My College Tomorrow: Innovation Labs to Enable Collective Public Action on Education Environments

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Abstract

How to support regional authorities in rethinking the way they develop colleges? How to enable pupils, professors, staff and all populations around to collectively take action towards new and more sustainable educational environments?

This paper presents the research process: "My college tomorrow" of the French public innovation lab La 27e Région to introduce new participative approaches and to renew the way public policies support local sustainable transition:

- residences as immersion sessions of interdisciplinary creative team conducted in 4 different colleges;

- experimental studio as a semester scenario building exercise with design students to produce breakthrough and inspiring new visions of colleges infrastructures;

- creative ateliers as multi-stakeholders workshops organised within regional councils to transform concrete experiences on-site into regional education policies.

Lessons learn from this research process will elaborate on 3 questions:

- how immersive collaborative approaches enable local stakeholders to question their interaction and reset the way they collaborate;

- how schools through project-based and action learning can play the role of active agents supporting local sustainable social change;

- how public action can evolve towards a model of co-evolution between social and public innovation through a system of local experimentation and micro-projects.

1. Researchers' Methodology

This research is grounded in the interpretive methodology (rather than empirical or critical). The authors of this paper assumed that knowledge is co-constructed by people, that truth is created (not out there waiting to be found). Knowledge creation takes into account the

influences of social and cultural dynamics. There are many ways of knowing and the resultant knowledge can be cognitive, feelings and embodied (part of everyone who co-created it) (epistemology). The authors further assumed that reality is in people's minds and is collectively constructed via the lived experiences of people, in interaction with their shared contexts and each other (ontology). This research was value-based. Biases, feelings, hopes, expectations and perceptions were central to the research process. The relationship between the researchers and the participants was intense, prolonged and dialogic (deep insights gained from interactions) (axiology). Inferences drawn from the knowledge created using the interpretive methodology is based in inductive logic. For this research, the authors strove to discern patterns that govern and guide human behaviour. The goal of research informed by inductive logic is credible representations of the authors' interpretations of those experiencing the phenomenon under study (McGregor and Murnane, 2010).

2.   Research Design and Methods:

The design-related approaches and methods used along the research process here are aiming at involving stakeholders to collaborate and collectively generate creative solutions. In other words, it is assumed that the populations considered here are enabled to create by themselves new and more suitable ways of dealing with their college environment (social and material) if the right conditions, assistance and proper supports are made available to them.

We can assume the *credibility* of the participants' descriptions and interpretations of their experiences because they themselves determined the goals of the research, not the researchers: the brief and the identification of objectives to be reached was the result of a joint co-design process between all the participants and the researchers.

The approach taken in this research raises a question of neutrality of the interpretation by the participants. A blog that has been used as a diary of the research with articles and pictures posted on a daily basis maintaining a dialogue with education experts, regional civil servants, education policy makers, consultants, etc. Permanent feedback from these communities of observers plays the role of a 'moderator in real time' and ensures the *confirmability* of the research.

Rather than looking for stable results and general rules, the *dependability* of the research is based on a large collection of promising solutions for the future of colleges presented so that stakeholders may choose, adapt and complete them according to each specific local context.

The research intentionally provided unfinished results. This strategy of *transferability* is based on a sample box of inspiring examples, teasing ideas, contrasted scenarios, etc, to ensure regional stakeholder will question and adapt the findings to their context avoiding diffusion of ready-made solutions.

The research aimed and certainly succeeds in involving participants directly into the design of the research process itself matching with criteria of authenticity (Lincoln, Y., and Guba, E. 1985). Emphasis has been put on *fairness* and *tactical authenticity*, ensuring that all stakeholders' views (in particular those generally less involved in participative process such as technical staffs, parents, neighbours, pupils, etc) are represented in a balanced way during immersive work. The output of the research and also all its development process is based on visual elements, scenarios of use and story-boards that ensure the whole research to be accessible and attractive to all stakeholders and to meet *educative authenticity* criteria. Finally, the generation of a large range of fresh, feasible and often breakthrough innovations is meant to challenge the current conventional college development process and meet the *catalytic authenticity criteria* stimulating stakeholders' creativity and decision-making.

