1 INTRODUCTION

European cities are faced with complex challenges in urban governance, integrating the many and varied voices of the city into governance frameworks. This is particularly the case in the arena of urban regeneration, where often conflicting public, private and civil society interests are involved in governance processes at the neighbourhood level (McCarthy, 2007). However, as many commentators have observed, involvement in urban governance processes is at best an uneven territory, with different groups having differential access to power and decision-making (Bacqué et Simtomer, 2010). Within this mix, a key area that is less understood, is the role that traditionally « unheard voices » within civil society can play in governance processes for regeneration, that is those people who are not traditionally involved in decision-making structures, and who do not have their views heard within the governance system. This paper explores these themes, investigating the role of the various regeneration stakeholders, including residents, in governance and decision-making, and in particular, the « spaces of participation » (Gaventa, 2004) that can open up for resident engagement in a regeneration context.

The focus of this paper is to explore two regeneration projects, one in France in the banlieue of Greater Lyon, and the other in England, on the outskirts of Birmingham. The two countries offer interesting comparisons in relation to governance, due to their particular institutional contexts and tradition in legitimising public intervention. Historically, France has traditionally had a strong focus on a top-down approach, with the central State playing a key role in the future of the city. This contrasts with the approach in England, on the other hand, where local authorities have more of a key role to play, that is functional rather than political and which, combined with a tradition of bottom-up initiatives, favours participation of different actors in local decision-making processes through partnership.
However, as in many western nations, France and England are both experiencing a crisis in representative democracy. Many citizens don’t feel that their elected councillors adequately represent their views, brought on in part by a disjunction between the political elite and local residents, as well as an erosion of ties between the mainstream political parties and civil society. This is reflected in part by high abstention rates, which in France reached a record 38% nationally in the second round of the municipal elections held in April 2014, and in England, as high as 64% in the munipical elections held in May 2014. This raises questions about the legitimacy of decisions taken within a framework of weak representative democracy, and the potential for participatory democracy to step into the breach.

Within this context, it is interesting to explore the potential for residents to become involved in decision-making through governance structures, and the possible «spaces of participation» that are available to them. This paper focuses on the cases of regeneration in Vaulx-en-Velin in the banlieue of Greater Lyon, and Longbridge on the outskirts of Birmingham, exploring the potential for «spaces of participation» to provide a voice for residents in planning the future of their city. The following section will set out the analytical framework that will structure the paper. Section 3 will provide some context to the situation in France and England. Section 4 will detail the methodology, while Section 5 will explore the issues of governance and participation in the cases of Vaulx-en-Velin and Longbridge. Section 6 will draw conclusions from the study.

2. URBAN REGENERATION AND SPACES OF PARTICIPATION

Cities are arenas of contrast and inequalities, presenting extremes of wealth and poverty. Pockets of social and economic deprivation and physical decline can challenge the objectives of a city to be sustainable in the widest sense: economically, socially and environmentally. A common response in many European cities to these neighbourhoods in decline has been to instigate urban regeneration programmes, to address the physical signs of deprivation, as well as its social and economic manifestation.

In parallel to these socio-economic trends, there has also been a shift in urban politics and the form of urban government (Le Galès, 1995). Since the 1980s, there has been a move away from more formal modes of city ‘government’ to a more fluid and informal system of urban ‘governance’, including a strong role for partnership in urban decision-making (Jouve, 2005). The literature on urban governance has grown in recent decades, proliferating from the 1990s, with academic studies debating the value of different mechanisms of local governance at the urban level (Le Galès, 1998), and highlighting the role that different voices play in decision-making through different modes of governance (Bache and Chapman, 2008). However some have suggested, in line with Arnstein’s «ladder of participation» (Arnstein, 1969), that participatory involvement in urban governance processes is at best an uneven territory, with decision-making powers distributed unevenly between different social groups (Carpenter and Brownill, 2008). Other critics assert that even within a participatory framework, decisions are guided by those with the strategic and economic power to assert their views over others (Flyvbjerg, 1998).

Within a participatory framework, in order to understand citizen engagement in governance processes at the neighbourhood level, it is useful to make reference to Gaventa’s work on
« spaces of participation » (Gaventa, 2004) in which he proposes a typology of different approaches to participation, around the notion of spaces. Firstly, there are « closed or uninvited spaces » where bureaucrats, experts, and elected representative make decisions with little broad consultation or involvement. Secondly, there are « invited spaces » where people are invited by various authorities to participate in decision-making. Thirdly, there are « claimed or created spaces » which are spaces claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders, or created more autonomously by them. By exploring these « spaces of participation », we can better understand the potential for transformative engagement by citizens in regeneration, and possible strategies for empowering residents to have a voice in the future of their city.

