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Not just power

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Not just power: Exploring transitions as fluidity relationality in Participatory Design

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ABSTRACT

Power is often a focal point in PD methods to address challenges and facilitate change. However, what happens when in some socio-cultural contexts, power is not a topic to be mentioned and an ineffective lever for change? How might shifts in dynamics be supported? This paper reflects on 'Purpose Model', a visualisation method that has gained emerging popularity in Japan. This method intentionally avoids addressing power, even though this exists within hierarchical social structures of Japan. Instead of power, the Purpose Model catalyses relational fluidity for stakeholders to become self-reflective of their positionality and modify their behaviours in relation to others. This paper explores socio-cultural constructs in Japan, like the constant, transitional nature of becoming and Ba of Emptiness (place of empty potential) as relational dynamics in hierarchical conditions, activated by the Purpose Model to scaffold social change.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing**; • **Interaction design**; • **Interaction design process and methods**; • **participatory design**;

KEYWORDS

Power dynamics, Ba of emptiness, PD in Asia, visualisation method

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1 INTRODUCTION: POWER IN PD

In Participatory Design (PD), co-creating with stakeholders with divergent interests has often focused on aiming to achieve power balance. Numerous methods, tools, and theories to explain design moves have been associated with influencing power dynamics to ensure participants with divergent stakes are able to influence the design processes, decision-making, and overall participatory experiences and outcomes [7, 20, 34]. Of those, the emphasis on empowerment, equal participation, and horizontal relationships have emanated from PD in Scandinavian and Western countries [5, 9, 27, 34]. This emphasis is reflective of PD's democratic legacy where laborer resisted the unilateral system implementations by management when new technologies were introduced in factories and offices [20, 32]. Historically, PD has recognized the managerial layer as a dominant force possessing power and has concurrently proposed ways to empower the vulnerable workers. This entails a departure from a hierarchical decision-making process dominated by the management, towards a more horizontal approach [37] where the perspectives of the less powerful stakeholders are heard. Expansion of PD in social activism and community-led initiatives have also explored many ways to empower participants, for example, Giannini and Mulder [37], aimed to challenge oppressive conditions by working with participants through action and critical reflection, to establish power-balanced relations among them. Also Bretteteig and Wagner discussed power in relation to decision-making in design, emphasizing influence on decision making [10, 11]. In all, we can see repeated emphasis still being placed, and often, to address power balance as a matter of concern [5].

However, for cultures that have a greater degree of accepting hierarchical order, PD is, and needs to be different from the Scandinavian norms. Sociological studies, like Hofstede's Power Distance [19] have already indicated notable differences between Japan and Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway, and Denmark). It is a well-known study, even though there are issues with its over-simplification (For example [15]), in confirming some general perceptions. His analysis measured the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country assume and accept how power is distributed. Japan scored as one of the higher Power Distance countries, indicating a greater tolerance of hierarchical order. In contrast, Scandinavia had low Power Distance score, suggesting a preference for more egalitarian and decentralised power structures. We can glean from this that Japan is regarded as one of the most hierarchical countries while Scandinavian countries are the least.

In very general terms, power relationships are expected, institutionalised and managed in Asia. for example, Nakane and colleagues have observed that vertical power and hierarchy is the fabric of Japanese culture [29]. Individuals often comprehend the power structures within society, gauge their distance from others based on this understanding, and navigate their social actions accordingly [29]. The hierarchical protocols determine the way speaking and presentations takes place, or how the seating is arranged in formal settings to ensure smooth progression of events without causing unnecessary confusion [28]. Such protocols, repeated over time, has led to power being regarded as a structured element in society by taking account of age, gender, lineage, education, status as seniority; thus, it serves as a foundation of social behaviour, rules

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and actions [29]. Power embedded in social hierarchy is not immediately perceived as needing eradication, as many also equate this power with wisdom, leadership and respect, which is considered as essential for progressing collaboration smoothly [28]. Furthermore, studies that examines design methods associated with power are quite rare in Japan. Of those that do, Taoka and colleagues [36] conducted a comparative study of co-design environments in Europe and Japan, focusing on experts' and non-experts' behaviour positioned within various hierarchies. Their study is valuable in confirming what we have observed generally and anecdotally in Japan, that those in lower hierarchy were impeded in their participation, such as withholding ideas or following the lead of experts, in the presence of those perceived as occupying a higher social position. This tendency was noted as being more pronounced in Japan, compared to Europe.

