning processes, was as much about giving them work experience, as about exercising their lawful right to express their own views and opinions. These different and simultaneous positions and roles given by multiple local actors came into conflict when the youth gained the skills necessary for asking critical questions. They transitioned from being engaged in ‘thin’ participation activities to becoming enmeshed in ‘thick’ participation practices, and over time was enabled to design activities of their own choosing.

## THEORETICAL APPROACH: POWER AND ROLES OF PARTICIPATION

To better understand the complex positions young people acquire when they step outside of the assigned roles by adult actors, we draw on the three dimensions of power discussed by Steven Lukes (1974/2005): *decision-making power*, *agenda power* and *thought control*. In a recent literature review on children’s participation in urban planning, Mansfield et al. (2021) find that there is a total lack of literature on children or young people *driving* urban planning agendas and processes, what Lukes (1974/2005) calls agenda power, the capacity to set the agenda. Also, the barriers and enablers that children themselves identify, such as processes being boring, tiring, or restrictive, are discussed in the context of taking pre-cautionary measures in future participation processes—not as incentives to allow children to design and determine processes of participation (Mansfield et al., 2021). Following Lukes’ (1974/2005) terminology, this latter position can be defined as youth holding decision-making power in a planning process.

Lukes (1974/2005) finally explains *thought control* as the power to define the mindset of an organization. Usually, it is the role of the municipal administration and adult actors within this system, to exercise these forms of power—often used to ‘prevent conflict from arising’ (Lukes, 1974/2005, p. 23). Connecting to the case of the Youth Ambassadors and the municipal mystery they were assigned to solve, this is the kind of power that youth with activist aspirations may exercise, as they question and challenge the status quo.

The matrix of Richards-Schuster and Plachta Elliott (2019) where they delineate the different degrees of youth participation in evaluation efforts has informed our analysis. They distinguish between youth as consultants, collaborators, partners or leaders of participatory evaluation processes. These positions can be held by the same youth simultaneously, as different adult actors have varied intentions and perceptions of that youth’s role in a process. They can also shift during a process, and among the group of youth themselves.

Inspired by Haraway (2008) we finally see how youth can *become with* the tools and products of their own making. In our case, the youth transitioned from participants into becoming activists together with the material object that we refer to as the ‘timeline’. They both seemed to acquire the confidence and skills to ask critical questions, and they were presented with platforms of communication that they had previously not been aware of. This manifestation of events, imprinted on a 4×1.5-m grey paper roll first put up on a wall in the vicinities of our research institute, later became the main reference object in the youths’ endeavour to shake the municipal actors and politicians out of their institutional amnesia.

## SOLVING THE MYSTERY TOGETHER: THE MAKING AND PRESENTATION OF ‘THE TIMELINE’

Bjørk recalls that she and the other youths did not know what to expect when they came to our research institute for the first time. They had previously been introduced to a local historian who told them about the story of the old villa, and they had asked questions to employees from the municipality about things they thought were unclear regarding the process. The researchers now suggested that the youth should print out everything that was relevant to the process and attach it on a big piece of paper, Bjørk recollects:

The scientists provided help on how to start searching in the archives. They guided us through the complicated website of the municipality and made it less overwhelming to search through it. As we found different answers and unclear answers, I could feel the scientist becoming more engaged and really wanting us to do something about this inequality of empty promises by the municipality. The fact that someone with more authority than us pointed out the mistakes that we saw, made it feel more validated in a way. When you are a teenager, you are often being told how things are, almost as a child, and you are expected to accept it. When you don’t have much knowledge about the field either, such as city planning, you don’t have much choice but to follow instructions.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

The youths’ own agenda was clearly expressed at the workshop: They wanted to contribute to the realization of the youth house, within a time frame that also allowed for them to be users—as the age limit was 19 years. Was this possible or not? They aimed to get in touch with the people that held power and argued that they wanted to hold someone responsible: To find out why the process came to a halt, and who was responsible for the budget of the planned youth house, and they wanted to get the attention of the local newspaper.