3 CONTEXT

This section sets out the context of the two case study areas: Vaulx-en-Velin in Greater Lyon and Longbridge in Birmingham.

3.1 VAULX-EN-VELIN, GREATER LYON

Lyon is France’s second largest urban area, situated in the central-eastern part of the country. The governance of the city is characterized by a multi-layered mille-feuilles institutional structure (Carpenter and Verhage, 2014). The Greater Lyon area (Grand Lyon) is made up of a total of 58 local authorities (communes), the largest municipality being the central City of Lyon (Ville de Lyon) with a population of 440,000. The Greater Lyon area is governed by the Greater Lyon Authority (the so-called Communauté Urbaine de Lyon), including the commune of Vaulx-en-Velin, the case study area in this paper, to the east of the city centre.

With a population of some 40,000 inhabitants, the suburban commune of Vaulx-en-Velin is one of the largest municipalities in the Lyon conurbation. At the beginning of the 20th century, the village of Vaulx-en-Velin had a population of around 1,200 mostly working in agriculture, and it remained a small agricultural community well into the 1960s. However, with the expansion of Lyon mainly due to migration, the population of Vaulx-en-Velin grew rapidly from the 1960s. The city was designated at the ministerial level as a « Priority Zone for Urban Expansion » (Zone à Urbaniser en Priorité – ZUP) in 1963, and was the focus of a national housing-building programme from the early 1970s, with the construction of large social housing estates (grands ensembles), a shopping centre, schools, administrative buildings and three industrial estates.

In the 10 years from 1968 to 1978, the population of Vaulx-en-Velin more than doubled, from around 20,000 to over 43,000, including many families of non-French origin in social housing units. The social housing estates were designed in the modernist style of the time, with a separation between cars and pedestrians, and organized around monolithic « tours et barres » (high-rise housing estates). The low income housing (Habitation à Loyer Modéré – HLM) attracted a mainly working-class population with low incomes, and in particular, ethnic minority families. However, the combination of urban poverty due to a lack of employment (following the oil crisis of the early 1970s), increasing social and economic exclusion, and the frustrations that this generated were brought to the fore in Vaulx-en-Velin when urban rioting
erupted, initially in 1979 and again in 1990, sparked by a police incident and fuelled by deeply felt economic and social pressures (Dikeç, 2007).

As a result of the unrest, and similar incidents in other suburbs around France in the 1980s, the government initiated a series of policies to address underlying socio-economic tensions, as well as the architectural inadequacies of these banlieue neighbourhoods, in particular through the demolition of outdated housing stock, through the so-called «Politique de la Ville» approach (Urban Policy for Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods) (Severin-Barboutie, 2012). In 1988, structures and programmes were put in place at the national level to facilitate the implementation of regeneration policy, including an Interministerial Committee for Cities (Comité Interministériel des Villes), attesting to the perceived multi-sectoral, multi-faceted challenges that these deprived neighbourhoods face.

However, the riots that took place in Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990 and elsewhere in France represented a ‘wake-up call’ for the French government, highlighting the dysfunctional nature of the banlieues, their physical and symbolic isolation, and the poverty and disadvantage that were concentrated there, these places on the margins of urban space and urban society (Kokoreff and Layeyronnie, 2013). Vaulx-en-Velin became a focus for the «Politique de la Ville» at the national level. The municipality was designated as a «Grand Projet Urbain» (GPU – Large-scale Urban Project) in 1994, and classified as one of the first «Grand Projet de Ville» (GPV – Large-scale City Project) in 1999. Partly due to the riots of 1990, and the poor socio-economic indicators compared to the rest of Lyon and France, Vaulx-en-Velin became a symbol of the failure to integrate non-French immigrants into French society, and a challenge to policy-makers as a testing ground for new policy (Severin-Barboutie, 2012).

The «Grand Projet de Ville» national regeneration policy is an area-based initiative to regenerate deprived urban areas. While its predecessor, the policy of «Zones Urbaines Sensibles» (ZUS – Priority Areas for Intervention) was focused on social exclusion (a people-based policy), the GPV takes a more explicitly integrated approach to regeneration (place-based as well as people-based), involving significant demolition of outdated housing and facilities, and rebuilding of neighbourhoods. The Vaulx-en-Velin GPV covers much of the area that was previously classified as a ZUP. It aims to demolish sub-standard housing stock, rebuild new mixed housing areas, as well as provide new services (rebuilding the town centre, schools and shopping centres), addressing issues such as social inclusion and sustainable development. What is interesting to explore is the potential for citizen engagement in the GPV, for the voices of the banlieue to be heard through potential «spaces of participation» and the possibility for meaningful involvement for residents in regeneration governance.

