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USER ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Introduction

The development of urban areas requires active collaboration between project stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle, from the front end to the operations phases (Artto et al., 2016). Municipalities must constantly develop their infrastructure and services to meet the needs and expectations of various citizen groups (e.g., children, workers and pensioners). Consequently, municipalities are considering ways to engage citizens in urban development projects. Citizen engagement plays a crucial role in urban development projects, as it promotes the consideration of communities' needs and preferences, potentially leading to more effective and well-received outcomes. Engaging citizens in urban development projects empowers them to have a say in their urban environment, fostering a sense of ownership and community pride (Kujala et al., 2022). Successful engagement benefits not only citizens but also cities and decision makers, as it may lead to better informed decisions, increased project acceptance and improved project outcomes (Purvis et al., 2015).

In this chapter, we focus on citizens as users of urban development projects. While citizens can assume various roles in such projects, it is the users who especially benefit from the final outcome of the project, such as a public building. In this chapter, we define user engagement as 'organizational practices that are used to involve users in urban development project's organizational activities' (Greenwood, 2007, pp. 317–318). Even though previous research on stakeholder engagement in construction projects has emphasised collaboration between public and private actors (e.g., Cui et al., 2018; Hedborg & Karrbom Gustavsson, 2020) at the front end of projects (Candel et al., 2021;

Toukola et al., 2023), increasing attention has been placed on understanding how users' needs can be better acknowledged in different phases of these projects (Torvinen & Ulkuniemi, 2016). The goal of user engagement is often different in different phases of the project lifecycle. It can be assumed that the practices of user engagement would vary as well (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020). Moreover, it is not evident what kinds of practices should be adopted to engage various user groups. Thus, there is a need to better understand how public project organisations (e.g., municipalities) engage project users in publicly procured projects throughout the project lifecycle.

To study user engagement in publicly procured construction projects, we conducted a multiple case study in two Finnish municipalities. This chapter answers the following research question: *How do municipalities engage users in different phases of the construction project lifecycle?* We studied two urban development projects in different phases of the project lifecycle: one under early project planning and the other under the construction finalisation and early use phases. The two cases complement each other, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of user engagement across various project lifecycle phases. Our primary data comprise semi-structured interviews (15 in total) with representatives of both municipalities and project users.

The findings of this chapter reveal the practices of user engagement, how various user needs are communicated and how users' needs and expectations are eventually considered in the project work. The findings show how the intensity of user engagement is often strongest in the project front end and the finalisation phases and how, around project commissioning, actors continue to collaborate to solve final issues in the project. This study contributes to the discussion on user engagement in publicly procured projects by demonstrating the importance of user engagement in committing them to urban development projects and how decision makers should employ engagement practices when developing urban spaces.

The chapter begins with a literature review on user engagement in urban development projects. Next, research methodology and the two case studies are presented in detail, followed by the results section. Finally, the implications of the research and practice and policy recommendations are discussed.

Literature review

Stakeholder engagement in urban development projects

Urban development projects, such as the construction and maintenance of infrastructure, housing or public buildings, are important for municipalities, as they transform the urban landscape and create value for citizens as end

users of these different premises. These kinds of projects often have a long life-cycle, spanning from the initial planning and design of the project to finally implementing the project and using the developed products. It might take several years to implement such projects, and the final product should last for decades, thus bringing sustainable value to societies (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019).

Projects often involve various stakeholders beyond the focal organisations implementing the projects, such as citizens, media and non-profit organisations (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2010). Stakeholders can be defined as individuals or groups that can impact, or be impacted by, organisations' objectives (or, in this study, urban development projects) (Freeman et al., 2007). Recent research has studied how to engage these various stakeholders in projects, meaning 'organizational practices that are used to involve stakeholders in urban development project's organizational activities' (Greenwood, 2007, pp. 317–318). This research on stakeholder engagement highlights a managing *for* stakeholder perspective, suggesting that organisations should generate value not only for internal project stakeholders but also for external ones who, despite lacking official or contractual ties to the project organisation, may still influence or be influenced by the project (Freeman et al., 2007; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020).

