

# Participatory Design for Accessibility: The Case of the Funktek Pilots

Magnus Eriksson

June 1, 2015

## 1 Introduction

In this paper I will describe my research on the participatory research project Funktek, which has the primary aim of evaluating and improving the accessibility of the Gothenburg City Museum. I will describe the methodological innovation the project is working with as well as some preliminary result of the still ongoing project.

This paper will first describe the Funktek project and my role as a researcher within it, then proceed to describe the main methodological innovation – The Funktek Pilots – and some preliminary results from their activities. It will end with conclusions for how the work within Funktek has implications for thinking about participation and accessibility as well as for participatory action research.

## 2 About Funktek

Funktek is a participatory research project testing a novel method to evaluate and improve accessibility within cultural practices. It is being conducted by Gothenburg City Museum, The Interactive Institute, Utopia, Mistra Urban Futures, Changemakers and Riksställningar. Is a 3 year project and is now in it's second year.

The main aim of the project is to evaluate and improve the accessibility of the activities of the Gothenburg City Museum. This paper focuses in particular on the work done with the their program for guided historical city walks. These city walks consists of a group following a guide along a pre designed path throughout the city with stops at various historically important places where the guide provides information to the group. The current city walks focus on the birth of Gothenburg in the 17th century, but also connect the history to the upcoming 400 year anniversary in 2020 and the future of the city. A second aim of the project is to develop a methodology for working with participatory design for accessibility within organisations, both within the cultural sphere and in other fields.

The motivation for the project comes partly out of an ongoing interest in the accessibility of Swedish museums (see for example HandikappHistoriska Föreningen, 2013; Kulturrådet, 2013; Lagercrantz, Mehlich, Adolfsson, Gustafsson, & Lindqvist, 2014). From this comes also a recognition of the importance in particular of the City

Museum to initiate and foster conversations about the future of the city and the role of participatory culture in general to shape the future of the city. A second motivator for the project comes from the work of the Utopia organisation which comes out of the tradition of social movements for disability rights (Radermacher, 2006). The work of Utopia is based on the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983) in the sense that disability is considered to be caused by the organisation of society and the environment, rather than the individuals difference and functional variation. The social model of disability also rests on a critique of expert knowledge in defining and solving the problem of disabilities and encourages people with their own experiences of disabilities to take part in setting the agenda (DeJong, 1979). Thirdly, there is also an element of “the social production of space” (Kitchin, 2001) in the project in the sense that what is considered in the evaluation and redesign of the city walks is not only the built environment, but how different social practices creates different experiences of space and time.

### **3 The role of the researcher**

As a researcher, I am part of the project with the main role being to study the work being done with the city walks and highlight the implications of this for designing participatory action research as well as for the implication of the work in the broader field of contributing to sustainable urban developments. The research is however published at various stages during the project so my research is also likely to provide input into the project and potentially shape the ideas and activities being conducted. This work is being done within the framework of the research of Mistra Urban Futures. The methods I use is participatory observation in city walk and in project meetings, as well as interviews and document analysing of internal project documentation.

### **4 The Funktek Pilots**

The main methodological innovation in the project is the group called The Funktek Pilots who are the primary actors in doing the evaluations of the city walks (as well as other parts of the museum program). The Funktek Pilots are a broad collective of people participating in some or all of the evaluation and workshop activities of the project. The group is put together with the ambition of covering as many functional variations as possible to get many different point of views but it is not limited to people with “disabilities” per se, although various physical, cognitive or intellectual disabilities are present within the group. Utopia has been responsible for recruiting to the group and have used various methods such as contacting previous collaborators, and open call through the project website, direct contact with various relevant organisation as well as inviting through the snowball effect.

The Funktek group takes part in the city walks and other museum activities and evaluates them according to a survey and by taking part in workshops where the Funktek pilots also provides suggestions for improvement of the activities. All of these are paid activities although participation is on a volunteer basis (there is no em-

ployment contract). The result of the evaluation is fed back into the project and the museum to redesign further iterations of the activities but are also published on the website in the form of reports and short video clips. This is in line with the projects ambition to not only publish for an academic or professional audience but use channels and forms of media that potentially have wider reach.