3.2 LONGBRIDGE, BIRMINGHAM

Birmingham is the UK’s second city with a population of just over 1 million, located in the West Midlands region, 160 km north west of London. Situated in the industrial heartland of Britain, the city grew rapidly during the industrial revolution, becoming one of the key manufacturing regions in the country. Due to its strong base of small firms involving skilled workers, the city became a focus for the automotive industry during the first half of the 20th century (Gwynne, 1996), with car production becoming one of the most important industrial
sectors. In 1971, nearly 20% of all employment in manufacturing in the region was within the motor vehicle sector, not taking account of employment in supply chains (Spencer et al, 1986).

However, the city as a whole has suffered heavily from the impacts of deindustrialization and globalization, starting in the 1970s (Bryson et al, 1996). Many companies closed down, and others implemented heavy redundancy programmes. The automotive industry, for example, lost more than 40% of its employment in the region from 1971 to 1981 (Spencer et al, 1986). The results of deindustrialization across all sectors have been heavy job losses, a decrease in manufacturing output and a hike in unemployment rates.

In response to the economic and social crisis brought on by deindustrialisation, Birmingham has received considerable funding from central government to address the challenges of urban deprivation. This has included Single Regeneration Budget financing, New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. However, while there has been talk of an ‘urban renaissance’ in the city centre, there are questions over how far the regeneration of the city centre has improved living conditions for those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Barber and Hall, 2008).

The case study area in Birmingham, Longbridge, is located in the south west of the city, and was home to the car manufacturer MG Rover until 2005. The area experienced rapid housing growth until the 1960s, with the expansion of manufacturing jobs in consumer goods industries, including the automotive industry. At its heyday in the 1960s, it was claimed to be the largest car production plant in the world. However, the scale of production was reduced in waves through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, together with a reduction in the workforce. The profile of the area has been characterized as a white working class population, with considerable deprivation challenges (Smith, 1989). These were compounded following the announcement of the closure of MG Rover in 2005, with the loss of 6000 jobs. Not only did this represent an economic crisis, but also a community crisis, as social networks that had been built around the car plant were subsequently severed following closure (Hall, 2013).

The Longbridge site is now under redevelopment, guided by the Longbridge Area Action Plan (LAAP), a statutory document produced by the two local authorities that are responsible for the site, Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council (BCC, 2009). The aim of the AAP was to provide a framework for future development in an area. The local authorities involved were required to undertake a statutory process to ensure that the plan was both sustainable and deliverable. It was prepared together with the private sector landowner and developer, St Modwen, who acquired the site in two tranches in 2003 and 2004, before the closure of MG Rover in 2005. The LAAP was also produced in consultation with local residents, following an extensive public consultation exercise carried out by consultants using a variety of participation methods, and it is this process of consultation, that is interesting to explore, in relation to “space of participation”, and the opportunity for ‘unheard voices’ to be integrated into the planning of the neighborhood’s redevelopment.
4. RESEARCH METHODS

This research takes an international comparative approach to regeneration governance in France and England, an approach that has been largely missing in studies to date. Cross national comparisons are however particularly useful in helping to advance theoretical debates and improve policy and practice in different contexts. The evolution of governance in different urban settings is highly path-dependent, and is affected by the institutional, regulatory, political, economic and cultural structures inherited by a city. The differences between the two countries of France and England therefore present a rich comparative terrain for cross-national study.

Firstly, there are interesting differences in relation to the question of legitimacy of public intervention. In France, intervention is based on public interest as enshrined in the constitution, whereas in the UK where there is no written constitution, public intervention is based on a more evolutionary pragmatic approach. Indeed, in the UK context, encoded statutes are perceived as potentially stifling economic and social evolution (Breuillard and Fraser, 2007).

Secondly, France has traditionally had a strong focus on top-down approaches, with the central State playing a key role in the future of the city. Despite a shift over the last 30 years from government to governance through the process of decentralisation, local elected officials are still seen as the legitimate actors to take decisions in the public interest, due to the importance of the concept of the ‘Republic’ within French politics. This favours representative democracy as the means of citizen participation, rather than participatory democratic processes. In contrast, in the UK there is a stronger acceptance of participatory democracy as a means of decision-making for the ‘common good’. Community engagement and broad involvement in urban governance approaches have been embedded within policy for some 15 years, while more recently, the Coalition Government elected in May 2010 has introduced sweeping changes to the way in which citizens are involved in planning their neighbourhoods through processes of ‘neighbourhood planning’.

