The pragmatics of citizen participation.
How citizens in 3 European cities deal with complex problems around safety, liveability and urban development (English summary)

This thesis draws into the forefront what most often stays out of sight: the hard work and the practices involved in citizen participation from the perspective of citizens. To situate the growing attention and meaning attached to active citizenship, the first part of the thesis reconstructs the intertwined intellectual and practical history of developments in democracy, government and (urban) policy. This wider context forms the background against which the 'small' practices of citizen participation, that I focus on in detail in the second part of this thesis, gain their significance beyond the particular case. They are elements of a bigger, often neglected, unfolding story across Europe.

The practices that this thesis focuses on are European equivalents of what Mathews calls 'citizen politics' (Mathews, 1999) or what Verhoeven calls 'everyday politics' (Verhoeven, 2006). These are acts of citizenship or politics which don't fit well within our current conceptualizations, whereby the focus is on the way people act within domains for which the government sets the agenda. Here we focus on practices where residents themselves set the agenda and invite the government to participate. This means we partly lack a precise language to put into words the meaning, workings and values produced in these kinds of practices. This thesis, in a small way, tries to help develop this much needed language. A new language to describe these phenomenon is much needed because these practices are important testing grounds for new forms of governance, and offer the potential to deal more effectively with the complex problems that we are being presented with in cities across Europe. This process of testing could work to replace our current bureaucratic and government oriented practices.

In Chapter 2 I argue that the practices of active citizenship that I draw attention to are an important, but mostly neglected, element in the search for new ways of putting into practices the democratic aspirations more and more people indicate to subscribe, but don't see realized in our democratic institutions. This is what Dahl calls the 'democratic paradox'(Dahl, 2000). Time and again this leads people to argue that our democracy is in crisis. After arguing, with Thomassen (2010) that there are reasons to doubt the breadth and exact meaning of our democratic crisis, I take as my starting point that while there might not be less trust in our
democratic institutions, there is a growing desire for residents to be more (in)directly involved in democracy. Too support this overarching claim I reconstruct both supportive research as well as critical arguments developed by authors such as Putnam, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, Norris, Macedo and Dalton. Where some see the current decline in active involvement in our democratic institutions as a sign that people are actually content with the current situation (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse), I find that the arguments and empirical data offered by Norris and Dalton, who claim that new practices to situate and enact our democratic desires are required, more convincing.

The search for these new practices has been emerging in general form for some time, but the examples I explore in this thesis, should actually be seen as examples of a growing range of novel experiments – ranging from consultation, deliberation, co-governance, to participatory budgeting and citizen initiatives – looking for new forms of participatory democracy.

The final part of Chapter 2 then explores the different critical arguments against this move towards participatory democracy. I distinguish between two kinds of critique here: critical enthusiasm and democratic realism. The first refers to critique, exemplified by Newman and Clarke (2009), which is enthusiastic about the development in general, but is critical of the current practices being developed in its name. They find them to be mainly depoliticizing, functionalistic, ritualistic and project-oriented, resulting in practices that do not live up to the democratic ideals through which they are being promoted. Democratic realists are even more critical, doubting whether people have the moral and intellectual capacities to perform this new democratic role given to them by proponents of participatory democracy. Furthermore they doubt whether people are willing to put in the time required to deal with societal problems which, given their complexity, are best left, they think, to professionals. Finally, democratic realists doubt that from a democratic point of view – referring here to such criteria such as representation, accountability and transparency – whether these participatory practices will not lead to a diminished democracy, one that only further benefits a particular elite. Although these are serious criticisms, which one should keep in the back of one mind when reading the rest of this thesis, I will show in the second part that these concerns and critiques may be exaggerated when challenged with new findings and that there is reason for being more optimistic.