Over the next few months, the youth ambassadors participated in a series of bi-weekly workshops facilitated by the researchers. Here they dug into the municipal archives, they found case files and minutes from meetings where the youth house was discussed, read newspaper articles about the house, and interviewed local politicians, municipal employees, and other people who they found had been involved in or was relevant to the process. Bjørk recalls the process of compiling the data on the timeline:

By making the timeline, a lot of important information was gathered at one place. However, the timeline also included hopes and plans we had with both the house and the process for the future. For instance, I remember very well a drawing that

was put up that said, “have a coffee with the politicians”. It illustrates how we were eager to talk to the people involved. The scientists made us feel like these goals were available to us. It is interesting how it might not have felt available to us if we were in a different setting. As an individual or just a group of teenagers alone, that system doesn't feel as available as it is intended to be.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

When the youth later brought the timeline to the local politicians to demand that they do something about it, some of the adults appeared surprised by the amount of information the youths had managed to gather. ‘We want you to make sure that the renovation of the house will happen, and we want to be involved in the process’, one of the youths said to the adult audience of municipal officials, our observing research assistant reported from the meeting open to the public, called ‘open half-hour’. The youths had seemingly solved the puzzle: The renovation project had halted because there were disagreements about how much the municipality should pay in rent to the city level undertaking that was responsible for the renovation of the villa, to run the youth house after the completed renovation. Still, they did not yet know who they could hold accountable for the delay. As much as they pushed for answers, the municipality didn't seem to share their enthusiasm for digging further to identify the responsible, as we will describe in more detail below.

This prompted the youth to add to their agenda. They decided to keep pushing, and get insight into the upcoming planning process to figure out if they could take part in it. They aspired to get a meeting with the Municipal Undertaking for Social Service Buildings (OBY). They particularly aimed for OBY to start the renovation before the Youth Ambassadors were finished with the mission by the end of the school year. Again, they stated that they wanted to be able to use the renovated youth house themselves before they turned 19. The power that the youths now possessed, particularly through the design and ownership of the timeline, became a visual reminder to all as the municipal officials were asked by their managers to hang the timeline on a highly visible wall space in the district administration office.

## THE OPINION PIECE: TIMING, CRITIQUE AND SANCTIONS

Emails and inquiries from the youth towards OBY during the winter of 2020 resulted in nothing. The youth thus decided to write an opinion piece for the local newspaper, urging someone to take responsibility for the halting process. Our communication advisor at the research institute gave them a crash course. Bjørk has this recollection of the events:

After a lot of research, we, the youth, felt that there was something wrong about how this process had turned. Time after time we felt neglected by the municipal employees responsible for big delays in the process. We wrote an opinion piece with a clear wish to be included in the future and a critique of the lack of responsibility in the process.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

Two of the Youth Ambassadors were listed as authors of the opinion piece. The headline was ‘Youths [in the borough] was promised a youth house in 2014. Why will no one take responsibility?’ (our



translation). In the piece, the youths wrote about their findings, they argued why it was important for youths to have a youth house in their neighbourhood and they were critical of how the municipality and others involved had handled the process. This was how Bjørk recollects the reactions following the publication of the opinion piece:

About a week after the opinion piece had been published, we got the complaints. It still isn't clear to me how I became aware of the situation. I do not believe we got a direct message, but rather overheard things from different adults discussing. It was more a feeling of the serious atmosphere that developed in the room. The feeling that we have done something wrong. Adults discussing with each other and adults unsure about their position over us.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