Thirdly, an important difference between the two countries is the varying roles of the public versus private sectors in the planning system and urban regeneration. Traditionally, the public sector in France is much more active in planning the financing of development, enshrined in the process of ‘aménagement du territoire’ (spatial planning) and the ‘politique de la ville’ (urban policy for disadvantaged neighbourhoods). In the UK, on the other hand, the public sector plays the role of facilitator for the private sector, providing guidance for the private property investment sector to consider whether the potential return will be great enough. In the UK, “public funding is there to serve the interests of private capital to whom land development is just another investment opportunity” (Fraser and Hoffmann, 2007: 154). Land development in the UK is a private activity, whereas in France this is not necessarily the case. This is illustrated by the proactive role that the UK Treasury plays in the strategic management of policy formulation and implementation, aiming to shape policy to maximise potential private investment and enhance competitiveness. The two countries therefore offer interesting points of comparison for the research.

However, when drawing up a framework for international comparisons, there are two possible approaches to integrate these different settings (Verhage, 2002: 37). One approach
emphasises the differences between the national contexts, and leads to conclusions that highlight the uniqueness of each country. However, this lends itself to the criticism that such comparisons are unhelpful, as the resultant lessons cannot be transferred to other situations. An alternative approach, rather, concentrates on the similarities between the different national contexts. Such a study starts from the premise that between countries, similar things are taking place, in this case related to the regeneration of run-down areas. However, the processes are undertaken in different ways in different countries. It therefore highlights the alternative ways of approaching the common challenges of urban regeneration, questioning accepted ways of tackling area-based deprivation in particular contexts, and offering alternatives. By adopting the second approach, this research aims to exploit the advantages of adopting a comparative method, by highlighting alternative means of addressing urban governance and regeneration, using case studies in France and England. Thus the two countries present a fruitful comparative study, providing new insights into different approaches to participatory governance and their potential policy implications for cities, not just in France and England but also in other EU countries.

The research adopts a qualitative case study approach acknowledging that all cases are individual, and yet in a multiple case study setting, this allows for comparisons and contrasts to be drawn, and common themes to emerge. Vaulx-en-Velin was identified as a suitable case study, given its long history as a focus for national urban policy, and strong tradition of active neighbourhood associations, which have created a culture of engagement at the neighbourhood level. Longbridge in Birmingham was an interesting case in England to study, given its recent history as a focus for regeneration and the different partners that have been involved, including residents and community groups in the redevelopment of the area.

The study has used a mixed-methods approach, employing qualitative semi-structured interviews, combined with a documentary review using the method of discourse analysis. The initial objective of the interviews was to elicit the views of stakeholders within the regeneration process, such as the local authority and the regeneration agencies, about the role of different partners, including associations, residents and «unheard voices» in neighbourhood regeneration governance structures, and the potential «spaces of participation» within these governance arrangements. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with residents in the case study area, to explore these themes from the residents’ perspective, in particular the role of citizens in regeneration governance structures. A purposive sampling (Given, 2008) was carried out initially, to identify the key stakeholders involved at different scales. This was subsequently supplemented by snowball sampling, to identify further respondents that would be relevant to interview. A total of 32 interviews were carried out for the case studies, including exploratory interviews with local and national experts, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, and interviews with residents in the case study areas.

In addition to in-depth interviews, policy documents and archive material were also reviewed using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a methodology that is used relatively little in the social sciences in general, and in geography and planning in particular (Lees, 2004). While many researchers draw on policy documents to support their research, few draw explicitly on the particular method of discourse analysis to critically assess the rationale and messages behind the policy documents (Hajer, 2006). But in the words of van den Brink and Metze (2006), «Words matter in policy and planning ». The research presented here
therefore aims to address this methodological deficit, drawing on discourse analysis to explore the meaning of policy texts related to urban regeneration, governance and participation, in order to elucidate the rationale behind those texts in relation to power structures and dominant axes of understanding.

Discourse analysis can be described as «the examination of argumentative structure in documents and other written or spoken statements as well as the practices through which these utterances are made» (Hajer, 2006). One of the key concepts behind discourse analysis is that language has a profound impact on our view of the world and reality, and that in political terms, policy should therefore be analysed within the context of the particular narrative in which it is set. Therefore for this research, we are using a combination of discourse analysis of key documents, together with in-depth interviews with both institutional actors as well as residents, to explore the themes of governance in neighbourhood regeneration and the role of citizens in potential «spaces of participation».

5. SPACES OF PARTICIPATION: RHETORIC AND REALITY

Participation on paper

A review of key documents related to regeneration and participation reveals a commitment on paper to participation processes in both cases, but the reality when talking to key stakeholders in local authorities is that participation is desirable in certain circumstances, but not to be encouraged in others.