Even though the importance of engaging external stakeholders in larger construction projects is acknowledged, it remains challenging to identify suitable and successful practices for engaging stakeholders throughout the lifecycles of projects (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Kujala et al., 2022). Especially in urban development projects, a project organisation's (e.g., a municipality) primary purpose is to create value for all stakeholders, extending beyond stockholders, suppliers and customers, and organisations should pay careful attention to their relationships with stakeholders (Eslerod et al., 2015). In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on a specific aspect of stakeholder engagement: citizens as users of urban development projects.

Practices to engage users in various lifecycle phases

Engaging users in urban development projects is important because they are the primary stakeholders affected once the projects are completed. The importance of local users and communities has been addressed increasingly in studies related to decision-making processes in projects (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022), addressing the social aspects of sustainable development. Typical ways to engage these kinds of stakeholders in projects include methods, such as interviews, forums, workshops and focus group discussions, as well as various digital tools, such as virtual reality, social media, gaming or building information modelling systems (Toukola &

Ahola, 2022). As the goals of user engagement and the possibilities to affect project plans or outcomes vary throughout the project lifecycle, so does user engagement take different forms.

The project front end is an important phase of the project lifecycle because there the possibilities to affect project plans and outcomes are oftentimes the highest (Zerjav et al., 2021). Especially in public projects, the users can be engaged, for example, in the zoning process of new living areas, as they often involve an opportunity for users to state their opinion on the planning. Moreover, some municipalities have used participatory budgeting processes (Sintomer et al., 2012), where users can directly decide which projects are implemented in their neighbourhoods. Many of the studies in the project front-end phase, however, concentrate on the collaboration between public and private sector actors (i.e., internal stakeholders) (e.g., Candell et al., 2021; Toukola et al., 2023) and how projects should be managed for the best outcome. Municipalities represent users' voices in these settings; thus, there is a significant risk of missing users' opinions in project plans if they are not engaged at the project front end.

The project implementation phase concentrates on implementing the project, based on the decisions made at the project front end. The focus here is mostly on cost-efficient management of the project in terms of time, budget and scope. For example, previous studies have focused on the coordination mechanism among various stakeholders (such as contractors, suppliers, developers and consultants) (e.g., Hedborg & Rosander, 2024), and Hietajärvi et al. (2017) concluded that integration needs between stakeholders often decrease when the project proceeds to implementation. Implementing organisations are, however, responsible for communicating with users, especially in the case of public infrastructure projects, to build trust and legitimacy (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022). The implementation phase places high emphasis on project plans, and there is often little room for users to affect the project at this stage, which might explain the scarcity of such studies.

Finally, the project proceeds to the finalisation and use phases after the project has been handed over to the customer. Here, the warranty period starts, and the contractor is often responsible for the project outcome for a number of years to come. The users' voices can be argued to amplify, as when the use of the building starts, some errors can often be found. Previous studies on project management in this phase have concentrated on project learning-related aspects, that is, what stakeholders learnt from the project and what they could have done better in future projects (Hartmann & Dorée, 2015). However, users' viewpoints are often neglected, and more studies should concentrate on addressing the longer impacts of projects and whether the project creates long-term sustainable value for users.

Research method

Research design

Due to the explorative nature of this study, a multiple case study research design was chosen. This research design enables the formation of a deep understanding through the collection of in-depth data from several informants (Yin, 2014). The cases of this study are two public construction projects, and the unit of analysis is the user engagement practices in these projects. The case study design resembles a common process approach (Eisenhardt, 2021) in which the same focal phenomenon is studied purposefully in different settings. In particular, the two cases focus on different phases of the project lifecycle, enabling us to study the practices of user engagement in two different settings. This way, the two cases complement each other, as visualised in Figure 5.1. We anticipate that examining user engagement during both the front-end phase (Zerjav et al., 2021) and the finalisation phase is valuable, as project outcomes are often most affected during these stages.

The goal of *SchoolProject* is the renovation of a primary school in a relatively remote suburb of a middle-sized city. The school facilities have been built in three phases: in the late 1960s, the late 1980s and the early 2000s. In addition to the primary school, several other public services, such as a local library and youth services, are provided in the same facilities. Outside school hours, the facilities are also used by different user groups, clubs etc. Consequently, the renovation project is of interest to many different user groups. We studied the early planning phase of *SchoolProject*, in which user groups' needs and expectations for the project were identified by the city.