One result of digging into the municipal mystery and publishing an opinion piece about this was that the youth transitioned from being invited participants in an urban planning process to being seen and treated as trouble. This became clear to us researchers when the research team's young research assistant prepared to facilitate a digital workshop with the youths the following day. In the evening, she received an email from the municipality employees they collaborated with in the borough. They asked her to join a meeting to discuss how the municipal employees should handle the opinion piece. From their reaction and comments in the meeting, she deduced that the leaders in the municipality thought the opinion piece came at an odd time. The Municipal Undertaking for Social Service Buildings (OBY) were about to restart the process of renovating the old villa after the politicians had finally agreed on a solution for the house. To the youth, it seemed like the leaders in the municipality did not understand why they had written an opinion piece that was critical when the process seemed to be back on track. They stated in the meeting that the youths should *not dwell on the past but instead focus on the future*. This was also said to the youths in the workshop the following day, and the research assistant heard the same sentence repeatedly in the months to come. In a later discussion when working on this article, Bjørk exclaims that it felt somewhat illegal and wrong to dig into the archives and print the results, pinning them on the wall.

Professional adults tend to celebrate the performance of youth participation, rather than the actual ideas, knowledge or critique the youth put forward (Hart, 1992). Before the opinion piece was published, the communication department at the city level had planned for a media story in the same local newspaper as the city councillor for industry and ownership. This had been postponed because the youth couldn't attend the first time. The city councillor explicitly wanted the youth present when they met the press. Before the interview, the communication advisors wanted to «prep» the youth, to do what they called 'advance clarification', the purpose being that 'everyone speaks the same language and that we now focus forward'.

Three of the youths joined the media session. The purpose was to 'set the city councillor up for success' and the councillor was thus the focus of the interview, according to the communication advisor. Even though the communication advisor didn't have a prep meeting with the youths, they were, again, told that the purpose of the session was to focus on the future.

Later we did a group interview with the municipal employees in the borough, who stated:

And that was perhaps the biggest problem for us, that we were put in such a pinch where we somehow could not support them [the youths], or that our leaders did not support them. So, we had to say, as we talked about last year, that we had to tell them that "yes, this was a little bad" in a way, even though it was our responsibility. That was our responsibility to the youths.

We follow Bessant when she asks, ‘If policy-makers are serious about improving opportunities for young peoples’ democratic practice, then why do they so easily ignore the barriers encountered?’ (2004, p. 397). Over the years we have experienced a variety of often surprising barriers and sanctions on participating youth—particularly and maybe not so surprisingly when the youth’s engagement comes in the form of critique and thus turns on the power holders (see Engerbakk, 2021). As Bjørk states in hindsight about the reboot of the renovation process:

If we hadn’t been brought together and been asked to do tasks such as interviewing politicians and attending their open half-hour, it probably wouldn’t have happened.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

To the youth, the paradox in the situation was that they were hired to do this job but now the municipality did not want them to discuss their findings openly or to hold anyone accountable. To the researchers and the municipal workers closest to the youth, the dilemma that emerged was an ethical one; They were responsible for putting the youth in this position, by training the youth and introducing a choice of activities and strategies as part of the innovation and participation action research project. Now the youth had found their own agenda, regardless of the intentions of the research partners.

## **HOLDING POWER ACCOUNTABLE: THE YOUTHS’ STRATEGIES TOWARDS GAINING AGENDA POWER**

One of the youth’s own strategies when faced with indirect sanctions from their own employer, was to insist on interviewing the director of OBY, even though the renovation process was well underway. In hindsight Bjørk points to this as the moment she felt more like an activist, when she planned for and asked questions to reveal what lay behind the director’s answers. This is how she remembers this event:

I arrived at the park where the villa still stood empty a warm day in June 2020. The last weeks I had prepared for the interview I was here to do today. I was very excited and nervous. This was a person that hadn’t been very available to us and someone we had wished to talk to all along regarding the complicated process we had looked at. He was the head of a part of the municipality responsible for management of protect worthy buildings in Oslo, the OBY director.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

The youth continued their research and recently found out that the reason for the huge delays in the project was a conflict about money between different parts of the municipality, in other words, a conflict within the municipality. The OBY director would be one of the parts of this conflict. Trying to grasp what the dilemma was about was difficult, Bjørk later explains, but it was to the youths’ understanding that OBY heightened the rent on the house and the municipality didn’t want to pay that price. How they solved this conflict is still unclear to her. Suddenly they did pay the money that was required for the house, but why? She recalls

I wanted to ask the OBY director why they had to raise the rent. It also seemed like many of the delays came from OBY. It felt like the project would never happen because they didn't want it to. And we wondered, then what would happen with the money and of course also the house. Did they have other plans for the house that we didn't know of? Was the money used for other things?