In Chapter 3 I show how democratic renewal develops from what some would think of as a strange place: within public administration. Through reconstructing the historical development of how we govern our society I show how we can
discern a development from closed practices of governing - studied by elitist and pluralist in the sixties – towards more open and democratic ways of governing drawing in new actors. Where the studies of elitists and pluralists still mainly focus on the question regarding who has power over others, recent studies - exemplified by the work of Clarence Stone - focus on power to get things done. With the work of Stone, the central questions, the central actors and the rules under which they play become again the object of empirical study and conceptual groundwork. The work of Stone, I argue, can be seen as a turning point in our perception of the way society is governed and forms the basis for theoretical developments mostly captured under the banner of the move from 'government' to 'governance'. To make this grand gesture understandable, I resist theoretical debates, but instead draw out its contours by focusing on empirical studies of 'partnerships' in urban renewal practice in the UK. These are practices, initiated by the government, are intended to draw in new actors in making policies for local urban renewal projects. While heavy on democratic ambitions most empirical studies show that the results are meager and mixed. Through this reconstruction we see developing what Warren has called 'governance-driven democratization' (Warren, 2008). This is one of many different kinds of experiments going on in practice to (re)invent democratic forms of government, what Cornwall and Schatten-Coelho (2007) call new democratic arenas. The practices, which are analyzed in the later part of this thesis form part of this larger development.

In the fourth chapter I show how the democratic and governance arguments I reconstruct in the previous chapters play out in discussions about urban policy. I demonstrate how active citizenship can prove a solution to the democratic crisis as well as the way we govern society and solve problems in deprived neighborhoods. In the first part of Chapter 4 I reconstruct the development of a dominant scientific paradigm, which sees neighborhoods as both the place where problems are centered, but also as the place where (part of) the solutions can be found. The concentration and accumulation of problems in particular neighborhoods, means they are logical objects for urban policy. And although scientists doubt the actual concentration and accumulation in European neighborhoods, it forms the main inherent argument for policies focusing on these neighborhoods. The assertion that there is dominant scientific paradigm is supported by two further important points. Firstly, arguments on the level of governance are used. This is mainly captured under the banners of area-based and integral urban policies. Based on civil, social, political and economic arguments (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008), the integral area-based policies have
taken a strong hold of urban practice across Europe. Secondly, the argument focuses on the changing role of residents in these areas. They are not seen as passive recipients of these policies, but are invited (or urged) to actively participate.

Together these arguments form the basis of a dominant paradigm, through which, although heavily debated and questioned, we can observe and analyse the influences and structures of current urban policies across Europe. To support this claim I reconstruct the development of urban policies in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, as well as at the level of the European Union. This dominant conceptual and policy paradigm (in which the democratic and governmental arguments I developed in Chapter 2 and 3 come together at the level of the neighborhood) forms the background against which one should understand the local practices I analyze in the second part of this thesis.

In Chapter 5 I explore the different tools with which I empirically formulate an answer to the central question of the second part of my thesis: 'how does citizen participation form an answer, at least partially, for dealing with complex problems in deprived neighborhoods in three European cities?'. To answer this question I have focused on reconstructing practices using sociology, a particular conceptual orientation within philosophy, as well as interpretative policy analysis. A practice orientation is a 'heuristic device, a sensitizing framework for empirical research in the social sciences. It thus opens up a certain way of seeing and analyzing social phenomena' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 257). What is unique and helpful about this perspective it does not see rules, actions, and ways of thinking as preceding actors, but rather as the outcome of collective actions in which actors are engaged. In order to understand the underlying dynamics on these local practices I have used three particular methods for data-collection and analysis: ethnography and participant observation; qualitative interviewing; and Grounded Theory.

Participant observation offered insights into unfolding practices during my four month stay in respectively Antwerp, Rotterdam and Dortmund. Qualitative interviewing enabled me to explore in detail the historical and personal development of an initiative. Over the course of the empirical research I conducted 38 extensive interviews with residents and local professionals and civil servants involved in the initiatives. Furthermore, an extensive field report of experiences during my stay was kept. This, together with other material gathered during my stay (leaflets, notes, local papers, and earlier research), formed the basis for the analysis. To analyze all this data I used Grounded Theory. Through
meticulous coding of the interviews, Grounded Theory allowed me to stay close to the actual data, and form middle-range theoretical frameworks to help me make sense of what I saw happening. The research, which was conducted in three different European cities, should not be seen so much as a full-blown comparative research project, but rather as a contrasting case study (De Souza Briggs, 2008). Through this qualitative, contrasting case study, we have been able to lay bare important dimensions of the practice - the how - of citizen participation.

