

# Theory of Architectural, Social Participation and “Contact” by Robert Zemeckis

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## Abstract

The paper shows the importance of memory in architecture and how social participation influence the formation of cultural memory. The article examines the issue of the importance of memory and how the popular culture coexists with highly symbolic places. The research will be conducted on the case of the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" in Berlin, built by architect Peter Eisenman. The aim of the paper is to show that architecture of memorials restores ideas and messages to protect the community from future mistakes. Social participation supports shaping public spaces and thus participates in the creation of culture. Article points out that creating memorials is connected with a great responsibility, because they strongly affect our memory and guide future generations.

**Keywords:** labyrinth, memorial, social participation, architecture

## 1. Introduction

In this article I will try to examine the description of architectural, social participation presented in the famous science fiction movie "Contact" by Robert Zemeckis, which was based on a novel by Pulitzer Prize winner, Carl Sagan.

I will use one of the most popular social participation models, "The ladder of citizen participation" by Sherry R. Arnstein. Before we will analyse the process of portal construction, I will briefly explain the idea of social participation in the field of architecture.

## 2. Architectural Democracy and Architectural Tyranny

At the time when human kind was approaching the renaissance period a significant change has taken place in the world of building construction. The architects stopped being anonymous and their names started to be associated with the work they created. For example one of the first well-known architects of the era in my homeland, Poland, was named Henryk Brunsberg (Gierke, 2015).

We can perceive this moment of time as a beginning of monarchy or dictatorship in the architectural world - one person started to rule, control and be responsible for the whole construction process. With an approval of an investor the architect could do whatever he wanted.

However, soon people started to realise, that many other people may be interested in the form of the new building. For example a neighbour from the other side of the road will soon look at the new facade every day, so his opinion should be taken into consideration, when designing its shape. An ecologist will be interested in preserving a large tree which grows in the middle of the designed building. The city president has always wanted to build a new road, which would pass the property. Social participation is about listening to and trying to reconcile all these people.

The amount of ideas and problems is as large as the planned construction process. The movie I am going to talk about is telling a story of the biggest construction in the history of mankind. Therefore the director could not resist the temptation to beautifully paint the social background of the investment.

## 3. The Plot

A young female scientist is analysing radio - signals which come to our planet from different places in the universe. The research leads to the discovery, that one of the transmissions contains plans of a mysterious building.

Is this giant construction of unknown origin a trojan horse or a part of a communicational system, which will help to accelerate the development of the Earth's technology? The people decide to check this in an empirical way.

#### **4. The Ladder of Citizen Participation**

When we think about the story in the context of the Sherry R. Arnstein theories we can perceive the construction of the portal as the process of climbing the "ladder of citizen participation". The involvement of people grows as the building takes its shape.

Shortly after the discovery we can see the non-participatory processes. For example the idea of concealing the message from the stars can be regarded as a manipulation. However, many scientists are against this way of thinking - the building plans were surely given to the whole human kind.

The next step on the ladder of citizen participation is called "the therapy". When politicians and scientists inform the people about the forthcoming construction, they try to convince them that it is extremely important.

The research facility starts to be surrounded by the people, who want to take part in this extraordinary discovery. Some of them are for and some against the experiment. The most controversial aspect is connected with selecting the person, who will pass the portal - the one which will be a representative of the whole human kind. The committee, which is formed on the basis of the partnership (the sixth step on the ladder of Citizen Participation) creates a kind of casting and finally finds an appropriate candidate.

When the construction is completed and the experiment is about to begin, social participation reaches the highest possible level. "Citizen control" leads to the tragedy - the opponents of the project take control of the experiment and the construction is destroyed.

In my opinion this point in the screenplay shows a critical diagnosis of the social participation ideas. As we can see social disapproval may lead to the failure of one of the greatest chances of mankind.

However, despite the collapse of democratically created construction the experiment is still possible - it can be conducted in a twin copy of the portal, which was built secretly by the government on a far-away island. The justice, which is a feature of projects created with the help of citizen participation is compared with the effectiveness of those built without it.

Can we agree, that in certain circumstances, social participation can be regarded as something negative?

#### **5. Critical look on the social participation**

In the history of my country the democratic rule of "Liberum Veto" - according to many historians - has weakened Poland's political position (Jasienica, 1988). Similarly the above mentioned portal did not bear the discrepancy of views and opinions.

Can we blame the authorities, that the second construction was created with the lack of social participation? Are they justified by their faith in the meaning of the experiment?

Apparently in the history of democracy we can find many examples of decisions, which served social justice but were made in a way which could not be regarded as democratic. It was proven that Abraham Lincoln used bribery and traded positions in order to impose the thirteenth amendment to the constitution of United States, which illegalised slavery (Foner, 2010).

In Poland one of the biggest national holidays is the third of may - the day, when the country imposed the second constitution in the world. However, not all the people know, that in order to achieve this success work on the document was kept in secret (Foner, 2010) and during the vote political opposition was cheated and kept guarded (Adamkiewicz, 2012).

If a man believes strongly in an idea, but knows that in order to achieve the goal he has to violate the rules of democracy - what should he do? Do the ends justify the means? How far in marginalising the role of social participation can the authorities go, when working on the project of high economic, scientific or aesthetic value?

All these questions can only be left unanswered. However, there is one particular problem, which the movie tries to solve at its very ending. It can be stated in a following way: what should we do to make the freedom, democracy and social participation possible? To show the intentions of the director we will have to analyse one of the most interesting threads of the movie - the relation between science and religion.

## 6. Science and Religion

In the background of the main, science - fiction action we can find a love story between Ellie Arroway, an earlier mentioned female researcher who is an atheist and Palmer Joss, a theologian who is a would-be priest. Their discussions, which are a confrontation of scientific and emotional way of thinking, become surprisingly important in the context of the ending of "Contact".

The portal experiment finally takes place. The heroine has an interesting vision of meeting alien life forms, as she falls in special capsule between rotating rings. However, her cameras do not record any image. Arroway, who cannot show material evidence of the adventure must refer to the criteria of faith and trust - what unexpectedly helps her understand Palmer Joss.

In my opinion the message of the movie can be analysed in the context of the topic of this article. Social participation is a great idea as long as we will try to understand the beliefs of other people, who take part in the negotiations. An attempt to perceive the disputed matters from our opponents' point of view not only can help us find the best solution to the problem, but also begin a new friendship.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, "Contact" by Robert Zemeckis can be read as a critical essay on the topic of social participation in the world of architecture. Although the reflection is rather pessimistic a careful audience may also see the final, hidden message of tolerance and brotherhood.

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