In France, the vast majority of the key urban regeneration policies at the national level over the last 30 years have, at least on paper, encouraged resident participation in regeneration programmes (Hall and Hickman, 2011). From the Habitat et Vie Sociale programme (HVS) in the 1970s, to the Loi de Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbaine (SRU) of 2000, all have given space to the rhetoric of the importance of involving residents in participatory exercises. It is interesting to note that this supposed desire for resident engagement in deprived areas contrasts markedly with the process through which many of these areas were initially built. The large scale housing estates (grands ensembles) were the result of one of the most ‘top-down’ policies in the history of urban development in France, which makes the reference to resident engagement all the more interesting.

The key issue to explore is whether and how this supposed desire for resident engagement is translated into action on the ground at the local level. Materials accessed at the municipal archives suggest that even though participation has been written into policy documents, residents in Vaulx-en-Velin felt that they weren’t consulted during the initial regeneration process at all, as this extract of an interview with a local resident illustrates:

«When the national decision was made to build the ZUP, farmers had to be expropriated, they didn’t have the choice. [.....] Everything went to the new city centre during construction in the 1970s. The village was emptied and all the administrative roles went to the new centre. There was a political will to announce that the city was moving, it wasn’t in the village anymore, but in the new centre. And what’s more, there was no explanation given to the
people. It was a national decision ». (Agence d’Urbanisme de Lyon, 2011: 53, author’s translation)

Effectively, the initial regeneration programme in Vaulx-en-Velin was imposed on residents, who had little voice in the future planning of their neighbourhood.

More recently, at the level of the Lyon agglomeration, in response to criticism that residents haven’t been involved enough in regeneration programmes in the city, the Grand Lyon has drawn up a « Participation Charter » specifically related to urban regeneration, to set out guidelines for involving residents in the redevelopment of their neighbourhoods (Grand Lyon, 2009). Some have praised this overall approach to participation, while others claim that, even with the Charter in place, local residents are not embedded in the organisational structure of regeneration partnerships, and thus not fully involved in governance.

The Charter merits a closer look, as it stands in contradiction to some of the discourses of key stakeholders from the municipality of Vaulx-en-Velin as well as at the level of the Grand Lyon itself.

The Charter states that the signatories (elected officials, public services and representatives from civil society) confirm their ambition to develop citizen participation within the context of urban regeneration, including the need for stronger mechanisms to facilitate such processes. The Charter then sets out four options for participation: information; consultation; dialogue (concertation), and coproduction, which is defined as « a participation process aimed at getting the population involved with the project designers and elected officials, as the co-authors of the project » (Grand Lyon, 2009: 4). However, this option of coproduction is firmly rejected in the Charter in favour of « dialogue »:

« From these different levels of citizen participation, the Grand Lyon has chosen dialogue (concertation). Dialogue becomes an integral part of the implementation of the project and the decision-making process. It also means that it is politicians who ultimately decide how to implement the project in line with the objectives of the plan for their electoral mandate. Dialogue is a design aid, it is not coproduction. Dialogue is a decision-making aid, it is not codecision » (Grand Lyon, 2009: 4).

The attachment to representative democracy that is implicit in this quote is reinforced clearly through interviews, but it is also interesting to analyse in the following section the potential contradictions between the expressed desire to engage in dialogue in the Charter, compared to the discourse from stakeholders related to how far consultation is actually useful in areas such as Vaulx-en-Velin.

In Longbridge, community consultation was an integral part of the development of the Longbridge Area Action Plan (LAAP). As stated by the developers, “Intensive consultation with local residents and stakeholders forms part of every new phase of the development (St Modwen, 2012: 34). The consultation statement (BCC, 2008) quotes the Government’s Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development (ODPM, 2005), stating that “Community involvement is an essential element in delivering sustainable development and creating sustainable and safe communities”.

9
In discussing the evolution of approaches to consultation over the years, local stakeholders in Birmingham suggested that the context for participation in regeneration programmes in the UK has changed over the last 20 years. Previously there would have been little role for residents in decision-making, whereas now, in structured regeneration programmes, Boards are constituted with local representatives, and members of the community are actively encouraged to take part:

“So I would say that nowadays, it is a much more imaginative joint exploration of the issues, joint working up of the suggestions and ideas, joint decision making with citizens actively, with voting roles on panels, and you genuinely try to do it as a partnership with the community”.

However, while it is true to say that extensive consultation was carried out in “invited spaces” during the elaboration of the Area Action Plan, now that the regeneration programme is being developed, there is less scope for communities to have their say. A Consultative Group meets every two months made up of leaders in the community, such as the local parish priests, councillors, and school heads. But interestingly, this meeting is not open to people who aren’t invited; it is very much a “closed space” in Gaventa’s terms, despite having community representatives involved. As one commentator said “It’s actually a closed meeting, but it’s a closed meeting to actually get things done, rather than waste everyone’s time”. Residents are therefore welcome to participate within the confines of a pre-defined exercise in particular contexts, but more spontaneous contributions are not encouraged, indeed, are seen as holding back decision-making.