The second part, consisting of chapter’s six to nine, discusses several dimensions of the practice of citizen participation. In Chapter 6 I focus on the will to participate. For even if there are many democratic, governance and policy arguments for more citizen participation, there remains a lot of skepticism with regard to how much people actually want to be active. The will to participate, it is said is unlikely, unrealistic and undesirable. In this chapter, I show how a different conceptualizations of how the will to participate comes about can help us see things differently: the will to participate is not so much the starting point, but the outcome of a lot of work. Work people undertake because something has triggered them to become active. I further explore this work theoretically through a concept developed by Stone and later Xavier de Souza Briggs: civic capacity: "the conscious creation of actors seeking to establish a context in which extraordinary problem solving can occur" (Stone, 2001, p. 615). Triggers, work and civic capacity together form the building blocks for a practice-oriented approach to the study of citizen participation.

This performative approach to the will to participate opens up a perspective on participation which focuses on the development of a public through particular actions: organizing meetings; gathering and presenting information; building personal and professional trust and alliances; an understanding of complexity of local problems; and, conflict resolution. These capacities are the the outcomes of all kinds of activities. This chapter reconstructs this work by closely analyzing the interviews in the different cities. Through this I lay bare the kind of everyday, but surely not simple or routine tasks, that need to be performed to develop the necessary civic capacity to turn a trigger into a blossoming local initiative.

In Chapter 7 I argue that the complexity of the problems with which residents in neighborhoods are confronted is not an argument against their involvement and for more professional intervention. Instead I argue that complexity is rather an argument for more involvement of residents. To support this claim I first give two arguments: residents don’t experience problems in conceptual and
institutionally distinct categories, but in their concrete and multi-dimensional manifestations. Second, residents have a particular kind of knowledge to offer which enables the development of better strategies through deploying their local experience. The second part of this chapter backs up this claim by showing empirically how residents are able to deal with complex problems.

To do this I focus initially on discussions about the conceptual meaning of complexity within the social sciences I then quickly approach complexity from a more pragmatic perspective through reconstructing three stories of how residents gain insight through both doing and analysing, and so are able to get a practical hold on the complex problems they are confronted with. This is what Axelrod en Cohen refers to in the process of ‘harnessing complexity’ (Axelrod en Cohen, 2000). Through reconstructing the different causes and consequences of the problem of garbage in Antwerp North, we see how residents are able to approach a problem from many sides, leading to realistic expectations and potential solutions. They are able to see the systemic, contextual and personal causes of a problem in great detail when looking for a solution. This is what I call the *dimension of causal complexity*. Secondly I discuss the *dimension of implementation complexity*. Even if one would find a common understanding of a problem, to then act upon this requires skillful navigation. I reconstruct this through the long and difficult history of the redevelopment of the main square in Dortmund. Finally I show how people have to deal with *institutional complexity*. For active resident don’t act within a vacuum, but rather in a crowded (often overcrowded) environment. Given the many organizations that are active in Pendrecht, I show how they consciously maneuver to give themselves a position in this field.

These different stories give empirical backing to the claim that residents are actually well suited, and probably necessary to find solutions for our current complex social problems. This doesn’t mean that residents can do everything by themselves, but it requires professionals to rethink their role and how they should perform this, something I focus on in chapter nine.

In Chapter 8 I explore the ways in which the design of participatory processes influences its potential meaning. Many participatory processes - in particular the call for more participation - are currently surrounded with frustration, cynicism and disbelief. I argue that this is partly due to the way we tend to organize these processes, containing within itself the elements which disable the positive outcomes and experience to emerge. In other words, through the way we organize participatory processes, we set ourselves up to fail. Despite the fact that this is an experience shared and expressed by all parties involved, changing and
improving this dynamic has proven stubborn. This is what I call ‘organized frustration’. Building on earlier research by Wagenaar on ‘democratic, communicative space’ and Hajer's call for a ‘dramaturgical analysis of processes’, this chapter explores the implicit and explicit ways in which the residents try to design a space which enables them to escape this predicament. Designing a new type of space requires us to be clear about what the role of space is. Space is not something which structures, or enforces particular behavior, but it can make particular forms of behavior more likely.

The second part of the chapter then explores both the way physical spaces and communicative spaces are structured by residents in such a way to enable more satisfactory and meaningful practices of participation. With regard to actual space, the location, time and timing, food and drinks, invitations and announcements, the use of the space and technique were all elements used to create an environment which enabled the participants to build an enduring relationship. They are meant to make people attend, make them feel at home and that their presence is wanted and makes a difference. What this shows is that the quality of democratic interaction is not only down to the content of the conversation, but can be enhanced by explicitly focusing on the design of participatory spaces.