3. La 27e Région

The country of France is divided into 26 regions. Each region is divided into departments, and each department has its own capital city. The 27th Région (www.la27eregion.fr) was created in 2008 in response to a perceived need for creativity, innovation and willingness to better understand the future impact of technology and design on public policies in the 26 regions, (Durance, Kaplan, Vincent 2008, Jouen 2009). Known as La 27e Région, it is not a new geographic region; rather, it is a virtual region, a public service social innovation laboratory for the 26 French regional councils. It uses service design thinking to foster creativity, innovation and sustainability in public institutions.

The discipline of designing services (compared to designing products) has gained credence and influence since 1991. Service design thinking, upon which La 27e Région is based, refers

to an interdisciplinary approach to designing services (including public services). Designers work with people from other disciplines, as well as with service providers and users, to innovate and create (Schneider and Stickdorn, 2010). Conversations are required to build share meanings, create understandings and reach agreements. Learning requires interaction with an environment. Conditions must be created within which designers and users can design and innovate. Designers and users must take advantage of network effects (Dubberly, 2008).

Vincent (2011) describes La 27e Région as "an experimental place where people can collectively imagine and prototype other ways of building public policies, inspired by open and social innovation instead of the old model of new public management". La 27e Région aspires to help the 26 French regional councils reshape their policies using citizen-driven, user-centric approaches inspired by design thinking and open social innovation. So far they have undertaken 12 projects, dealing with such topics as transportation, rural health, railways and education. The latter is the focus of this paper.

3.1.   Re-shaping colleges in a context of crisis and complexity

Little time and less money: French regional governments only have until 2014, the end of the present political mandate, to implement their ambitious projects for colleges in the fields of education, employability, social development, food, environment, culture, citizenship in a global context of drastic cost cutting. Another difficulty is the complexity of governance in education: while the national government is in charge of the pedagogic side (the whole management, teachers, curriculum in the 1 500 existing colleges), the 26 regional governments are in charge of the "hardware" such as buildings, catering, furniture, computers, books. Conceiving and building new schools takes between 5, 7 or 10 years, and tends to be a very top-down process -which is a challenge for the Regions who want to promote quality of life for pupils in the colleges they build or restore, but also sustainability. Under such constraints, creativity, boldness and expectation are powerful engines for elected officials and civil servants.

For the Regions that are in charge of shaping the school of the future, the main risk is to restrain the reflection to the technical performance of the buildings -including environmental standards- or even to the educational excellence, instead of the well-being for people living

together (Chupin and Sobocinsky, 2009, Descoings and Delhay, 2010). Besides the "hardware", our proposal was to consider first the "software", e.g the future of the school as a human ecosystem. Starting back from grassroots practices could give another vision and re-interrogates many subjects such as: how to improve the quality of life in the school, how to feel good, alone and collectively? What kind of digital life in the college, between openness, pedagogy and control? How could pupils be empowered and get ready to leave school? How memory could be built for generations when the turn-over is high? Beyond environmental standards of the buildings, how could behaviours towards responsibility and sustainability? How cooperation and partnership could be developed in the community, but also between colleges within the region and with other regions? How could divide be reduced?

3.2.   An action-research programme from the 27e Région and supported by 2 French
        regions

In partnership with the Region North-Pas de Calais, the Region Champagne-Ardenne, and the national Association of the Regions of France (ARF), the 27e Région has run a creative program dedicated to the "college of tomorrow" which can inform policy makers and provide them with visions about challenging the school tomorrow, but also sensitize policy makers about new user-centred and co-conception methods.