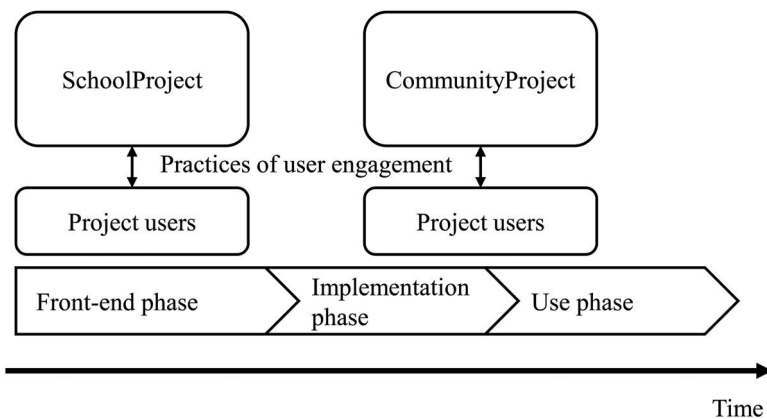


FIGURE 5.1 Case projects and the lifecycle phase they address

Source: Authors.

CommunityProject concerns the construction of a new community centre building in a Finnish municipality with approximately 40,000 inhabitants. This is one of the biggest projects the municipality has ever implemented, being also innovative as it is built out of wood. The building is designed for high school use; however, the adult education centre, music institute and some other smaller groups operate on the same premises. Thus, similarly to *SchoolProject*, the premises are shared among various user groups. The project has been completed, and the new building has been in use since autumn 2023. We studied the finalisation and use phases of *CommunityProject*, to identify how different users' interests were considered in the completed building.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected in spring 2023 (*SchoolProject*) and autumn 2023 (*CommunityProject*) through semi-structured interviews. Altogether, 15 interviews were conducted (Table 5.1). The interviewees covered both user and client perspectives on the two case projects. In addition, in the *SchoolProject* case, we interviewed the consultancy company involved in the user engagement process, and in the *CommunityProject* case, we interviewed the contractor representatives. The list of interviewees was considered sufficient for this study because it includes the majority of key actors representing the buyer and user

TABLE 5.1 Background Information on Interviewees and Interviews

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Stakeholder group</i>	<i>Duration (min)</i>
<i>SchoolProject</i>		
Coordinator	Municipality	60
Youth services representative	User	49
Consultant	External consultant	52
Library representative	User	32
School principal	User	60
Youth services representative	User	48
<i>CommunityProject</i>		
Head of project management	Contractor	54
Principal, High school	User	59
Principal, Adult education centre	User	84
Project manager	Contractor	69
Production engineer	Contractor	88
Head of facility services	Municipality representative/user	38
Responsible supervisor	Contractor	64
Project manager	Municipality representative/user	75
Head of educational administration	Municipality representative/user	50

perspectives to the projects. In terms of the size of the projects, the number of interviews was considered sufficient to make meaningful conclusions in terms of the focus of this study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Moreover, some publicly available data were utilised to verify key facts, and in the SchoolProject case, we also obtained the results of the engagement process conducted earlier for the municipality inhabitants. Preliminary results were discussed with municipalities' representatives to enhance validity and reliability.

The interview outline covered the following topics: the interviewees' background, background of the project, current situation in the project and project timeline; user engagement practices utilised throughout the project lifecycle, interviewees' experiences of user engagement and perceptions of the overall success of the project so far. The interview structure was slightly altered depending on the interviewee and the project. For example, in SchoolProject, we focused on user engagement practices in the front-end phase and expectations expressed by the users. In CommunityProject, we focused on engagement in the finalisation and use phases; thus, we could also discuss how the users' needs were eventually considered in the final building.

Finally, the data analysis proceeded by exploring the data freely to provide a holistic understanding of the two cases. We then specifically coded the data inductively in terms of the user engagement practices utilised, the timing of user engagement and interviewees' perceptions of such practices. Illustrative quotes are employed throughout the chapter to create connections between the conclusions and the data. The quotations have been altered slightly to improve meaning and clarity. To protect the interviewees' privacy, the quotes are anonymised.