These were questions we asked ourselves and different people in the municipality many times, without getting clear answers. We were referred to a different person in a different department, time after time. Could we finally get our answers this time?

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

To get access to the director, the youth agreed on the 'rules' for the interview put forth by the municipal communication officer—but they bent the rules during the interview, like any good journalist, researcher or activist. Before the interview, the youth talked through the questions and their own expectations, Bjørk recalls:

I remember that we were nervous. Especially after the incident with the opinion piece we were a little bit scared to say something we weren't allowed to say. The scientists and our bosses made us certain we should say whatever we felt we needed to say and that we weren't in the wrong to do so. Right before our interview, the OBY director's communication advisor approaches us. "Are you ready for the interview"? She asks us. She gathers us closely and speaks in a lower voice. The OBY director haven't arrived yet. She tells us that it is important that we focus on the future during the interview and not to dwell too much on the past. Then the OBY director arrives, and we start the interview.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

She later describes how many of the answers they got during the interview felt like practiced answers with a lot of complicated words and long sentences about the building process (Engerbakk, 2021). This was something they hoped they could avoid. The information they got during the interview was mostly information they already knew, and Bjørk recalls how it was told in a way that made it hard for them to ask the critical questions they wanted to ask.

We do end up asking some critical questions about the process which we feel we shouldn't ask. For instance, we tell the director why the time aspect is important to us and why we want to talk about the past and not only the future.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

We see here how the youth tried to navigate the roles of being simultaneously hired by the municipality, occupying the roles of participants in the planning process and as co-researchers involved in an action-research project, juggling positions of power unfamiliar both to them and the municipal officials, including the communication advisors. To the youth, the urgency of the matter was an important part of their motivation for getting answers; soon they would be too old to use the youth house themselves.

## ANALYSING 'THICK' PARTICIPATION PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

Youth are often viewed as binaries, either within the dominant traditional disengaged paradigm as passive, devoid of political interest and naturally inherently delinquent (Bessant, 2004) or within the critical traditional engaged paradigm, as actively political in new forms (Farthing, 2010). The way youth participation is often implemented in Norwegian municipalities today, with singular and short-term processes with a random selection of youth (Klausen et al., 2013), one has little success in building deep relations and dialogue over time. This is what we call 'thin' participation. Co-research strategies, like we developed in collaboration with the Youth Ambassadors, are one way of securing the opposite: thick participation. It can be defined as long-term and relationship-building engagement, with the aim of deepening the understanding of others, be it youth or any other demographic, and having access to a variety of tools and methods that help portray the knowledge acquired in accessible and empowering ways.

Even though children and youth have more rights and possibilities to express their views than they had before the integration of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in national laws and regulations, we see that the core elements of participation are still monopolized by adults: They decide how to seek advice from young people on matters concerning them and are solely responsible for bringing their perspectives to decision-makers (Musinguzi & Ellingsen, 2018, p. 3). Experiences like the one described in this article inspired us to start theorizing what youth participation *can be* if one aims to build competence on a level where youth can and will make their own independent opinions on the subject matter.

In the case of the mystery with the old villa, we saw how the youth were invited by the municipal employees *on local level* as collaborators of the process, but the municipal office at city level, including the communication advisors, seemed to treat the youth as mere consultants with limited responsibility. This created a conflict also between the different levels of municipal employees. To add to the level of complexity, the youth were treated as partners by the researchers in the innovation project and trained as co-researchers being encouraged to ask questions to decision-makers to gain knowledge on the process.