The challenge of this program was not to produce one and unique vision of the college of the future, but to enrich the dialogue by showing numerous insights, diverse –and contradictory-visions and by making it more tangible from a user-centred approach. Moreover, the goal was to impact on the process of creation or rehabilitation of colleges by:

- training the civil servants from the Regions to the new issues of the school: developing knowledge, sharing of experiences between teams from different regions;

- providing teams with new methods of innovation : helping them to use creative tools, involving users in their projects, organizing creative workshops;

- developing cross-discipline: giving more sense in the adoption of a broader vision of the school, including services, devices, levels, participants;

- reducing risks and costs: the aim is to reconnect the political ambitions with grass-root realities, and to inform public decision-making by suggesting durable solutions, based on local practices;

- acting as a remedy to the crisis : promoting envy rather than coercion, anticipating the risk of depression following service cuts.

My college tomorrow... programme was based on 3 parallel and interwoven approaches:

- residencies as 3 weeks immersion sessions of interdisciplinary creative team of young designers, sociologists, architects, etc, conducted in 4 different professional, technical, agriculture and general teaching colleges;

- an experimental studio as a semester scenario building exercise with design students building on lessons learn through the residencies to produce breakthrough and inspiring new visions of colleges infrastructures;

- creative ateliers as multi-stakeholders workshops organised within regional councils taking part to the programme to transfer concrete experiences on-site and inspiring visions gathered to the civil servants of the regions and enable their Directions for Education to reproduce themselves the approach of La 27e Région locally.

Progresses of all these 3 parallel approaches have been captured and discussed online between the Région staff, headmasters, teachers, students and experts involved on a dedicated blog (www.sustainable-everyday.net/inventerleslyceesdemain).

4. My college tomorrow... research programme

The 3 parallel collaborative approaches will be described in details, showing in particular the experimental methods and instruments used to engage a creative strategic conversation with the different stakeholders; the way these 3 different stream of action-research activities interacted and cross-fertilize; the lessons learned progressively raising awareness within the regional public authorities.

4.1.   Four residencies in colleges

The residencies (figure 1) are conceived like "micro-labs" of the regional policies -including education and colleges. The aim of a residence is to restart from grass-root practices to reshape a regional policy, by associating users and beneficiaries (pupils, teachers, staff, regional authorities, etc) to the production of common visions, projects and solutions (Jégou, Vincent and Thévenet 2010, Jogo and Vincent 2010).

Figure 1 Three week long immersion sessions of a small creative multidisciplinary team has been conducted by the 27e Région in 4 different professional, technical, agriculture and general teaching colleges.

The method used by the 27e Région consists in immersing during several weeks a small cross-disciplinary team - designers, sociologists, digital innovators, researchers- into a local project, a public facility or any organization (www.strategicdesignscenarios.net/ territoiresenresidences). Conceived as an alternative to classical consulting, studies or surveys, the residencies give the opportunity to meet, interview, provoke, share, and design projects and solutions with the local users, populations, elected people, and civil servants in charge of the policies.

During 2009 and 2010, a dozen residencies within the *Territoires en residences* programme (www.territoiresenresidences.wordpress.com) have been run on various issues (such as nursing homes in Auvergne, data opening in Aquitaine, social networks in Bretagne, rural transportations in Burgundy, energy and digital hubs in Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur, etc), but four of them were especially dedicated to colleges :

- "Opening up colleges" (Revin, Champagne-Ardenne): how to open a brand new college on the city, the society, the whole ecosystem around (Jégou, Vincent and Thévenet and Petit, 2009)?

- "Citizenship at the college" (Annecy, Rhone Alpes): how to promote collective commitment in a school when consumerism is the rule?

- "Sustainable food at the college" (Saint-Laurent, Champagne-Ardenne): how to relocate food production and to transform consumption behaviours?

- "The sustainable college" (Tinqueux, Champagne-Ardenne): beyond material and building standards, how to develop sustainable behaviours in the college?