Results

User engagement at the project front end: SchoolProject

The user engagement process of SchoolProject began in late 2022. The organisation responsible for developing the project was the property management services of the city. User engagement was led by the property services as well. However, to conduct user engagement in a comprehensive manner, the city collaborated with a consultancy company specialising in user engagement.

User engagement took place in various ways in the front-end phase of SchoolProject. Methods for identifying user expectations included user interviews, a workshop, a survey and an information event. By pursuing user engagement in different ways, the city, with significant help from the consultancy company, could reach a range of user groups in the front-end phase. To promote participation in the user engagement process, the process was promoted on local media, on social media and through 'traditional offline ways'.

The user interviews were targeted at different user groups in the school facilities. Examples of interviewed user groups included personnel of the school, library and youth services, and representatives of local clubs and associations. Altogether, more than 20 user interviews were conducted by the consultancy company. Due to the relatively low number of interviews and the targeted nature of interviews as a form of user engagement, the interviews enabled a deep focus on the needs and expectations of specific user groups. As one interviewee explained, *'The user interviews felt more in time [than the other forms of user engagement]. You really had the opportunity to describe and explain [e.g., your wishes to the interviewers]'*.

In contrast to the individual characteristics of the user interviews, the user workshop enabled the discussion of user expectations in a collaborative manner. The main goal of the workshop was to ideate and discuss users' wishes for the renovated school facilities, especially outside school hours. The workshop featured both individual and group work. As a representative of the consultancy company explained, *'First, the participants of the workshop ideated individually. Then, the individual ideas were discussed and prioritised in small groups. – And after the workshop, we took the written documentation, transferred it to the digital system and analysed the findings'*. The workshop attracted more than 20 participants, most of whom were local residents, employees or users of the school facilities. The workshop findings revealed three main areas of users' expectations: cosiness of the school yard, flexible use of the school facilities (especially outside school hours) and the need for better facilities for the local youth.

The third form of user engagement was a survey. Compared to the user interviews and the workshop, this form of user engagement enabled a significantly higher number of local people to bring up their viewpoints to the user engagement process. Round 150 people responded to the survey. Illustrative groups of respondents included users of the library, residents of nearby neighbourhoods, parents of school pupils and users of the sports hall. The wide range of survey respondents enabled the identification of diverse expectations for the renovation project. In addition, as explained by a representative of the consultancy company, the survey enabled the *'validation of the findings from the user interviews and the user workshop'*.

The fourth and final form of user engagement was a user event. The purpose of this event was to communicate the main results of the user engagement process and the next steps of the project preparations to interested citizens. In terms of user engagement, this event was mainly about unidirectionally informing the citizens and lacked depth in the discussions.

The four forms of user engagement discussed above – user interviews, workshop, survey and user event – illustrate the versatile forms of user engagement conducted at the front end of SchoolProject. These four forms were mostly led by the consultancy company. Partly simultaneously with this early

phase of user engagement, and especially immediately following it, early project planning began with the establishment of a planning group. This group comprised representatives of different city functions, and its first task was to create a preliminary project plan for authorisation by the city council. Consequently, the early work of the planning group also included elements of user engagement – especially consideration of user viewpoints. On one hand, the planning group had to consider the needs and expectations of the official organisational user groups of the project (e.g., school, library and youth services). On the other hand, the viewpoints raised by citizens and other user groups had to be considered as well. However, in this early phase of project planning, only a preliminary project plan was created, and the needs of the organisational user groups were prioritised.

In addition to describing the different forms of user engagement, the interviewees described their perceptions of the user engagement process. In general, the versatile forms of user engagement were appreciated by many interviewees. The interviewees described an open, active and positive atmosphere in the user engagement events. Due to the versatile forms of user engagement and the role of the consultancy company, a wide range of project users were reached, and data on their expectations were collected.

However, some interviewees raised two slightly more concerned viewpoints. First, although getting several user expectations was praised numerous times, the novelty of these ideas was considered quite low. In addition, several interviewees brought up the risks of user disappointment if only quite a few user expectations could be fulfilled in the renovation project: *‘There is always the risk that if people are actively engaged and listened to, but then nothing will happen in the end’*. However, one of the more critical interviewees pondered in the following way:

If the user engagement process was conducted to figure out novel ideas, it was quite useless – but if it was conducted to make the people feel that they have been listened to and they are now happy, then it was definitely worth the money and the effort.

