

MY COLLEGE TOMORROW: INNOVATION LABS TO ENABLE COLLECTIVE PUBLIC ACTION ON EDUCATION ENVIRONMENTS¹

François Jégou¹, Stéphane Vincent², Victoria Thoresen³

1 - Strategic Design Scenarios,
rue Dautzenberg 36-38, BE-1050 Brussels
tel: +32 495 50 24 33 fax: +32 495 50 24 35
email: francois.jegou@solutioning-design.net

2 - La 27e Région
151 rue Montmartre, Passage des Panoramas, 12 Galerie Montmartre FR-75002 Paris
tel: 01 40 13 64 46 fax: 06 75 24 10 61
email: svincent@la27eregion.fr

3 - The Hedmark University College
LUNA, Postbox 400, 2418 Elverum, Norway
Tel. +47 625 17636
Victoria.Thoresen@hihm.no

Keywords: college; participation, public policy, scenarios, region

¹ F. Jégou wrote 2. Experimental Studio in a design school, 2. A series of stakeholder workshops within the Regions and 3. Conclusions; S. Vincent wrote 1. Introduction and 2. Four residencies in colleges; V. Thoresen contributes to the all paper as a discussant.

1. INTRODUCTION

How can regional authorities be supported in rethinking the way they develop colleges? How can pupils, professors, staff and all populations around be enabled to collectively take action towards new and more sustainable educational environments?

This paper is based on the on-going research and development programme: *My college tomorrow...* of the French public innovation lab the 27e Région², to present new participative approaches to enable local stakeholders to co-design new and more sustainable way of living and to renew the way public policies support local transition towards sustainable development (La 27e Région, 2010).

As spin-off of ARF, the Association of French Regions, the 27e Région is introducing and experimenting since 2008 user-centred methods based on user participation, interdisciplinary teams, hands-on stakeholders workshops, collective projections as a tentative answer to the necessity to renovate in the way public action is made (Durance, Kaplan, Vincent 2008, Jouen 2009). The 27e Région applies this approach to colleges as one of the main areas of responsibility of regions in France.

Re-shaping colleges in a context of crisis and complexity

Little time and less money. French regional governments only have until 2014, the end of the present political mandate, to implement their ambitious projects for colleges in the fields of education, employability, social development, food, environment, culture, citizenship in a global context of drastic cost cutting. Another difficulty is the complexity of governance in Education : while the national government is in charge of the pedagogic side -the whole management, teachers, contents in the 1 500 existing colleges-, the 26 regional governments are in charge of the “hardware” such as buildings, catering, furniture, computers, books. Conceiving and building new schools takes between 5, 7 or 10 years, and tends to be a very top-down process -which is a challenge for the Regions who want to promote quality of life for pupils in the colleges they build or restore, but also sustainability. Under such constraints, creativity, boldness and expectation are powerful engines for elected officials and civil servants.

² www.la27eregion.fr

For the Regions that are in charge of shaping the school of the future, the main risk is to restrain the reflection to the technical performance of the buildings -including environmental standards- or even to the educational excellence, instead of the well-being for people living together (Chupin, Sobocinsky, 2009, Descoings, Delhay, 2010). Besides the “hardware”, our proposal was to consider first the "software", e.g the future of the school as a human ecosystem. Starting back from grassroots practices could give another vision and re-interrogates many subjects such as: how to improve the quality of life in the school, how to feel good, alone and collectively? What kind of digital life in the college, between openness, pedagogy and control? How could pupils be empowered and get ready to leave school? How memory could be built for generations when the turn-over is high? Beyond environmental standards of the buildings, how could behaviours towards responsibility and sustainability? How cooperation and partnership could be developed in the community, but also between colleges within the region and with other regions? How could divide be reduced?

An action-research programme from the 27e Région and supported by 2 French regions

In partnership with the Region North-Pas de Calais, the Region Champagne-Ardenne, and the national Association of the Regions of France (ARF), the 27e Région has run a creative program dedicated to the "college of tomorrow" which can inform policy makers and provide them with visions about challenging the school tomorrow, but also sensitize policy makers about new user-centred and co-conception methods.

The challenge of this program is not to produce one and unique vision of the college of the future, but to enrich the dialogue by showing numerous insights, diverse –and contradictory- visions and by making it more tangible from a user-centred approach. Moreover, the goal is to impact on the process of creation or rehabilitation of colleges by:

- training the civil servants from the Regions to the new issues of the school: developing knowledge, sharing of experiences between teams from different regions;
- providing teams with new methods of innovation : helping them to use creative tools, involving users in their projects, organizing creative workshops;
- developing cross-disciplinarity: giving more sense in the adoption of a broader vision of the school, including services, devices, levels, participants;
- reducing risks and costs: the aim is to reconnect the political ambitions with grass-root realities, and to inform public decision-making by suggesting durable solutions, based on local practices;

- acting as a remedy to the crisis : promoting envy rather than coercion, anticipating the risk of depression following service cuts.