4.2.   Experimental Studio in a design school

The second track of investigations of *My college tomorrow...* programme took place in a design school at ENSCI Les Atelier in Paris. For one semester, a group of 10 students collaborated in the framework of an *experimental studio* involving them to explore the path of design of public services and how it may change the way public policies actions are conducted in this field. It was organised in 10 sessions of 3 hours including an afternoon with the pupils of a college in Paris' suburb; several discussions with experts advising the Regions and civil servant from the regional Education department; the analysis of lessons learned in the residencies conducted in 4 different colleges by the 27e Région; more brainstorming sessions to elaborate new ideas for college infrastructure and services; visualisations through short movies of alternative scenarios challenging the current state of the art along a series of critical and recurrent questions for regional Education public authorities.

This approach contradicts the orientation of the field work, participation, experimentation, etc, described so far for the 27e Région. When residencies allow in-depth immersion in specific contexts to start with real users and reset preconceptions, they also induce the team of residents to focus the particular context of immersion and stick to field problem solving activities. Therefore an analysis of lessons learnt requires a somewhat different posture, deliberately out of any college context and detached form specific contingencies. The purpose of the experimental studio is to distinguish signals from field noise and propose more generic visions fully rooted in reality, inspired by it but with broader point of view, reconnecting with public policies perspectives.

The students came up then with a sample of suggestions in the shape of short video-sketches (figure 2) challenging some of the bottlenecks regions often point in the development of college infrastructures such as: how to articulate the technological divide between the official Digital Working Space provided by the Regions and the range of ICT networking activities of the pupils growing at high speed? The students of the *studio* showed with the scenarios they present how in an open source logic, mobile phone *College Aps* developed for the colleges (and also by themselves) may enable a range of micro-services combining personal interests and didactic purposes. They proposed a *College Memory* system that keeps track of the generation passing and favour exchanges between the younger pupils and the ones already in higher education or professional life.

They also try to tackle with other teasing questions such as how to ensure visibility to all the ever growing offers of services developed by the Region to support learning, facilitate orientation, diversify and open the teaching environment? Or how to organise a bottom-up participative approach and embed it in the very infrastructure of this mostly top-down organisation?

Here also the video-sketches developed show a *College Guidebook* built on a social map of the place and identifying and linking the different populations inhabiting the college; a pupils *Project Room* in the middle of the college setting action-learning at the core of the architecture; a *Diffused Pupil House* that makes the entire college a place for the pupils instead of limiting it to a single room; etc.