The involvement of the Funktek Pilots takes place within the frame of particular activities structured by the project, however there are possibilities for the group to set the agenda for further work in the more open workshops. The final decision making power, though, is with the Funktek project leadership (that also includes Utopia which in a sense can be seen as a representative of the Funktek Pilots) and in the end with the museum who is responsible for conducting the activities.

## 5 Preliminary Results of the Evaluation of City Walks

While this will not be a full evaluation of the work so far with the Funktek Pilots, I want to highlight some main results that has come out of the Funktek project evaluations of the city walks.

Evaluations was first done by having the Funktek Pilots take part in a regular city walk together with other participants. This experienced received a lot of negative feedback since the city walk was often too fast for the Funktek Pilots who have mobility issues. This led to them lagging behind the main group and arriving to the next stop last and with the rest of the participants already having formed a wall of bodies around the guide. This meant that the Funktek Pilots had problem seeing the guide, hearing what they said and had a hard time making their voices heard if they wanted to ask questions.

Later evaluations was also done only with the Funktek Pilots to try out a new route for the city guides. This tour took its time and evaluated each stop from a Funktek perspective. The evaluation focused a lot on the length of the walk and the suitability of the route for mobility and the ability to focus with other distractions around. One interesting result was that the perceived length of the walk was not the same as the physical length. Uncomfortable terrain, a need to focus for a long duration of time and difficulty in follow the story of the guide across several stops contributed to the feeling that the tour was too long. Ironically the historical parts of the city were the most difficult due to the prevalence of cobblestones.

Another result of the evaluation was that the city walks are very dominant in sight and hearing (as well as mobility). They are based on a guide speaking to a crowd at the same time as other sounds of the city share the environment as they are based on viewing various historical parts of the city, sometimes at a greater distance. This turned out to be a difficulty for people who have problems with sight and hearing, but it was also remarked that this is only one way of experiencing a historical context in an urban setting. Some Funktek Pilots wondered more how it would be like to live in that time period and wanted to experience that, rather than the very information-based city tour. Functional variation can thus not only imply different ways of accessing the same content, but also imply different ways of relating to historical context and the imaginary worlds which the museum activities invite participants to experience.

## **6 Implications of the Evaluations for Redesign of City Walks**

After the evaluations of the city walks were performed in the summer of 2014, the project moved to a design phase over winter. This has resulted in a redesign of the concept of city walk to include the ordinary city walk (stadsvandring), as well as a city stroll (stadspromenad) and a city sitting (stadssittning).

The city walk covers lots of distance and information, the city stroll is a short walk more focused on experiencing an environment and the city sitting is a one-location activity that focuses on reflection, reminiscence and the use of multiple senses; such as smell, taste, and touch.

It is clear from these new concepts that some physical impairments that was disabling in the city walk (such as cobble stones in historical part) would no longer be impairing in a city stroll because the social practice producing space have changed (Kitchin, 2001).

The different concepts also emphasize different spatial, experiential and time scales. Word spoken by a guide on a city tour for example are immediate and are gone the moment they are spoken and are thus easy to miss and thus to lose the context of what is said. On the other hand, objects to smell and touch is something a participant can take their own time with and spend a lot of little time depending on their own preference. The cobble stones that were an obstacle in the fast tempo city walk turns into an environment to experience in a city stroll. The more you feel them, the more they are experiences as opposed to a feeling that distracts from the main task of getting to a spot within a certain time frame. This redesign shows that the city walks were based on a particular notion of how a city should be experienced and they open a door to re-think how conversations about the future of the city should be structured.

## **7 Implications of the Funktek project for Participatory Action Research**

### **7.1 Evaluation versus Redesign**

The real change within the museum activities resulting from the Funktek project came when the Funktek Pilots went from evaluating and adding accessibility to taking part in rethinking the concepts. Accessibility evaluations can often lead to simple fixes that do not address the main problems and can be watered down after the project ends from pressures of budget and time constraints (Priestley, Waddington, & Bessozi, 2010a). The reconceptualization adds a more structured frame for the results of the project and the museum will be able to add new designs and new content within these frames in further activity planning, should they choose to continue with these formats. The Funktek pilots have thus become part of defining, analyzing and taking action towards the problems addressed (Balcazar, Keys, Kaplan, & Suarez-Balcazar, 1998).