When power and hierarchy is expected and accepted, and cannot become an assumed as a "problem" to be addressed, how does PD happen in Japan? What does PD look like when power-balance or power is not the focus? What else is at work that enables change? This paper aims to understand and investigate the characteristics of a PD visualisation method called Purpose Model [22], developed by Japanese researchers to support participation and co-creation of diverse stakeholders in designing for social innovation. The Japanese co-authors, including Kibi, the design-researcher who developed the Purpose Model, were further made curious that this method was gaining rapid popularity in Japan. More relevant to this paper, power and hierarchy is not a focus for visualisation in the Model, even though they are part of the socio-cultural fabric, so the analysis aims to reveal other facets at work. In sharing our initial reflections, we aim to strengthen further understanding of PD in Japan where so little is still inaccessible to researchers and practitioners beyond its cultural borders. This is cyclically inhibiting how methods and socio-cultural constructs of Japan, can also contribute to expanding a plural PD discourse.

The paper is structured as follows. We first compare how stakeholders are analysed, using typical methods used in PD, to accentuate differences that the Purpose Model uses. Through further examination of a case study and observing how the stakeholders interacted, we analyse how participants shifted their self-awareness and behaviours. In discussing Ba of Emptiness, we introduce a deeper, socio-cultural condition in Japan to help explain its importance and how we observed the Purpose Model that activated this consciousness. In introducing this socio-cultural notion to PD, we strengthen discourses that attend to the importance of cultures, their diversity and how PD works when methods, people and place are connected.

2 POWER VIA METHODS: STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

In Scandinavian PD, power and hierarchy are identified to flatten and equalize through tools, methods, and theories [11, 12]. Analysing stakeholders is an exemplar of this where the focus extends beyond understanding the needs of participants to include an examination, externalisation, and visualisation of power balances. Take Interests Analysis for example [21]. This method visually represents the principal stakeholders and their roles within PD projects (1, top left). Data derived from field surveys, observations, interviews, and similar methods are often utilised to deduce the needs, concerns, relationships, and power balances of stakeholders. The visualisation takes a table format, which gives an overview of participants and their characteristics. Stakeholder Matrix [31], although not strictly a PD tool, is a similar example that locates each stakeholder in a grid-form of power and interests. The tool identifies, allocates and visualises roles, power, relations, interests, and attitudes of stakeholders and the relation between them. Another example, the Onion Map [16, 24, 25] visually represents external power relations among stakeholders. This technique involves a layered diagram resembling an onion, with each layer representing a different level of external influence or power. The layers are organised based on the stakeholders' significance and impact on the project or decision-making process. This visual representation helps project managers and decision-makers understand the complex web of external relationships and power dynamics among stakeholders. A Net-Map by Schiffer [33] is a participatory mapping tool used for social network analysis. It helps analyse relationships, connections, and power dynamics among actors in a specific context.

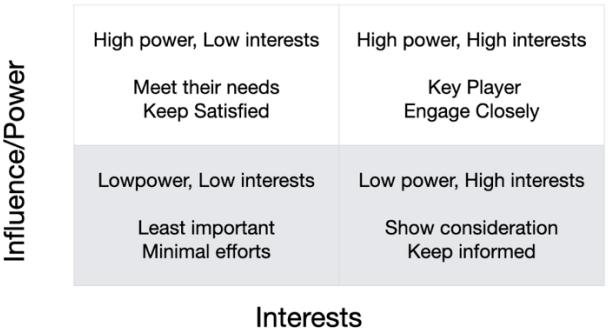
In addition, Scandinavian PD has typically employed approaches to empower the powerless and facilitate equal participation. Methods using board games use tools with rules and roles to foster hierarchy-free environment, preventing dominance by a single authority, for example, between managers and employees [8, 41]. The consideration embedded in the tools and theories show, valuing equating power balance. In essence, all together, these indicate how PD methods and episteme have been driven and shaped by what society considers valuable, in this context diminishing power imbalance to achieve equality.