Representative vs participatory democracy

In France, one of the key themes to emerge from the research is the importance of representative democracy within the French political culture. The elected mayor of each commune in France holds a key position of power set out in the constitution, that is deeply engrained in the culture of French society, in the psyche of both politicians and citizens. Thus, following election, a mayor feels that it is his or her right to take decisions on behalf of citizens for the following six years, and that if those decisions are unpopular, citizens are free to vote for another candidate at the next election. This attachment to representative democracy was evident in interviews with stakeholders within the municipality, as well as elsewhere. For example, when talking about the development of the strategic plan for Vaulx-en-Velin, a respondent from the Mairie was categorical: « In fact, there was no negotiation, it was non-negotiable », effectively a « closed space ». The culture of representative democracy is deeply embedded within the political system, which makes it difficult to open up decision-making processes to a wider public.

It is also interesting to note that this attachment to representative democracy also extends to residents as well. In one particular neighbourhood, while local people were initially concerned about the prospect of demolition under a new regeneration programme, and attended public meetings in certain numbers, when they realised that there would also be reconstruction within the programme, they became less engaged in the process and meetings were less well attended. As one representative of a local association said, « They were somewhat relieved,
they let go a little and said that this is a problem for the technicians ». So the « spaces of participation » closed down again.

However, there were some more marginal domains where « spaces of participation » were in fact opened up, for example, in the redevelopment of a small square, as part of a larger regeneration programme in Vaulx-en-Velin. Residents were excluded from the « closed space » of discussion around the strategy for the wider programme, but invited to come to a public meeting and express their views on the redevelopment of the square, an aspect that, as the Mairie put it, affects the « real daily life of residents ». This « invited space » was seen as the appropriate level of resident engagement, allowing a dialogue between residents and the Mairie. However, these « micro-local level » participation processes (Sintomer and de Maillard, 2007), it could be argued, go little way to truly opening up decision-making processes to local residents and integrating them into governance structures.

There were a number of justifications given for this dichotomy in « spaces of participation ». The residents of Vaulx-en-Velin, in France’s third poorest municipality (Agence d’Urbanisme de Lyon, 2011: 11), have troubled lives day-to-day. Many are without jobs, and living on the poverty line. Those in the Mairie justified their decision to exclude residents from strategic decision-making by claiming that residents are more concerned with their lives in the immediate future, with the basics of jobs and housing, rather than a 10 or 15 year vision of the neighbourhood. « When the economic situation is so hard, it’s really difficult to develop an atmosphere of participation for the long term ». These structural barriers are not particular to the French case, but were cited in this case as justification for the lack of commitment to engage people in decision-making processes.

Consultation processes do take place, but « true » participation and empowerment is rare if non-existent. As one resident put it: « Yes, we were consulted, but you know it’s a bit like, they say what they’re going to do, we tell them what we want, and that’s it. It doesn’t go any further. […] If they’ve decided to do it like that, it’s difficult to make them go back ».

However, those in the Mairie claimed that the very bureaucratic nature of the political system in France, with complex procedures and technical hurdles to overcome, also meant that it was better all-round if residents are not involved. As one respondent in the Mairie expressed: « It’s too complex, and most of our officers or technicians or engineers say, ‘Listen, it’s too complicated for you, the residents. So trust me, and we will find the best solution for you’ ». The complex bureaucratic procedures are therefore used as a justification for excluding residents from taking part in decision-making processes.

These arguments find echo in what sociologists have termed « territorial stigmatisation », the negative representation of cities or neighbourhoods that has a profound impact on the residents in these areas (Wacquant, 2007). Residents are « tainted » by the places in which they live, with consequences in all aspects of their lives, including discrimination on a daily basis, and prejudice in the job market, impacting on their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood (Derville, 1997). The literature suggests that living in a banlieue such as Vaulx-en-Velin leads to residents being labelled as « immature citizens », unable to make important decisions about their own lives, not to mention decisions about the future of their neighbourhood. Stigmatisation can also impact on the capacity for collective action and mobilisation, being at the margins of urban society. These themes are very present in the
discourse of officials when commenting on the capacity of residents to take part in consultation exercises, and serves to reinforce marginality and shut down potential «spaces of participation».

In Britain, participatory democracy is embraced as part of the planning culture. Integrated into the development of the Longbridge Area Action Plan, a comprehensive consultation process was undertaken to engage local people, including mailing of letters, newsletters and postcards, a website, a Future Forum meeting to debate options, events to appeal to young people, and other activities focused on different members of the community. A variety of methods were used to reach different groups, but as one interviewee stated, “it was good, but it was consultation. It wasn’t partnership and what we were about was partnership. By the end of it, to be honest, local people felt consulted to death”. The longtime scales between the consultation and the signs on the ground that the project was actually moving, didn’t help. “People by the end of it said they just wanted something to happen”.

