Graphic facilitation is a set of techniques that revolve around the predominant use of visual tools (images, drawings, maps, and other graphic elements) to transmit, produce, and collaboratively analyse ideas within a specific focused group of people.

Problem description

Processes about the transformation of cities need to take advantage of collective intelligence to seek for alternatives and generate proposals about key challenges such as the improvement of the quality of air, the adaptation of cities to climate change, and the transition towards a model of sustainable mobility. In this context, there are a series of participatory methodologies that intend to channel the inputs of a diversity of agents and to improve the management of groups and conflicts. There are also many forms of visualisation used in urbanism, currently led by computer-aided design. However, group facilitation and graphical tools, two worlds on their own, are not regularly associated. In fact, regarding specific urban and territorial issues such as urban mobility, they are frequently advancing on dissociated paths. Thus, spatial questions are
addressed, on the one hand, with graphic representations produced exclusively by teams of technicians, and, on the other, in participatory workshops where conversation is the principal matter and object of interpretation.

**How does it work**

Graphic facilitation techniques are procedures that explore the evocative and triggering capacity of graphical tools and the actions surrounding them. Drawing in particular, when practiced in the company of others while focusing on concrete issues, is an implicative and affective activity that sparks and guides inquiry and imagination. Ideally, these techniques must be integrated within a broader methodology and coordinated by a technical team working on the process at stake. Even if the team is responsible for enabling the exchange of opinions among participants and for helping to make clarifications when needed, it must not establish a strict order or rhythm for the sake of pushing the discussion forward. On the contrary, the team should be sensitive to ambiguities and less intellectual contents and interpretations, to what is implicit or not spoken out loud, to the tacit knowledge necessary in processes of collective creation - one rarely expressed through words, but that leaves traces on paper. It is a useful reminder that verbal language has several channels (auditory and proprioceptive), and that there are also non-verbal languages that manifest through movement and visual channels. In this sense, graphic facilitation is useful to open alternative means of communication and to keep the balance between participants' needs, the process itself, and the objectives to reach.

![Image 2. Ideas that were drawn during the participation and creativity workshops about public space and public equipment in the city of Grenoble. CCSTI Grenoble. 2015. Source: Improvistos (www.improvistos.org).](image)
Some concrete tools:

- **Graphic recording.** Live visual reporting with drawings and words that records and narrates in real time or one situation, or event. It combines the idea of a short story with a diagram, creating a tale by placing ideas spatially in a non-linear order. It can be done through sketch noting in private or in public, with the particularity that it is carried out in a large format, visible to everyone.

- **Video scribing.** Visual narration based on an animated video in which illustrations and words are drawn and written following a script and often accompanied by a voice-over.

- **The Livingston method.** This activity adopts a game format. A technician draws by hand a project or an idea following the instructions of the participants but may make small necessary changes to it to reflect the design limitations imposed by scale or form.

- **Visual template.** A structured and illustrated diagram to be completed by a group to guarantee that all participants can follow the process and its steps. The use of a large format awakens and sharpens participants’ attention, enhancing the group’s creative potential.

- **Walking and drawing.** Open-air activity consisting of a critical walk during which participants use drawings as the main mean of expression and documentation. There is the possibility to combine it with photography and note taking. It can be useful to gather information about specific issues, or simply to learn how to observe the city and public space.

- **Creative collaborative mapping.** Collaborative cartographies are a relatively extended technique to gather georeferenced information in a participatory manner. They’ve been recently boosted by digital and open source tools such as OpenStreetMap or Cumapp. However, taking into account other procedures and layers of interest, mapping still holds a great creative and critical potential.

- **Street actions with paint.** Subtle interventions to reclaim public space could be considered as practices of collaborative drawing in which an alternative for the city is imagined and executed. In this case, the canvas is the street itself.

- **Graphic reinterpretation.** The ideas and projects that have not been coined visually might need a graphical translation to be communicated in a friendly manner or to highlight some of their aspects.

- **Visual library.** Set of drawings, pictograms, icons, files, stickers, templates, connectors, bullets and other elements that could be useful for graphic facilitation sessions or techniques, and as a support for other tools.

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\(^1\)See this video for a glimpse on how the process looks like and its outcomes: https://vimeo.com/144629727
Image 3. Presentation of proposals during The Experiential City workshop. Educational and participatory process with children from different countries in Medialab-Prado, Fundación Pandora. 2016. Walking and drawing were two of the tools used to explore the city. Source: Improvistos (www.improvistos.org).

Image 4. Pictograms and icons prepared beforehand for The Experiential City workshop. Educational and participatory process with children from different countries in Medialab-Prado, Fundación Pandora. 2016. Walking and drawing were two of the tools used to explore the city. Source: Improvistos (www.improvistos.org).
There is an infinity of micro-techniques that can be introduced in general activities and that enable to explore visual thinking: introducing oneself by drawing, visual games to break the ice, the use of visual metaphors, etc. Other ways of drawing together that lack an explicit name or formulation are designed and prepared in advance to propel that drawings will back up conversations during workshops. In all of them, the team of facilitators fulfills roles that range from drawing for someone or with somebody to helping a person draw on its own. Either way, graphic facilitation tools can be useful supplements to processes where they are not the principal instrument: they can support communication, the exchange or the development of ideas, or the visual monitoring of the encounters.