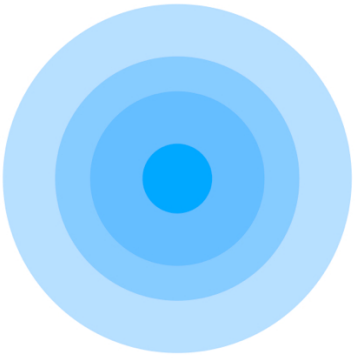
When the desire to balance power is a key driver for design methods such as these, it can make them difficult to adopt, or worse, may intervene problematically in contexts with different values and priorities. It is obvious to say that socio-cultural conditions play a significant role in how methods perform and what they enable or inhibit participants from doing. As argued by Light and Akama [26], the relationship between methods and enactment in complex participatory settings is what matters, instead of discussing methods alone. Another study in Japan confirms this. Yasuoka and colleagues [41] explored a design game based on Scandinavian approaches, initially established to achieve a horizontal hierarchy, and applied it to IT system development in Japan. She reports that Japanese participants engaged in pre-negotiation and conveyed their views informally as "general opinions" or "third person views". She observed participants trying to reformulate their opinion this way to search for an acceptable way for a better fit with others. This revealed that a method from Scandinavia, when deployed in Japan, catalysed an emergence of "local" rules for this game. It also validates those methods, no matter how well they are designed, cannot balance power as intended if the contextual conditions, including the participants, do not favour this.

2.1 Purpose Model

In Japan, a visualisation method called Purpose Model by Kibi and Kondo [22] has garnered broad interests from more than 60 various

Stakeholders	Responsibility	Focus	Activities
Corporate A	Project management is the Maino role	Assessing results and making decisions about baselines	Steering committee meetings and meetings with other management
Citizens	Project participations and concrete ideas.	Sharing results, gathering comments and summarise..	Evaluation with staff members and stakeholders, informing stakeholders
Municipality A	Fund supports and internal string	Coordinating ongoing results, information affected particles about the reasoning	Meeting with the people overseeing the technical implementation,





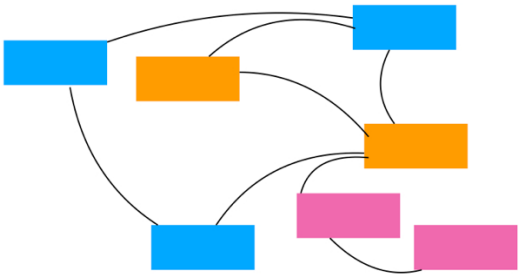


Figure 1: Top left: Interests Analysis, Top right: Stakeholder Matrix, Below left: Onion Map, Below Right: Net-Map

project platforms in two years, including government entities [43], educational institutions, Non-profit organization [4], and private enterprises [39] involved in PD and co-creation in Japan. Typically, diverse stakeholders such as public, private, and individuals use the method together for co-creation and social innovation through design, supported by platformers or design researchers. The method works by visualising the constellation of various stakeholders in the co-creation process. It captures and details their relationships, thus registering and conveying their perspectives. This helps to clarify the role of each stakeholder and articulate a common goal that everyone can agree upon, hence the naming, Purpose Model. As we know PD's co-creation can often reveal different needs, views, values, expectations, and understandings among the stakeholders. These can become problematic when there is coarse resolution of their respective purposes and awareness [13]. Kibi and colleagues have discovered that a shared common purpose can become a unifying force to align divergent perspectives and clarify a firmer direction for stakeholders. By verbalising and sharing a common goal, it can minimise deviation and foster empathy when involving new stakeholders. In other words, this visual tool has been proven to enhance clarity and alignment to give direction to the project, thereby addressing challenges like understanding issues, clarifying objectives, and managing expectations that they have often encountered in participatory co-creation projects in Japan [36, 41, 42].

Next, we explain the key features of the Purpose Model (fig. 2). Various stakeholders involved, such as individuals and organisations identify their individual and differing purpose for establishing shared understandings during the project period. The visualisation emerges by being co-created among stakeholders who self-identify their position on the diagram, often facilitated by design researchers through dialogue, or in a workshop. Occasionally, it is drawn after the project through stakeholder interviews by the design researchers as a way to reflect upon a project. They are colour-coded, based on sectors, such as industry, public, citizens and university (see 3 in Figure 2). In the centre, the common goal or purpose of the project is described. The Purpose Model template divided horizontally into two half circles, where the upper part notates potential and related stakeholders, while the lower part indicates proactive stakeholders committed to action and creation. The Model visualises a list of participants in the project as a 'equal size of pie' of a circle. Each stakeholder is represented in having an equal portion, as a default, to contain their specific concerns, roles and purpose acknowledged, which is often and potentially different from the whole, shared purpose. This colour differentiation makes it clear to see what assets each bring, such as services and products, at a single glance.