Finally, the early work of the planning group raised some concerns about different organisational user groups. In particular, a few interviewees raised the risk that the requirements of the most powerful organisational user group, the school, would override all other organisational user groups. As one interviewee described, *‘The agenda of one meeting included nothing but issues of the school – [person X] was present, she did not say a word – I was present, I was not asked a single question’*.

Engaging in the finalisation and use phases: CommunityProject

The construction of CommunityProject started in 2021, but design planning of the building had begun already in 2014. In these early phases, the users

were engaged in various workshops, and finally, in 2017, the users could participate in voting in the architectural competition, where the jury and the users reached the same conclusion regarding the winner concept. Thus, the foundation for the engagement had already been built, and all project stakeholders agreed to engage users whenever appropriate.

In the construction phase between 2021 and 2023, the main engagement activities occurred from late 2022 to project handover in 2023. At the beginning of the project, a project management group was established that involved all main stakeholders of the project. In this management group, all possible problems and changes were discussed together, which actively reduced the workload and decision-making needs at the construction site. Altogether, the collaboration in the triad of the contractor, the municipality and users was considered clear and developed further as the project moved ahead.

When the finalisation phase approached, the intensity of user engagement also grew. Different types of meetings were organised between the stakeholders, and the role of the high school principal was especially emphasised. The principal actively collected users' needs and requirements and communicated these to the project management group. The role of such individuals was to collate a list of requirements from the final users and to filter and prioritise the noticed issues. This way, the contractor could concentrate on the main tasks and evaluate what could be left for further consideration and fixed when the warranty period started. It was also important to separate the tasks based on what needed to be corrected by the contractor, which errors were design faults, and which issues were more like wishes for the future, typically not included in the project plan.

As more straightforward examples of user engagement, several site visits were organised for the users during the finalisation phase. As there were various user groups (e.g., students and teachers of the high school, the adult education centre, the arts school and the music institute and employee of the cultural services of the municipality), it was important to consider all of them individually. For example, the adult education centre and music institute use special equipment in teaching (e.g., musical instruments or equipment for pottery classes). Due to the wide range of different user groups, it was not immediately clear how the spaces would function cohesively across all institutes. This issue persisted as a significant concern for users, necessitating the adoption of new methods for collaboration and planning. The users' representatives held joint meetings to discuss all requirements, which were then communicated to the contractor and municipality representatives. By visiting the almost completed building, the users could notify potential problem areas, some of which the contractor was still able to solve before the handover.

The municipality project manager and the high school principal coordinated the user engagement by deciding whom of the users were invited to

which training sessions. From the municipality side, a photographer was also involved in video recording of all the sessions (Contractor project manager).

One of the larger entities that was left to the finalisation phase was the choice of furniture. Here, the users chose a specific group among themselves that made the choice from the furniture options. The users could not choose individual furniture pieces (such as chairs or tables) but had to make a choice from the set of various pieces of furniture. In some cases, this was problematic as the final choice was eventually a compromise of various needs (e.g., what kind of chairs can be used by both the children and elderly people?). However, this was still considered a good practice, as the users felt like they were listened to.

When the project proceeded to the handover in summer 2023, the intensity of the project work grew. The contractor was in a hurry to finalise all construction work and, at the same time, furnishing needed to be completed. The overlapping schedules were considered challenging. Teachers played a crucial role in furnishing and moving to the new premises, and they managed to complete the transfer before the summer holiday season. At this stage, caretakers were a crucial user group, as they were responsible for maintaining the building's technical functionality. The importance of the early engagement of this user group was emphasised several times for the successful use of the building. The contractor engaged the caretakers when training them in the use of technology, and these training sessions were also recorded for others to watch later.

For round one and a half months, the users, furniture suppliers and several teachers in addition to high school principal were visiting the work site daily. We needed actively to coordinate our activities during that time (Contractor production manager).