**Benefits**

Graphic facilitation and its different techniques allow us to understand the world by drawing it, and to draw the world to find other ways of understanding it. Among its most obvious advantages, we find that almost any group or individual can practice it because it demands simple knowledge and materials. Even if limited in scope, graphic facilitation has been used for more than 30 years by companies and organizations (conflict management, the creation of projects, vision development, brainstorming, etc.), and in the world of education (to make presentations or look for collective solutions in a ludic way). However, it becomes a real window of opportunity for many agents when a team of mediators that master graphic facilitation techniques and that are also experts in the contents to address, intervenes. Another advantage is its capacity to combine different perspectives for it allows the incorporation of different professional backgrounds and points of views. For instance, visual templates enable to address a complex task in a participatory manner (like diagnosing an urban situation or imagining a future scenario). Moreover, drawing the intermediate and final results of a process makes them easier to share due to their visual attractiveness and clarity. It helps to increment transparency and to render face-to-face activities more interactive through digital platforms and social media. Finally, drawing enables the inclusion of other groups of people (children), other key features (for example humour has a lot of strength if expressed with drawings), and different temporalities (highlighting the duration and slowness of those distended moments during which it is possible to enhance imagination).

Risks

A tool that is useful and appealing, risks capturing all the attention and be mistaken for the object of a process. The current tendency to generalise visual content and increase its reach through the hybridisation with digital mediums could condemn graphic facilitation as just a fashion, an eye-catching and seducing technique ready for consumption, disregarding the subject or the community. Thus, like any other tool addressing participation in processes dealing with the transformation of the city and the territory, graphic facilitation techniques must help problematize the questions of who participates and why it is necessary.

Furthermore, drawing is considered a skill that is not within everybody’s reach, just within those with a natural ability or specific training. As a result, thinking whether one is good or bad at drawing often has a strong impact when it comes to drawing-based participation. However, graphic facilitation’s task is to make the act of drawing a friendly one by highlighting the creative process rather than its results. It does so in a fun way, mobilising tools that are easy to use and complementing drawing with other techniques.

Finally, graphic facilitation helps to clarify what might seem complicated, but it is not a magic tool nor should it simplify complex challenges. After all, simplified urbanism makes complicated lives.

Agents involved

There are two main groups of agents involved in mediated processes: the facilitators and the people or group whose activity is the object of the facilitation.

In cases that focus on the city and the territory, the team of facilitators, besides counting with professionals in the fields of mediation and participation, includes experts in the areas of architecture, urbanism, sociology, ecology, economy, etc. When graphic facilitation is part of the methodology, the team can also include, depending on the approach, professionals in graphic design, drawing, illustration, strategic design, visual thinking, communication and community management.

Regarding the participants of the process, they include collectives, neighbours, companies and organisations, other teams of technicians, public administrations, funders, and any person interested in participating.

Legal framework

The processes and the places in which they take place transfer their legal conditions to the choice and use of techniques. There are no specific legal frameworks bound to graphic facilitation. If the activities involve minors, mediators often need to have civil liability insurance or a special permit to work with children.

Strategic framework

The strategic framework is established by the graphic facilitation process itself or the broader project within which it is used. The reach of graphic facilitation tools is dependent on such frame, and its design and implementation adapt to ambitious long-term processes and independent meetings or interventions alike. Nevertheless, the development of graphic facilitation has significant opportunities where it has been scarcely used: this is, as a supplement in all stages of processes that deal with urban transformation and participation.

Examples

Image 7. Functional planning scheme for the mobility and public space of Madrid’s North-South axis. Madrid. 2016. Coordinated by Mateus Porto. Based on collaborative sessions with the drafting team, the project included a graphic translation of mobility proposals using schemes, perspectives, bird’s eye view, sections, icons, and diagrams. Source: Improvistos (www.improvistos.org).
Image 8. AbrePuertaBonita. A participatory process to define the future uses of the plot of former market Puerta Bonita. Ayuntamiento de Madrid. 2016. The diagnosis and co-design of proposals were carried out with graphic facilitation, and there was a drawn recording of the activities. Source: Improvistos (www.improvistos.org).

Image 9. Collective mapping workshop in Santa María La Ribera. Ciudad de México. 2015. In the image, we can observe critical visual resources produced by Iconoclasistas and used during the workshops. This organisation shares many of the material and methodologies resulting from their experiences in collective itinerant mapping, critical cartographies, and open source graphical resources. Source: Iconoclasistas (http://www.iconoclasistas.net/).
Image 10. Graphic recordings by Carla Boserman. 2014. The author explains on her website the components of a graphic recording: 1) Information about the event. 2) A drawn description of hosts. 3) Hashtags. 4) Metadata. 5) Label highlighting concepts. 6) Websites, books, or places where to broaden information. 7) Balloons gathering dialogues. 8) Icons, symbols, and drawings that give an account of the environment. 9) Central concepts or ideas. 10) A summary of the acquired knowledge, thoughts about the topic at stake. 11) A drawn description of the participants. Source: Carla Boserman (www.carlaboserman.net).