2.2 Case: Bonus Track, Shimokitazawa, Tokyo, Japan

Urban development in Tokyo has traditionally been spearheaded in a top-down manner by large developers and public administrations.

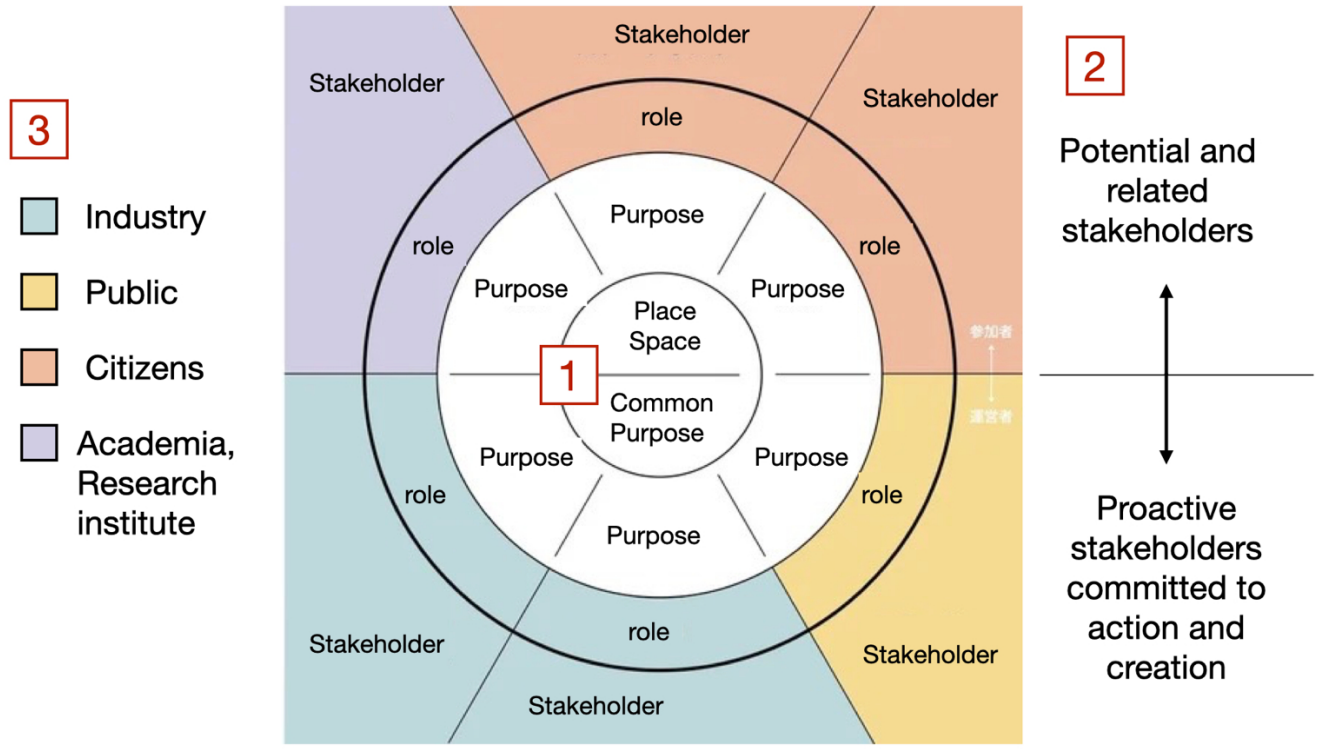


Figure 2: Purpose Model Basic Structure

Consequently, they often proceeded without adequately considering the residents and local businesses, leading to potential conflicts and compromises to the historical and cultural values of the area. In contrast, Bonus Track, embraced collective and collaborative development approaches that involved local stakeholders. Bonus Track is a revitalisation initiative in inner-city Tokyo. This commercial district was developed through exploration and utilisation of a vacant land, as a by-product from an Odakyu Railway development. The narrow site rendered it unsuitable for constructing large-scale industrial development, and Setagaya ward saw potential of greening this land.