It’s interesting to note that in the aftermath of the closure of MG Rover in Longbridge, there was a certain questioning about the ability of the formal processes of governance and engagement to respond to the needs of the community. As part of the restructuring of locality governance in Birmingham in early 2000s, area decision-making had been devolved to 11 area committees, set up on a partnership basis with representation from leading local agencies, statutory bodies, and the community. However, as one interviewee stated: “The city has always been ambivalent about that because on the one hand, quite often they want to, but on the other hand, they don’t want to lose control”. So there are tensions between wanting to hold on to power through representative democracy, and opening up decision-making through neighbourhood governance tools, even in England where participation is more fully embraced than in France.

There were also questions raised about the inclusivity of the devolution process. Following the MG Rover closure in 2005, there was a meeting of the Community Support Board at the local area level with, as one participant put it, “a nice formal agenda, a chair, suits and ties and what have you, a few of the usual community reps who were well used to being there, […] old stalwarts who knew the ropes of locality governance”. The meeting was interrupted in what has been described as a “touchstone moment”, by a group of wives of the ex-MG Rover workers, who demanded that the crisis situation be addressed at the highest level. In what can be described as a “claimed space” in Gaventa’s terms, this group went on over the following weeks to negotiate significant advances for the ex-workers, in part via a meeting with the Prime Minister himself. But early on in that Community Support Board meeting, there reached a point of tension between the formally constituted group with its pre-defined agenda and invitees, and the ‘intrusion’ of a community group demanding certain rights.

Following this experience, “there was a reflection thereafter around our formal processes of governance, and how much of a put-off that can be regeneration terms”. There are therefore what could be called “varieties of democracy”, where even in a more inclusive governance setting, with community representation on area decision-making boards, there are still questions over inclusivity, the exclusion of certain groups, and the openness of these “spaces of participation” to hear different voices.
Unheard voices – turn up the volume?

Even when talking about « micro-local level » participation processes, all actors in both cities talked about the difficulty of involving residents who wouldn’t normally take part in participation exercises, the so-called « unheard voices ». « Our issue is how to reach the other inhabitants, where they are in their own flats. They don’t go to the cinema, they don’t go to shows. They stay at home with a lot of social and cultural issues, and this is a part of our city, a fact ».

In Vaulx-en-Velin, those residents who took an active part in consultations related to the regeneration programme also expressed a certain frustration at not being able to mobilise local people to come to meetings. Even when faced with major changes to their neighbourhood, these residents are not integrated into the process. As one active local resident said: « We tried to organise ourselves, find people responsible for each building, we did a questionnaire, who are you, what would you like to get involved with … we hardly had any answers. We were dispirited ».

It was recognized that it is possible to reach these people, given the appropriate time and resources. But it was also acknowledged that different time-scales don’t necessarily coincide (funding deadlines, the time needed for consultation exercises, and electoral mandates), to allow for sufficient time to consult. For example, there are often deadlines attached to spending money in a particular financial year, whereas the Mayor is elected every six years, and strives to complete projects within the electoral timetable. Therefore, as the election year approaches, there is limited time available for consultation, to complete a project before the election.

Significance was also attached to the actual location of « invited spaces ». Stakeholders recognized that being invited to a public meeting at the Mairie could be threatening for some residents. Meetings have to be « in their own public space, not in our offices or buildings, because this building [the Mairie] is a power building, so it could scare some residents ».

Associations (the « third sector ») play a significant role in local community life in France. They are a crucial part of civil society and have encouraged a « culture of engagement » at all levels of society but as one respondent from the Mairie commented « we must give power to these NGOs, and it’s not easy ». There is a feeling of reluctance to give up power to NGOs, as well as hesitance, as NGOs are not necessarily neutral in relation to the issues being discussed, or their political affiliations. However, NGOs are seen as essential in the process of empowering those « unheard voices » to enter the decision-making arena, and are vital actors in the potential opening up of « spaces of participation », playing the role of intermediary between residents and decision-makers. As a stakeholder from the Mairie commented « we must create intermediate meetings, intermediate spaces, to create first steps before going to such large meetings with powerpoints, with frightening things for most of our residents ». These intermediate spaces and organisations act as a bridge between policy decision-makers, and those not normally involved in participatory exercises. As one respondent commented, recognizing the challenges, « I don’t think we should abandon the objective of participatory democracy, we should just be aware of the difficulty of doing it ».

In England, the example of Longbridge suggests that the barriers to engagement of ‘unheard voices’ are similar to those found in France. Many people cited the need for appropriate tools
to reach those groups who would not normally come forward in a statutory consultation process. These need to use methods that respond to different circumstances, such as provision of childcare, meetings held at accessible times of the day for people with caring commitments, and if necessary taking account of non-native speakers.