Image 11. These notes were drawn by Athanasia Panagiotidi during the European Visual Practitioners Meeting, 2017, Brussels. The image is a fragment of the notebook of one of the event’s participants. Combining, in a rush text and drawings, she created a metaphor to help remember an idea. Source: Athanasia Panagiotidi (https://www.behance.net/Nassi).
Timeline

Graphic facilitation can be used in short or long processes, adapting itself to each case. In general, it helps to understand and hold ideas quickly. However, it has its own rhythms that sometimes imply slowing down in the short-term as to allow graphic facilitation to produce positive effects. It is important to note that, to draw, one needs to take a breath, a “drawing breath”, and also to think, look around, interact, listen, feel, and enjoy.

Costs

In general, graphic facilitation has reduced costs, namely the salary of the facilitators and the price of the materials for the activity, often cheap. Notwithstanding, larger processes requiring graphic facilitation techniques might demand a specific adaptation of existing methodologies and the integral design of the facilitation process, thus adding other indirect costs.

Open questions

The main open question concerns drawing’s capacity to trigger, beyond form and representation, processes of inquiry and the breeding of ideas. The final drawings may be attractive and interesting, and they risk to catch all the attention and to be confused with the objectives. Nevertheless, it is the act of drawing that holds strong potential when exploring processes about the city and the territory. If we understand graphic facilitation as a variation of process mediation, one that can overcome the limitations of written or spoken language, and if we focus on methods, our final results might acquire a new scope. If we are to keep exploring this path, we must understand graphic facilitation as a means to increase the implicative dimension of processes that can be appropriate for participants.

Image 13. Presentation of the diagnosis that were drawn during the process of emPLAZAte: participatory design and drafting of preliminary projects for the refurbishment of several public spaces in the neighbourhoods of Fuente del Berro and Guindalera. Ayuntamiento de Madrid. 2017. The workshops of diagnosis, conception and co-design of proposals about mobility and public space incorporated graphic facilitation with a gender perspective. Source: Improvistos (www.improvistos.org).
Future developments

Customised graphic vocabularies: When we draw collectively or when we use graphic facilitation tools, meanings are dependent on the different narrative or conversational contexts. Therefore, it would be useful to further research which visual vocabularies apply better to topics about the city and the territory, in specific locations and with concrete actors. The development of semiotic and graphic frames of reference tailored to these questions would allow us to improve the use of a common language that could be used to exchange information and to express ideas. We should consider other components and dimensions of drawing, beginning with the basic elements of a visual library about the city - people, vegetation, buildings, letters, icons, signs, colours, etc. We should consider the composition and use of space, possible metaphors, high-speed drawing, graphic improvisation, etc. A field of possibilities exists, ranging from notations composed of interpretable elements to the most liberating forms of expression.
Graphic facilitation and digital channels: Another field of development concerns the possible combinations of graphic facilitation and the improvement of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Digital platforms and social media can be used as contexts for participatory exchange to increase transparency, complement, and widen the scope of face-to-face activities. Digital channels and their virtual dimension serve as spaces of participation to exchange drawings and graphics, to complement georeferenced information, and advance in the definition of projects and ideas.

To draw and design the city: Beyond the architectural modes for the generation of projects that have consolidated since the Renaissance (ground plan, section, perspective, etc.), creative practices (especially drawing, but also others like walking) have significant possibilities in ideation processes that question issues of spatiality and urban transformation. To draw collectively is an experiment that sheds new questions about our inhabited spaces, cities, and territories.

Compatibility with sustainable Urban Mobility Plans

We are currently witnessing a relocation of the role of expert teams and their specialised knowledge within participatory processes. If teams of professionals contribute with their expertise, they are only another agent of the process next to citizens, public administrations, and private organisations. Sustainable mobility plans require the participation of many agents to respond to mobility and urban issues creatively. Because these plans concern the city and the territory, the use of renders, images, maps, floor plans, and sections are recurrent as to grasp the spatial conditions of the topics at stake. However, a more ambitious and systematic use of graphical tools suited to participation, and not only that of final overviews provided by technicians, could help boost social creativity and mitigate fears. The implementation of process-based instruments such as workshops, walks, mappings, ludic activities and other testing actions can include specialised graphic facilitation to help produce pictures, drawings, and videos collectively, encouraging the reinterpretation and generation of new ideas. It is also possible to use techniques to display and handle proposals through drawing that could help to imagine and assess mobility-related scenarios. Parallel to this, the creation of a multi-format visual narrative of the processes through sustained graphic documentation is useful in the communication, understanding and diffusion of the Plans’ results, especially through digital mediums. Finally, it is worth recalling that graphic facilitation can have an inclusive approach, attracting and incorporating new agents into processes, and providing an alternative channel of expression.
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