Beyond being only a small range of 3 scenarios stories on 3 critical issues, all together, the sample of visions showed a more collaborative college, based on greater trust in relation to the pupils, more support between different generations and articulation with higher studies and professional arenas. The status of these visions was less a range of possible solutions to be discussed whether they should be implemented or not but it was rather food for thought. The easy and visual form of short movie sketches aimed at disseminating these alternative visions among all the stakeholders involved in the conception and development of the colleges' infrastructures. And how to make it effective was the focus of the third track of *My College Tomorrow...* programme.
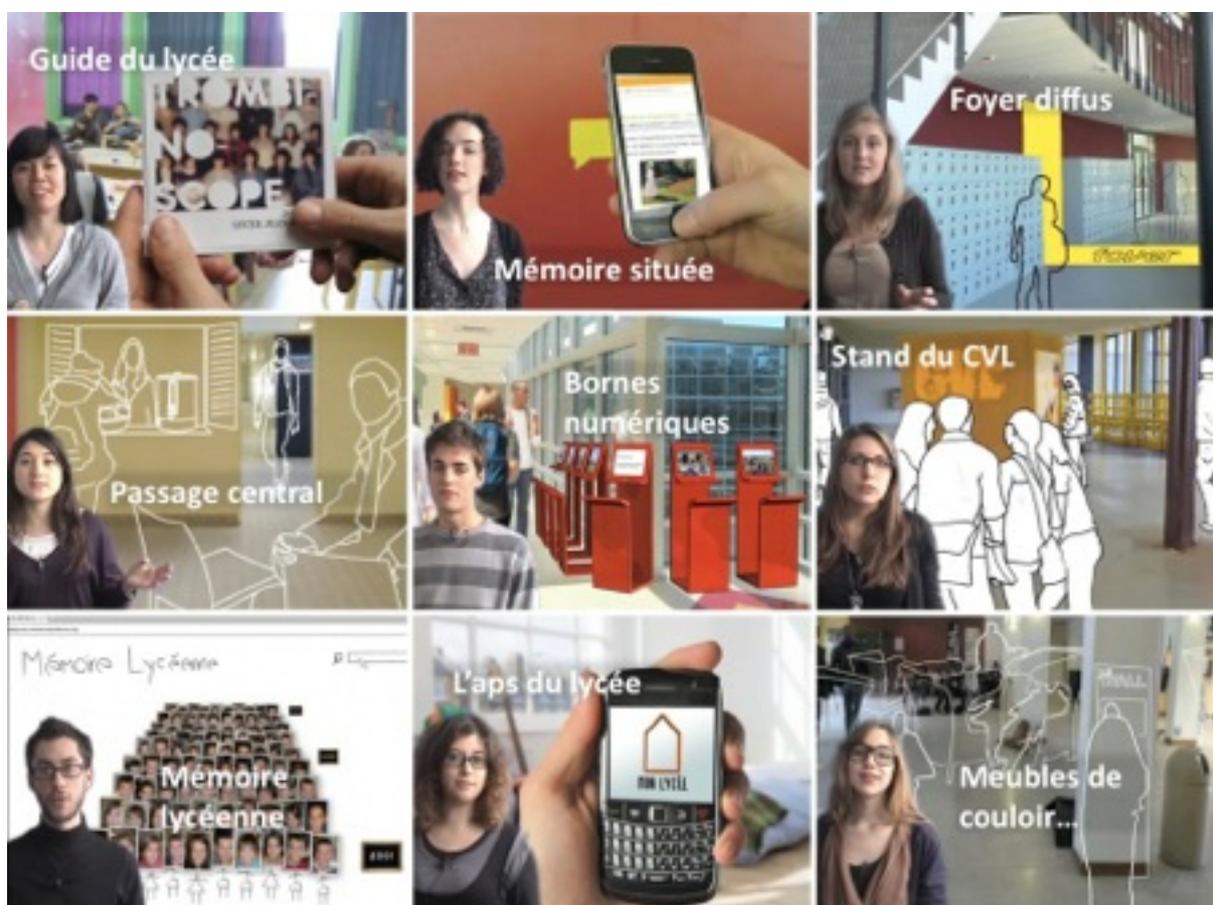

Figure 2 Output of the experimental studio consisting of 9 video-sketches telling scenario stories from the point of view of pupils in a 5-10 years horizon of time.

4.3.   A series of stakeholder workshops within the Regions

Parallel to the residencies on the field and the scenario building process in a designer school, workshops have been organised to enrich the outputs of the two other project tracks and to

explore how these results in terms of new visions and methods of production of colleges could be embedded into the Regional policies.

Civil servants from regional Education Departments, headmasters of colleges, teachers and experts of these fields met and worked together for half-day thematic sessions. The fact that they did not belong to the same Regions enriches the dynamic and the exchange of different experiences. It also allowed opening more critical questions in terms of stakeholders interactions that would nether have been tackled if personal hierarchy and/or institutional relationships would have been touched.

This arena, partly renewed by new participants along the sessions was focused successively on future vision, stakeholder process and implementation approach.