The contractor managed to hand over the building in summer 2023, with all major issues corrected. By the time of finishing the interviews, there were still some defects in the building (e.g., visibility issues in the main auditorium) and some concerns were raised regarding the sufficiency of the parking spaces. Some issues (e.g., an additional loading ramp) were left for the municipality to decide later, but the building was fully functional when the use phase started in autumn. Based on early user feedback, for example, some additional coffee stations were added to some floors. Moreover, the signposts inside and outside the building were not completely ready in the beginning. However, the users seemed to be pleased and proud with their new community centre and how their voices were heard in various phases. User engagement was considered helpful from both the contractor and municipality sides, as the project would affect the lives of the users for many decades to come.

When you go there [community centre] and encounter a seven-year-old pupil going to violin lesson, an elderly person going to pottery class, a high

school student or a politician, it feels special and something that is shared by all of us (Municipality worker).

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions and implications for research

In this explorative multiple case study, we examined user engagement in public urban development projects. In particular, we aimed to answer the following research question: *How do municipalities engage users in different phases of construction project lifecycles?* Our results contribute to the research stream of stakeholder engagement in projects (Eskerod et al., 2015; Kujala et al., 2022), especially from the perspective of user engagement throughout the project lifecycle.

The results reveal various ways of user engagement in different phases of the project lifecycle, highlighting a ‘not one size fits all’ viewpoint to stakeholder engagement. In SchoolProject, the focus was on the project front end, where a survey, user interviews, a workshop and a presentation session were utilised to engage users. Focus was on giving a voice to different user groups and on identifying users’ expectations for the upcoming renovation project. In CommunityProject, the focus was on the finalisation phase of the project and the practices of user engagement consisted of various meetings, site visits and feedback collection practices. The results highlighted ways to ensure that the outcome of the project satisfied the needs and requirements of the users. Although most of the forms of user engagement identified in this research have been discussed in earlier studies (e.g., Hedborg & Rosander, 2024; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020; Sintomer et al., 2012; Toukola & Ahola, 2022), our findings paint a more detailed picture of user engagement in different phases of a project lifecycle. In addition, our study contributes to the group of earlier studies discussing the heterogeneity of users and the delivery of value to them (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022; Zerjav et al., 2021).

Our results highlight variation in the intensity and nature of user engagement, revealing how user engagement evolves throughout the project lifecycle. At the project front end, more comprehensive user engagement can take place, as decision makers aim to grasp several viewpoints. In the implementation phase, contractors and project owners mostly focus on cost-efficient management of the project according to project plans, which leaves less room for user engagement. However, there seem to be significant opportunities to engage users when reaching the finalisation phase and even the early use phase. The importance of user feedback has been discussed in earlier research (Eskerod et al., 2015; Zerjav et al., 2021), but this study demonstrates how users can take various other roles in the engagement process. This study continues the nascent discussion on user engagement in project studies and

contributes to the lifecycle view on projects (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019). The study demonstrates that engaging various stakeholders is not only important in the project front-end phase, but opportunities for value creation also occur in the later phases of a project lifecycle.

Implications for practice and policy

For project management practitioners, the results encourage user engagement to be included in project plans. The plans for user engagement should consider different user groups and the different phases of a project lifecycle. Our results indicate how, especially early in the project, forms of user engagement can be more versatile so that the voices of the various user groups are amplified and several viewpoints are considered. When a project proceeds to the implementation phase, especially towards the finalisation phase, more formal coordination of user engagement, such as meetings and feedback collection systems, might be required to efficiently gather all concerns of the final users and prioritise the tasks. Moreover, this might mean identifying key people in all stakeholder groups (such as the principal in the CommunityProject case) whose task is to collect the feedback and communicate it to everyone else in the project organisation.

This study suggests the vision and common goal of a project as an important form of user engagement. The vision commits stakeholders to the project, and it may be easier to engage users if they feel that the project is ‘built for them’. For the project organisation, this implies that communicating with the users all the way from the early project front end builds commitment to the project and potentially increases its legitimacy in the eyes of the user groups. Even though user engagement might not bring any additional insights to project plans, as is, the sole engagement has a value itself.

Finally, for policy, public decision-making and urban planning, this study highlights the active collaboration among various stakeholders, and that resources should be reserved for the user engagement process. When choosing contractors for upcoming urban development projects, not all might be familiar with user engagement. The experience of user engagement in public projects could be included as one decision-making criterion. For urban development on a larger scale, users’ voices should be considered better when developing the urban space to make more approachable spaces for everyone in the future.

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