However, it could be suggested, in a more fluid planning system such as that found in England that is less constrained by regulations, there is more opportunity than in France for engagement with ‘unheard voices’, in particular, the possibility for ‘claimed spaces’ to emerge as fora for voices that are not normally heard within the planning system.

The example in Longbridge of the ex-workers’ wives suggests that in a more flexible system, there are greater possibilities for ‘unheard voices’ to come forward than in France. It was suggested that this is true in a crisis situation, such as the period following the plant closure, but there were questions raised as to whether these “spaces of participation” then closed down afterwards, as the system reverted to “business as usual”. What is needed is an “inclusive participatory democracy” taking into account ‘unheard voices’ through more open processes that reach out to those who are usually unheard in the process.

6. EMERGING CONCLUSIONS

It is commonly acknowledged that the involvement of residents in urban regeneration projects has key benefits, allowing residents to take more control of their lives, and contribute to shaping the future of their areas. It is argued that when residents are integrated into the regeneration process, it improves the quality of projects by taking into account local views, and helps to build capacity, and a feeling of empowerment among residents, integrating them more closely into the community.

Despite the different contexts and settings, it is interesting to explore the parallels between the two cases in France and England. In both countries, there has been a move towards greater participation in planning and urban development processes. In France, there is a growing awareness of the importance of citizen engagement in regeneration governance, with the recent report (Bacqué and Mechmache, 2013) and subsequent law (Loi de programmation pour la ville et la cohesion urbaine, February 2014) going some way towards expressing the importance of integrating residents in planning processes. However, as this paper has shown, while pro-participation views are espoused in policy documents, the reality on the ground is somewhat different, with a reluctance from certain stakeholders to engage with residents on issues around regeneration. Although the benefits of participation are acknowledged in the rhetoric, there are tensions and contradictions in the various positions taken by stakeholders in relation to participation.

In France, there is a deeply embedded attachment to representative democracy, stemming from the Revolution and the ‘one and indivisible Republic’. French elected councilors and the figurehead of the Mayor have a privileged position in the French psyche, and are seen as the rightful decision-makers in issues related to local affairs. This has led to what Hall and Hickman (2011) refer to as a « participation deficit », where despite the rhetoric on paper, there is little evidence of real participatory and empowerment mechanisms at work. As a result, many decisions related to regeneration are taken in « closed spaces » lacking
transparency, where citizens are excluded from the decision-making arena. Where they are integrated into « invited spaces », the issues at stake in these fora are often at the margins of the project, what could be called « tinkering », rather than influencing more profoundly the direction of the programme. Consultation takes place because there is an obligation rather than a willingness, with local authorities in many cases ‘hearing but not listening’. Gaventa’s « claimed or created spaces » are rare.

In England, there has also been a move towards greater participation, dating back to the 1980s, to the point where participation is now embedded in the culture of planning. While in France, local authorities feel obliged to carry out a consultation exercise, in England there are positive steps taken to try and ensure that different groups are heard, within statutory engagement processes and beyond. The consultation exercise for the LAAP illustrated an imaginative approach to participation, and yet the Consultative Group, supposedly allowing local residents to express their views, was very much a “closed space”, with only certain invited members as participants. This raises questions about the inclusivity of participatory democracy practiced in England, where in the case of a supposedly participatory forum, certain groups are excluded from taking part. So while England can be characterized as being more open to different forms of participatory democracy, there is clearly a blend of representative and participatory democracies in operation, that in some cases acts as an exclusionary force.

One of the questions to arise from this paper is whether participatory democracy is compatible with the French notion of representative democracy. Due to the role of the State in French society, a particular version of participatory democracy has evolved, which allows for dialogue in « invited spaces » in relation to the micro-details of a regeneration project, but which denies citizens access to engage with more strategic questions around a regeneration programme. To shift this in the future would require a more inclusive form of citizen engagement involving a more open approach to participation, and a greater willingness on the part of elected councils to reconfigure the dynamics of power, and integrate citizens’ voices into decision-making structures at all stages. This would require sufficient resources to allow the necessary time to engage with different groups, using suitably adapted methods to open up meaningful involvement in « spaces of participation » to all.

In relation to policy implications, it is interesting to reflect on the potential for cross-national comparisons to shed light on different practices in different cultural settings. Rather than emphasizing the differences between countries, it is useful to concentrate on the similarities between the different national contexts, holding up a mirror to each case to help understand the different systems. Through this method, new insights into different approaches to participatory governance can be explored, and their potential policy implications for cities examined, not just applicable to France and England, but also to other contexts in the EU and elsewhere.
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