From the early stage of Bonus Track when the site was vacant, dialogues with tenants took place to negotiate and shape the development of the site. Frequent sessions among Odakyu, architect and potential tenants were held to explain rent price and tenant spaces, catalysing dialogues that gradually shifted those who were in opposition to its development for fear of change and deterioration of the calm residential area to become stakeholders. The development of Bonus Track can be largely divided into four chronological transitions: A) The Initial Stage, B) The Turning Point Stage, C) The Opening Stage and D) Future (fig. 3). These trace how diverse stakeholders transition over time. For example, in A, only two stakeholders can be seen with no discernible common purpose. However, as more stakeholders were identified and came on board (see fig. 3, B), each began to shift their objectives, adopting a long-term perspective. Given the locals' strong attachment to the area, this is when some became active in the operation of Bonus Track, forming resident groups that participated in place-making [2], such as greening the area and street refurbishment. This period also marks the emergence of individuals with strong passions. As the project entered C) Opening Stage, the dynamics underwent drastic changes. During challenging circumstances under the COVID-19 pandemic, with approximately only 60-70% of tenants able to open their establishments in April 2020, residents banded together to cover up the empty tenants and create local activities, thereby strengthening the positive relationship. Some citizens, who had previously raised negative concerns regarding the project even began to take on a proactive role. Those that were initially uninvested (positioned in the upper part of the model) then began to be more engaged in the local businesses, gradually becoming proactive co-creation partners (moving in the lower part of the model), by expressing their desire to contribute and commit to the community development. As the number of stakeholders grows over time, Odakyu Railway's portion gradually reduces to one-fifth (see B), one-tenth (see C), and one-fifteenth (see D). In visualising this transition, it shows how stakeholder attributes become more and more complex.

3 DISCUSSION

Based on the practice embodied in the Bonus Track, we will highlight two key features: 1) Catalysing reflexive fluidity and 2) Creating a space of potential: Ba of emptiness.