## 7.2 Funktek Pilots as a Nomadic Machine within the Organisation of the Museum

The Funktek Pilots have functioned as a nomadic machine within the organisation of the museum (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), in the sense that they have often not accepted the pre-defined organisation of the museum and the limits the structure of the museum has put on the potential of the insights from Funktek to affect the organisation and activities of the museum. This comes partly from the perspective of Utopia based on an activist perspective of questioning norms which has influenced the project. The Funktek Pilots have also often outnumbered the museum staff at meetings and have managed to set the frame during meetings and influence the agenda. Funktek is also located physically inside the museum on the daily basis in the form of a Utopia field office which gives it a visual and social presence. This has allowed staff from different parts of the museum to be recruited as “ambassadors” for the Funktek project to allow its perspective to influence a larger part of the museum organisation that would otherwise have been the case.

## 8 Conclusions - Emancipatory Research?

The Funktek project and the use of the Funktek Pilots have managed to contribute to a radical redesign of the long-standing concept of the city walk and open up for a rethinking of the norms around how cities are to be experienced and imagined. The use of the Funktek Pilots also provide lessons for other participatory action research projects looking to create sustained change around accessibility within organisations.

A common question asked in participatory research is “Who is emancipated by the results?” (Priestley, Waddington, & Bessozi, 2010b) and this is worth also asking of Funktek. Within citizen involvement in urban planning, the most common model to use is the ladder. However, this assumes that the goal always have to be full citizen control and that the higher up on the ladder, the better it is. It also assumes that the goal of everyone's participation is to be in control of the process, although this also comes with responsibilities and demands for time and effort that might not always be desired. Other models such as Fajerman's six levels of engagement (Fajerman, Treseder, & Connor, 2004) or Ife's list of conditions for participation (Ife, 1995) provide alternatives to the ladder.

If the Funktek Pilots are to be considered the “users” in this research, the project can not be considered to be “user-led” (Priestley et al., 2010b) although the Funktek Pilots have had a great deal of influence. The extent of the influence resulting from this participation will have to be decided by further research, but Funktek shows that empowerment needs to be considered as a process and can't be decided by looking at the formal structure of participation within a research project (Mullaly, 2002).

It thus remain to be determined by further research whether the Funktek model of participatory action research is generalizable to other contexts or if the success of the transformations brought about by Funktek is to be accredited to the participants in the Funktek Pilot group, the Funktek project and the museum staff.

## 9 References

- Balcazar, F. E., Keys, C. B., Kaplan, D. L., & Suarez-Balcazar, Y. (1998). Participatory action research and people with disabilities: Principles and challenges. *Canadian Journal of Rehabilitation, 12*, 105–112.
- DeJong, G. (1979). Independent living: from social movement to analytic paradigm. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, 60*, 435–446.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2004). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*.
- Fajerman, L., Treseder, P., & Connor, J. (2004). Children are service users too. *London: Save the Children*.
- HandikappHistoriska Föreningen. (2013). *Allas historia - Museer och funktionshinder*. HandikappHistoriska Föreningen.
- Ife, J. W. (1995). *Community development: Creating community alternatives-vision, analysis and practice*. Longman Australia.
- Kitchin, R. (2001). Using Participatory Action Research Approaches in Geographical Studies of Disability: Some Reflections. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 21*.
- Kulturrådet. (2013). *Kultur för alla - Inget hinder*. Statens kulturråd.
- Lagercrantz, M., Mehlich, A.-K., Adolfsson, J., Gustafsson, J., & Lindqvist, E. (2014). *Hur är läget 2014? Uppföljning av funktionshinderspolitiken*. Myndigheten för delaktighet.
- Mullaly, R. P. (2002). *Challenging Oppression: A Critical Social Work Approach*. Oxford University Press.
- Oliver, M. (1983). *Social work with disabled people*. London: Macmillan, for the British Association of Social Workers.
- Priestley, M., Waddington, L., & Bessozi, C. (2010a). New priorities for disability research in Europe: Towards a user-led agenda. *ALTER - European Journal of Disability Research / Revue Européenne de Recherche Sur Le Handicap, 4*, 239–255.
- Priestley, M., Waddington, L., & Bessozi, C. (2010b). Towards an agenda for disability research in Europe: learning from disabled people's organisations. *Disability & Society, 25*, 731–746.
- Radermacher, H. L. (2006). *Participatory action research with people with disabilities: Exploring experiences of participation*. Victoria University.