4.3.1.   Future visions.

As the experimental studio was developing a first range of visions alternative to mainstream colleges, the first stakeholder workshop followed the way open by the young designers to enlarge the number of alternative visions of colleges and enrich their content. The result is a somewhat exaggerated range of 18 colleges' visions, partly overlapping but especially challenging the established state of mind in France of what a college should and should not be:

For instance; what an *Open college* would mean? Open on and to the outside, with a rich but selective openness generating a continuum between the college and the eco-system in which it is placed, etc. In concrete terms the college is not anymore a territory restricted to pupils and staff: parents are involved in participative projects, the civil society enrich the educational approach, companies are invited. Kids and adults engaged in a life long learning process enrich each other, etc. The building itself may be shared with another institution such as a research centre or an association with synergetic potential for the college, etc.

Another example: what a *College as a local resource* could be? A college is an important infrastructure in terms of buildings, equipments, personal, etc, that is hardly used 8-9 hours, 5 days a week. If well anticipated, the infrastructure and all the services it provides could become a resource for the neighbourhood, the city, the region. Action-learning and project-based education makes it even more an opportunity for local development, a resource of

young mind willing to act, contribute to their own living environment and in return get a richer and more stimulating educational experience.

More such visions have been co-developed and exemplified: a *College as tool*, player for local development; a *College of continuity* where the articulation with next steps is predominant; the *Reversed college* where formal education is considered peripheral to activities that are today optional; a *College of trust*; a *College micro-society*; a *Citizenship college*; a *College of population mix*; a *College of competences*; a *Shared colleg*e; *Cooperative college*; *Anti-stress*, etc, all these common ideas often used as political claims were investigated and developed trying to search for consistency, existing examples, concrete specification in terms of space, equipments, services, etc that could make these vision tangible and applicable.

4.3.2.   Stakeholder process

The second workshop focused on the process of production of the college: what are the main and typical steps? Who are the stakeholders and how do they interact? Where are the critical points and how can we get around, enrich the process or make the process more fluid?

Participants were involved in building a large process scheme (figure 3) of the construction or renovation of a college starting from evolutions of educational context that trigger a new national education plan or the change in the local context where the college is settled that induces new investment plan from the Region. Then the process goes through a series of interactions between the political decisional level and the technical regional services progressively defining the expectations for the project that is translated into a programme commanding a competition of architecture and finally resulting into a building process on the field.

Beside the many local difficulties in such a long and complicated process, what strikes the participants considering the scheme they have reconstruct was that the users are nearly absent from all the steps. The very pupils, professors, staff, parents and citizens living around are hardly involved beyond the democratic representation through the local elected people. They are informed – when they are – of a long process happening above and beside them resulting

in an infrastructure that will be delivered to them but in which they neither have taken part nor have had the chance to give they requirements.