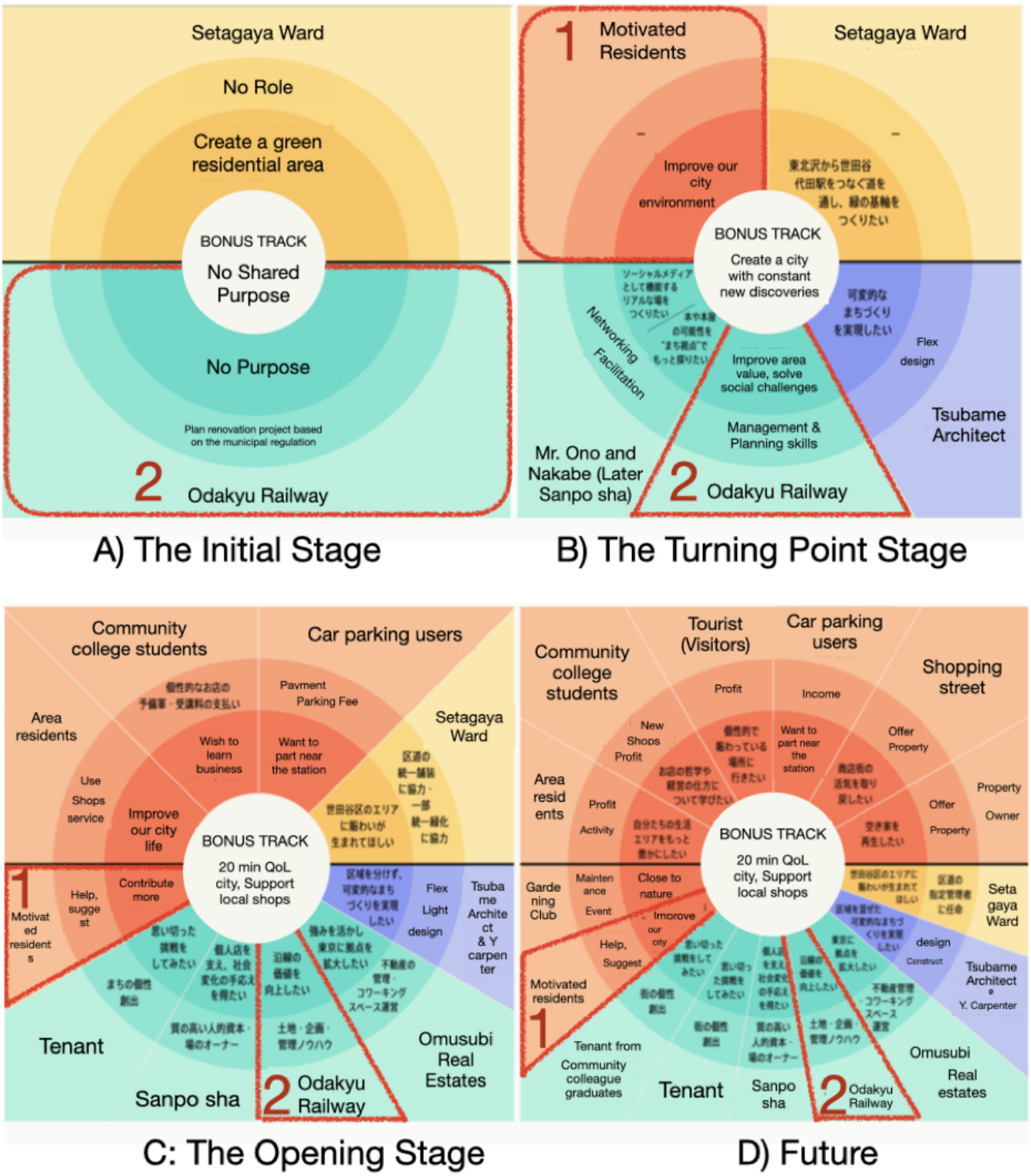


Figure 3: The chronological Purpose Model: Four transitions -A) The Initial Stage, B) The Turning Point Stage C) The Opening Stage D) Future, captured during the Bonus Track project

3.1 Catalysing reflexive fluidity

In the introductory discussion, we explained how power and hierarchy are acknowledged and accepted in the socio-cultural context of Japan. Unlike the focus of Scandinavian PD that attends to power in their methods, the Purpose Model does not do so. However, this does not mean that stakeholders are ignoring its presence. Odakyu Railway is one of the most powerful entities as the property owner. In the development of the Model and how Odakyu should be visualised, Kibi suggested reflecting the size of the pie depending on the resource contribution, thus representing Odakyu as the largest stakeholder. However, the project owner from Odakyu questioned this approach: "It doesn't matter if our share in the model is small. The current model is fine as that the people involved are visible." This offhand remark led to their pie being visualised equally in size thereafter. This conversation was later acknowledged to being impactful. It inadvertently prompted Odakyu to become humble, to realise the importance of not doing everything by themselves. Odakyu was able to see the evolution of how many stakeholders were playing different tasks and roles through the traces of the visual diagram. As such, companies like Odakyu were prompted to consider how the project could also benefit others, and from their contribution. Furthermore, stakeholders who originally perceived themselves as having minimal influence saw the Model that represented them equally with the same pie portion alongside large corporations. This prompted them to speak out more. Despite having awareness of varying power dynamics, such participants felt compelled to express their opinions, knowing that their perspectives count, and their voices were heard. The Purpose Model accompanies participants meeting one another, recognising each other's perspectives to then visualise their roles in the diagram. During these meetings, the team observed adjustments to how they interact with one another. As reported earlier, for some, this meant re-evaluating their roles in the overall project to contemplate what actions they could take more of. The shifts we describe cannot be attributed to shifts in power – it could be – but given the Model doesn't make this explicit, we cannot really know. Instead, the researchers observed dynamic relationalities between the stakeholders and their differing perspectives. How their perspectives differ may or may not be obvious to those participating or how they are represented, until they see the visualisations captures their input and evolve over the stages (Fig. 3).

This relational group-dynamics, which is a common phenomenon everywhere, owes much to the underlying socio-cultural structure at work. While various scholars have suggested a general predisposition for a collectivism in Japan that restrain individuality in preference for belonging harmoniously to a group [6, 29], there are other studies that nuance this more. For instance, Hamaguchi [17] has questioned the dualistic constructs of individualism versus collectivism in favour of "Contextualism". This responsive sensitivity can also be seen in the etymology of the Japanese word for human being is "between-person" [40] which indicates the inter-dependent relational being. In other words, a relational being is both individual and social, somewhere in-between. The emphasis on in-between (Ma) suggests a heightened sensitivity to relationality and contextuality [23] and less emphasis is placed on to individuals' free-will, attributes and their agency alone. In-between or Ma is a fluid, dynamic, contingent intersubjective encounter where one's being is constructed in the plurality and relationality of many worlds [2]. We could also say that Ma is at work here in the shifting positions of the stakeholders. Sensitivity to context is reflected in the study by a team led by the first author [41] who observed participants shifting their perspectives according to group dynamics. In this way, those with lived experiences in Japan determine their actions by gauging the contextual distance and comfort in their interpersonal relationships. Fluidity and shifts in behaviours can also be visible in the way language is used from polite keigo preferred in a new, formal or hierarchical relationship, which transitions to shigo when they grow into a personal relationship to converse with ease and comfort [3]. Such shifts in language from polite to personal form does not mean their positionality in age, gender, professions and the positions of hierarchy has changed, nor the power and resources they hold, rather, it often demarcates trust, intimacy and degrees of comfort in transition [1]. Listening out for that shift in language often demarcates relationships in transition, which was also observed on a number of occasions during the turning point stage.