All the benefits of a well designed space can be diminished if the actual meeting isn’t designed deliberately to leave room for genuine conversation. Many meetings organized by professionals include four recurring mistakes that help create a situation of organized frustration:

- They are organised as ‘meetings’, making it hard to form relationships and explore the situation at hand;
- They can be confrontational and reactive
- They are highly structured leaving only a particular type of opportunity for residents
- They reinforce existing role-patterns.

These different elements make it hard to turn these meetings into actual collaborative explorations. In the final part of this chapter I explore the different strategies used by residents to escape these four traps, focusing mainly on the last two. Important elements here are having a person whom residents trust to chair the meeting, but also using different forms of communication, such as theater, which creates space for a different kind of conversation. With regard to the last
point, the reinforcement of role-patterns, I explore the strategy used by the Pendrecht University. They revert roles, turning residents into professors and professionals into students. This reversal opens up space for a different kind of interaction between both groups. Using Douglas Torgerson's understanding of the jester, I argue that this kind of role-reversal, enables us to explore, in a safe setting, new ways to democratically engage with each other. This is why I think these practices have an important role to play if we want to make room in our democracy for genuine participation.

Where Chapters 6 to 8 focus on the role and work performed by residents, Chapter 9 focuses on the important role played by frontline professionals in the different neighborhoods. By exploring the work of a police officer, a community worker and a quartiermanager in a changing institutional environment, it becomes clear how they function as bridges between different worlds. This bridging is then further interpreted as the art of translation. Before turning to the actual practice of translation, I first explore the resurgence in both scientific literature and popular debates of the professionals as an important player in society. There are many calls pleading or demanding for more discretionary space for professionals. Building on, but also going beyond the classical work of Lipsky, a renewed attention and vocabulary of what it means to be a professional is emerging. This chapter adds to this vocabulary, which now revolves around such notions of creativity, improvisation, and negotiation. I do this first by exploring the work of more traditional professionals, and in the latter part by focusing on the work of a theater director as an example of new professionalism. In the interviews we find that professionals are looking for a balance between actively supporting ideas and letting citizens find out for themselves. To explore this further, and see how they actually perform this balancing act, I look at how they see their own role during public meetings. Based on the interviews I distinguish between three different roles: informing people; building trust between people and between people and institutions; and educating people about what is and what is not possible or desirable.

Using the work of Honig and Yanow to analyze these different dimensions as part of the art of translation, we gain insight in what this means in practice. Translation is neither a neutral nor passive activity, but an active and essential activity for local frontline professionals. This complex activity is all about bringing together two worlds or domains which speak a different language, but more importantly function according to different principles, routines and expectations. What becomes clear is that this vital practice is not currently being understood or appreciated widely.
To further explore this, the final paragraph of this chapter explores the work of a theater director who has been active in Pendrecht for an extended period. His way of facilitating conversations reveals additional elements of the art of translation: giving space for improvisation and failure; being modest; and acting location-specific. By understanding the work frontline professionals do as translators we gain a deeper understanding of their work, revealing a dimension that is now mostly taken for granted. It adds to the new vocabulary we need to critically understand the role of professionalism in participatory practices.

In the final chapter I bring together the two parts and reflect on the meaning of my research in regard to both science and societal discussions on participation. During my research in both worlds, the attention for participation has grown substantially. Given all critical remarks made from both worlds — and which I made myself — I am still convinced that well designed processes of participation are a desirable and potential way forward in both democracy and the governance of urban problems. By exploring this potential from the perspective of citizens, and by focusing on the ‘how’ of participation, we have gained substantial insight into the ‘pragmatics of participation’. This has both enhanced our theoretical understanding of participation, but also gives us possibilities to change things in practice. The practices of citizen participation I have researched and reported on in this thesis “obliquely bears witness to unwelcome insights that test the limits of what may properly and safely be said. When employed in the administrative sphere, carnivalesque language and logic generate unconventional perspectives that promise to enhance creative problem solving in the face of complexity” (Torgerson, 2003, 128). Their importance might therefore be much more substantial than we might have thought at first sight. This gives me hope that this thesis will not only be of scientific value, but will also play its role in the current discussions about the necessity for new arrangements of democratic governance to help us escape our current economical, financial and democratic crisis.