Residencies or the type of approach they use based on diving into context, building trust and empathy with the inhabitants, involving them in a round of collaborative experimentations, supporting the emergence of a shared understanding of the situation and of a range of related directions for change or suggested solutions, would be very helpful. In particular for the construction of the programme, it would help to reconnect the process to the field and make sure the architecture project is rooted in local practices. It will kick-off engagement and result into more interest and interaction in the initiatives of participative democracy to associate the users and the stakeholders around into the development and fine tuning of the project.
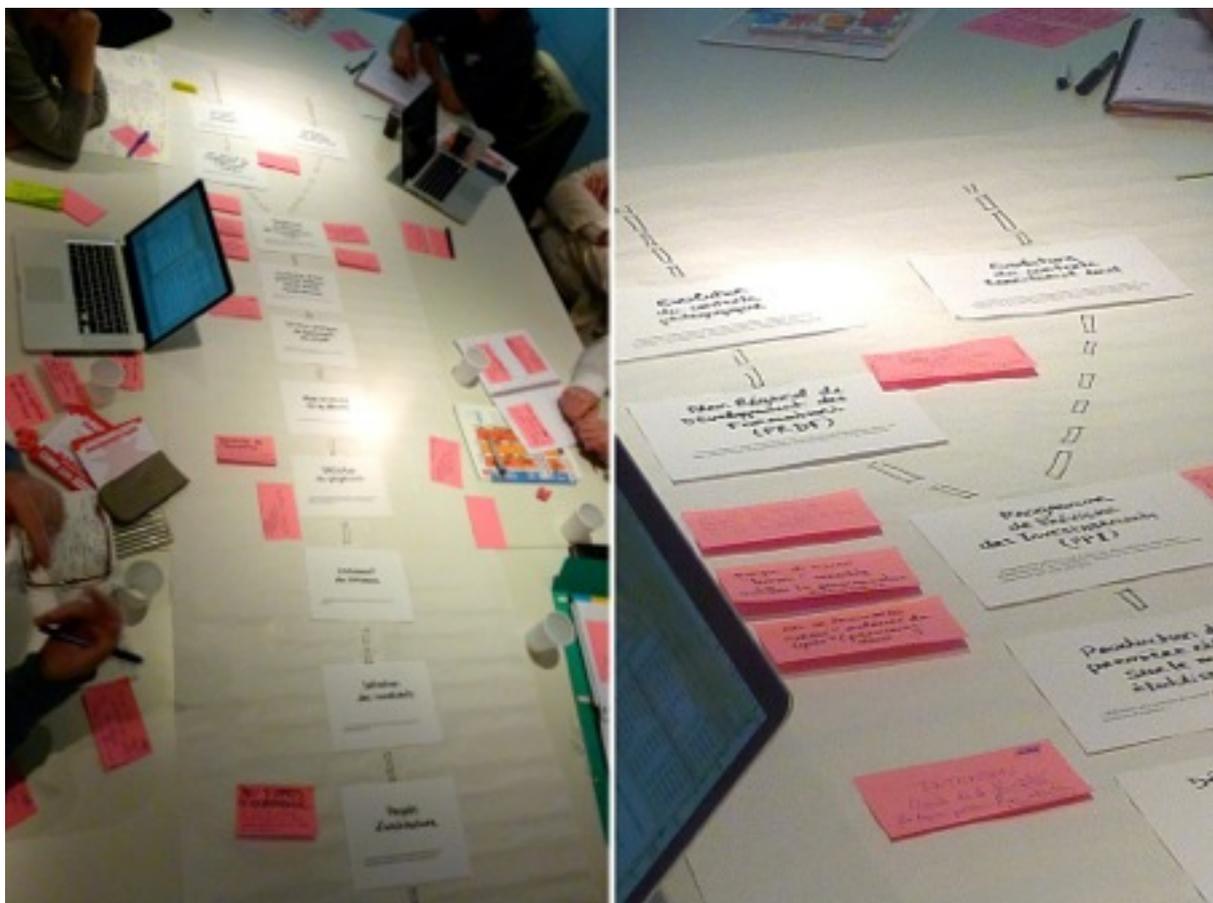

Figure 3: participant in the workshop rebuild the production process of a college resulting in a 3 meter long scheme where they identified bottlenecks, difficulties, conflicts, etc and suggest ways to overcome them.

On top of the lack of user participation, the whole process was characterised by very few creativity inputs. Innovation seemed all concentrated in the hand of the architect. College's infrastructure is perceived mainly as the physical space, the outer box which plays an essential role as a landmark and as an image at political level. The inside of the box, the interior architecture and how this big machine works is less in the focus. It is left to comply a series of norms and standards where very few innovations are input. Moreover, the service dimension of the infrastructure is much less regarded. The very fact that a college is a macro-service finalised at delivering a large range of services around the education of generation of pupils and their preparation to become citizens is not at all the way a college is thought and sometimes even considered by the stakeholders as a loss of value. The result is that in terms of service, average colleges are not well designed: the administrative structure suffers from inertia in adapting to changing needs, corporatism between the categories of population cohabiting the place, lack of fluidity in innovation processes, etc.