3.2 Creating a space of potential: Ba of emptiness

When the Model visualizes equality by the default portion of the 'pie', this is obviously a constructed imaginary. As we made clear already, the stakeholders are never equal in their living and working realities, and given the socio-cultural condition, it may not even be welcomed or aimed for as a shared purpose. The Purpose Model enables participants to recognize each other as related parties, negotiate their unique roles and relations in the overall project and adjust how they interact with one another through continuous reinterpretations of their roles during the project. Important to note here is that their roles are not fixed, but is always becoming, depending on what tasks and actions emerges through negotiation and discussion. This also includes roles of leadership in this project, which was also shifting.

However, visualising this imaginary is catalysing stakeholders with less resources, or residents who were against the development feel more ownership and contribute positively. What is this visualisation inviting, and could the circle diagram, which starts off by being 'empty' of a centre have any potential? While this is more of a propositional suggestion, we have begun to link this work with Ba, which approximates into "place" in English. Ba is not just a physical location but is also understood as a shared place for emerging relationships and knowledge creation [30]. People that share Ba (place), in turn, also create Ba to simultaneously form things while being formed by them [14]. This double-loop effect, have been noticed by design researchers as a creative potential in overcoming rigid social norms and hierarchies. For example, Akama reports how Ba has been noticed as an important feature in designing social innovation that enables transformation, particularly in building confidence, reconfiguring boundaries, and recognise the self-in-all to enable a capacity to be receptive [2]. We could possibly attribute resonant phenomena in Bonus Track, also. Another important feature of Ba is the way it has been associated with

'emptiness', via Kitaro's philosophy of Zen Buddhism [1]. In Zen Buddhism, 'emptiness' is associated with self-awareness, reflexivity, receptivity and to shift ways of thinking-being by clearing mindsets, letting go of attachments to catalyse transformation [35]. Change is constant in Japanese and Zen Buddhism worldviews [38]. We could thus see how the Purpose Model designed to accommodate change enables it to be readily accepted in use. We would like to argue accommodating change is an advantage of the Purpose Model design.

The Purpose Model starts with an empty circle. Just as the value of an empty bowl is its potential and capacity [18], Ba of emptiness could be explained as a place of potential and capacity [2], waiting for something to emerge. Similarly, Bonus Track is not led by an authority or leading figure but rather, the stakeholders begin to 'fill' the circle by being allocated a 'steak'. In seeing more and more stakeholders joining, the circle becomes fuller, and the collective benefits and purpose becomes stronger.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper took power as a starting point, a motivating focus that has been consistently debated in Scandinavian and western settings of PD, to show how underlying socio-cultural values are mobilised through methods and its enactment by people. In so doing, the paper aimed to introduce how another method – Purpose Model – enacted the socio-cultural values and worldviews that are embedded in the site of its use in Japan. In its early analysis and discussion, this contributes to the growing awareness of expanding PD beyond the sites where it first originated, and to bring attention to broader conditions that continue to shape practices of change.

In this exploratory paper, the discussion on ba remains an introductory one, which emphasizes the necessity to delve deeper in future investigations. Future work will aim to analyse other uses of the Purpose Model used in Japan to understand how ba of emptiness and fluid relational dynamics can explain its popular and wide adoption beyond Bonus Track alone. In addition, we also hope to examine micro process, attitude and interaction of participants at ba of emptiness, to clarify its impact of co-creation.

Arguably, change is constant, and our worlds are always in a state of flux. A method that is responsive to and reflective of such changes has much to offer in heightening our own reflexivity in participatory work. While underscoring the importance of method and its performance anchored in specific conditions and people, we hope the attention this paper gave to transient and dynamic nature of participation adds further richness to PD.

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