Also, the youths' roles and positions shifted as they became more knowledgeable than the adults involved, be it local politicians, civil servants or researchers, shifting into the position of power that Lukes (1974/2005) calls thought control. They turned into independent *drivers of the process* or *agents of change* (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2017). This is more in line with the leader role that Richards-Schuster and Plachta Elliott (2019) describe, where youth are the ones inviting adults into their processes and setting their own goals. Such practices are what Mansfield et al. (2021) argue is missing from the literature on children's participation.

The knowledge accumulated from participatory processes is often scarce and filtered through the interpretations of adults (Mawn et al., 2016). Through co-research practices we see how youth get access to tools they can use to better and improve their own situation or their surroundings (Hoechner, 2015; Raanaas et al., 2018). In this way, they can challenge rather than maintain established power structures. They come in a position to set agendas and influence decision-making. They might even exert *thought control*, in Lukes' (1974/2005) terminology, by modifying the mindset of the municipal organization. According to Bjørk, the researchers' approach to thick participation opened possibilities to make new relations in unexpected ways for the youth. Also, the youths' understanding became more independent and critical and their description of the timeline was impossible to overlook.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: ‘FOCUS ON THE FUTURE, DON’T DWELL ON THE PAST’

We never planned for the Youth Ambassadors to become activists. Yet, the historian on our team did introduce them to the recent history of youth activism in a Western context. The former Youth ambassador turned research assistant, Bjørk, later described how the changes in power dynamic made her more unsure about her role:

We were hired by the municipality to do this job. And even though writing an opinion piece about the municipality we were hired by could in hindsight be problematic I think there are two rights that stand as more important in this case.

The foremost being the right to criticize our society. Secondly, writing this opinion piece was a given task from our employees, it wasn't something we did to turn against them. Now that we kind of felt like rebels in our own job, we felt that we had a different kind of power. The fact that someone told us we were wrong in writing it gave us the power of motivation. It made us see more problematic things about the municipality which we maybe didn't want to see before we started looking in the archives. Also, we saw how much chaos we could make in our position. This was motivating in a way because it made us really see injustice and that we wanted it to be differently.

Bjørk, former Youth Ambassador

Close to 2 years after the opinion piece was published, the renovated youth house finally opened to accommodate young people from this and the neighbouring borough. The Youth Ambassadors' end goal of the youth house coming into existence had been met. Even though the process of transforming the villa into a youth house was delayed several years, when it finally did open it became a youth house truly co-created with youths living in the neighbourhood. Yet, their goal of being able to use the house themselves was unsuccessful for some of the involved youth, by the sheer amount of time that had passed from the initial process started. They were no longer recognized as the target group for the youth house, too old to be legal users.

This empirical account of a group of youth transitioning from invited participants of an urban planning process to uninvited activists may help practitioners and policymakers in delineating the shifting and organic character of youth involvement, rather than attempting to fit their fluid experiences into pre-fixed forms suitable to established governance systems. Experience from this and other action research projects has shown us how aspirations for ‘thick participation’ equals organizational change, as established actors within different sectors must find new ways of planning, working, collaborating and processing experience-based knowledge from the citizens. This might remedy what Mansfield et al. (2021) refer to as the top-down technocratic approach of planners and authorities not willing to give up power. The experience of the stakeholders involved is therefore valuable data for gaining a deeper understanding of the relational aspect of participation processes, and of the effects of invited and uninvited acts of participation (Wynne, 2007). This will be the subject of future research.

The results we draw from this empirical case invite social scientists to further study the ambivalence of invited youth participation and its shortcomings in actual redistribution of power, and exploration of ways in which youth activism already are inherent, albeit

unwelcomed part of youth participation. Instead of applauding youth's performance as engaged, soon-to-be-citizens, or making them 'hostages' of the implementation of changes and already-made decisions resulting from their participation (Listerborn, 2007, p. 65), we argue that recognizing the worth of the insights, ideas and most of all, the critical inquiries of youth must be the first step towards making inclusive cities. This holds the potential to enhance not only youth impact in urban planning, but also youth engagement in society at large, through the 'power of motivation'.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The project received ethics approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Code: 889626.

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