4.3.3. Implementation approach

The last workshop was aimed at proposing solutions with their possible implementation in particular considering possible convergences of the innovative visions, challenging ideas, creative inputs, etc gathered in the first workshop to 'irrigate' the somewhat 'dry' process of production of colleges. How could visions penetrate the administrative mechanism, raise awareness on solutions alternative to the mainstream way of doing and inspire the interaction between regional civil servants, national education programme, local elected peoples, headmasters and professors, pupils and parents?

From the process scheme elaborated in the second workshop, the norms and standards defining the background of the college project emerged also as a critical point to focus on. Beyond the general building safety regulation, Regions elaborate each a framework of what a college should be and sediment it in what is known as a document of references. These documents introduce the political project of the Region and give a conceptual vision of a college: what are the main spaces? How they relate to each other? What are the different rooms? How they should be equipped? etc. In practice, these references set the common background on which a specific programme of architecture will be elaborated. Most of them

are hardly better than dry briefs, setting the minimum requirements, giving the limits more than suggesting possibilities, and generally lacking of food for thoughts. Moreover, these documents don't provide any examples of how to achieve what they require: how to welcome the parents in the college and profit from their potential contributions and collaboration? How to design an open professor room that encourage interaction with the other populations? How to facilitate bottom-up initiatives and provide an environment enabling take-off of projects?

The visions and ideas collected and developed along *My college tomorrow...* programme were organised in the form of a *Sample box* to put in annex to the Region documents of reference. As a sample box of material or paints that show the range of possibilities in terms of textures or colours and stimulate a new thoughts in the project of a new product, this *Sample box* of scenarios was thought to open the mind of all the players participating to the production of a college. It showed them a range of alternative approaches, stakeholder-based, experimental, collaborative, etc; pictured how their role may evolve in the process and displayed a selection of diversified solutions to prompt more creativity, more experiences away from classical paths and more ambition from the project promoters. This *Sample box* was aiming at being used by elected people to exemplify their views, by the civil servants form regional Education Department to challenge their calls for offers, by the project developers to stimulate the range of perspectives and by the different populations of the college to exchange their ideas and help them to shape the development of their college, etc.

5.   Conclusions

My college tomorrow... showed how public innovation labs as La 27e Région could enable collective public action towards more participative, collaborative and sustainable living. In particular 3 points of conclusion could be drawn from this experience.

5.1.   Questioning and resetting public action

Immersive collaborative sessions as residencies enable local stakeholders to question their interaction and reset the way they collaborate. Education is a very controversial issue. The shared responsibility between the national Ministry of Education and the Region is often the place for strong political tensions in France. The heavy, inertial administrative institutions in

questions have difficulties to take action. In this context, a residence acts as a 'bubble of experimentation' free enough from the institution to challenge it but rooted enough to stimulate its evolution. It's an operation between bottom-up and top-down, relatively short in time, light in budget but not so small to have a communication impact and reach the momentum to stimulate change.

5.2.   Schools as agent for social change

Schools through project-based and action learning can play the role of active agents supporting local sustainable social change. The *experimental studio* in this case organised in a design school represented a creative task force. It provided a range of fresh and varied ideas, scenarios, visions in a form of projects. These projects are realist in the sense that they are coherent and feasible within a short/medium horizon of time. The enthusiasm of the students multiplied by their number represented an important force of engagement in co-design processes. The output of their work is often rich enough to create an alternative challenging the mainstream and consistent enough to leverage on it and call for change.

5.3.   Renovating public policies

The public innovation model can evolve towards a new model of co-evolution participating from the interplay of both bottom-up local participative micro-experimentations and top-down enabling policy framework. A multi-faceted action-research as *My college tomorrow...* programme could be seen as the prototype of such co-evolution process where different parallel streams interact: immersive moments deeply rooted into specific local realities to 'take the real temperature' on the field, frame opportunities and difficulties as there are now; a creative engine that generate positive and inspiring solutions to explore possible futures and show that alternative to the current mainstream are not utopia; a partnership with the public bodies that create the proper conditions to escape the classical postures of sponsor or of call for offer toward a unilateral participation process.

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