Figure 1 Three week long immersion sessions of a small creative multidisciplinary team has been conducted by the 27e Région in 4 different professional, technical, agriculture and general teaching colleges.

My college tomorrow... programme is based on 3 parallel and interwoven approaches:

- residencies as 3 weeks immersion sessions of interdisciplinary creative team of young designers, sociologists, architects... conducted in 4 different professional, technical, agriculture and general teaching colleges;
- an experimental studio as a semester scenario building exercise with design students building on lessons learn through the residencies to produce breakthrough and inspiring new visions of colleges infrastructures;
- creative ateliers as multi-stakeholders workshops organised within regional councils taking part to the programme to transfer concrete experiences on-site and inspiring

visions gathered to the civil servants of the regions and enable their Directions for Education to reproduce themselves the approach of La 27e Région locally.

Progresses of all these 3 parallel approaches have been captured and discussed online between the Région staff, headmasters, teachers, students and experts involved on a dedicated blog³.

2. MY COLLEGE TOMORROW... RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The 3 parallel collaborative approaches will be described in details, showing in particular the experimental methods and instruments used to engage a creative strategic conversation with the different stakeholders; the way these 3 different stream of action-research activities interact and cross-fertilize; the lessons learn progressively raising awareness within the regional public authorities.

Four residencies in colleges

The residencies are conceived like "micro-labs" of the regional policies -including education and colleges. The aim of a residence is to restart from grass-root practices to reshape a regional policy, by associating users and beneficiaries (pupils, teachers, staff, regional authorities, etc) to the production of common visions, projects and solutions (Jégou, Vincent, Thévenet 2010, Jégou, Vincent 2010).

The method used by the 27e Région consists in immersing during several weeks a small cross-disciplinary team - designers, sociologists, digital innovators, researchers- into a local project, a public facility or any organization⁴. Conceived as an alternative to classical consulting, studies or surveys, the residencies give the opportunity to meet, interview, provoke, share, and design projects and solutions with the local users, populations, elected people, and civil servants in charge of the policies.

During 2009 and 2010, a dozen residencies within the *Territoires en residences* programme⁵ have been run on various issues (such as nursing homes in Auvergne, data opening in

³ www.sustainable-everyday.net/inventerleslyceesdemain

⁴ www.strategicdesignscenarios.net/territoiresenresidences

⁵ www.territoiresenresidences.wordpress.com

Aquitaine, social networks in Bretagne, rural transportations in Burgundy, energy and digital hubs in Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur, etc), but four of them were especially dedicated to colleges :

- “Opening up colleges” (Revin, Champagne-Ardenne): how to open a brand new college on the city, the society, the whole ecosystem around (Jégou, Vincent, Thévenet and Petit 2009)?
- “Citizenship at the college” (Annecy, Rhone Alpes): how to promote collective commitment in a school when consumerism is the rule?
- “Sustainable food at the college” (Saint-Laurent, Champagne-Ardenne): how to relocate food production and to transform consumption behaviours?
- “The sustainable college” (Tingueux, Champagne-Ardenne): beyond material and building standards, how to develop sustainable behaviours in the college?

Experimental Studio in a design school

The second track of investigations of *My college tomorrow...* programme takes place in a design school at ENSCI Les Ateliers in Paris. For one semester, a group of 10 students collaborates in the framework of an *experimental studio* involving them to explore the path of design of public services and how it may change the way public policies actions are conducted in this field. It was organised in 10 sessions of 3 hours including an afternoon with the pupils of a college in Paris' suburb; several discussions with experts advising the Regions and civil servant from the regional Education department; the analysis of lessons learned in the residencies conducted in 4 different colleges by the 27^e Région; more brainstorming sessions to elaborate new ideas for college infrastructure and services; visualisations through short movies of alternative scenarios challenging the current state of the art along a series of critical and recurrent questions for regional Education public authorities.

This approach contradicts the orientation of the field work, participation, experimentation, etc, described so far for the 27^e Région. When residencies allow in-depth immersion in specific contexts to start with real users and reset preconceptions, they also induce the team of residents to focus the particular context of immersion and stick to field problem solving activities. Therefore an analysis of lessons learnt requires a somewhat different posture, deliberately out of any college context and detached from specific contingencies. The

purpose of the experimental studio is to distinguish signals from field noise and propose more generic visions fully rooted in reality, inspired by it but with broader point of view, reconnecting with public policies perspectives.

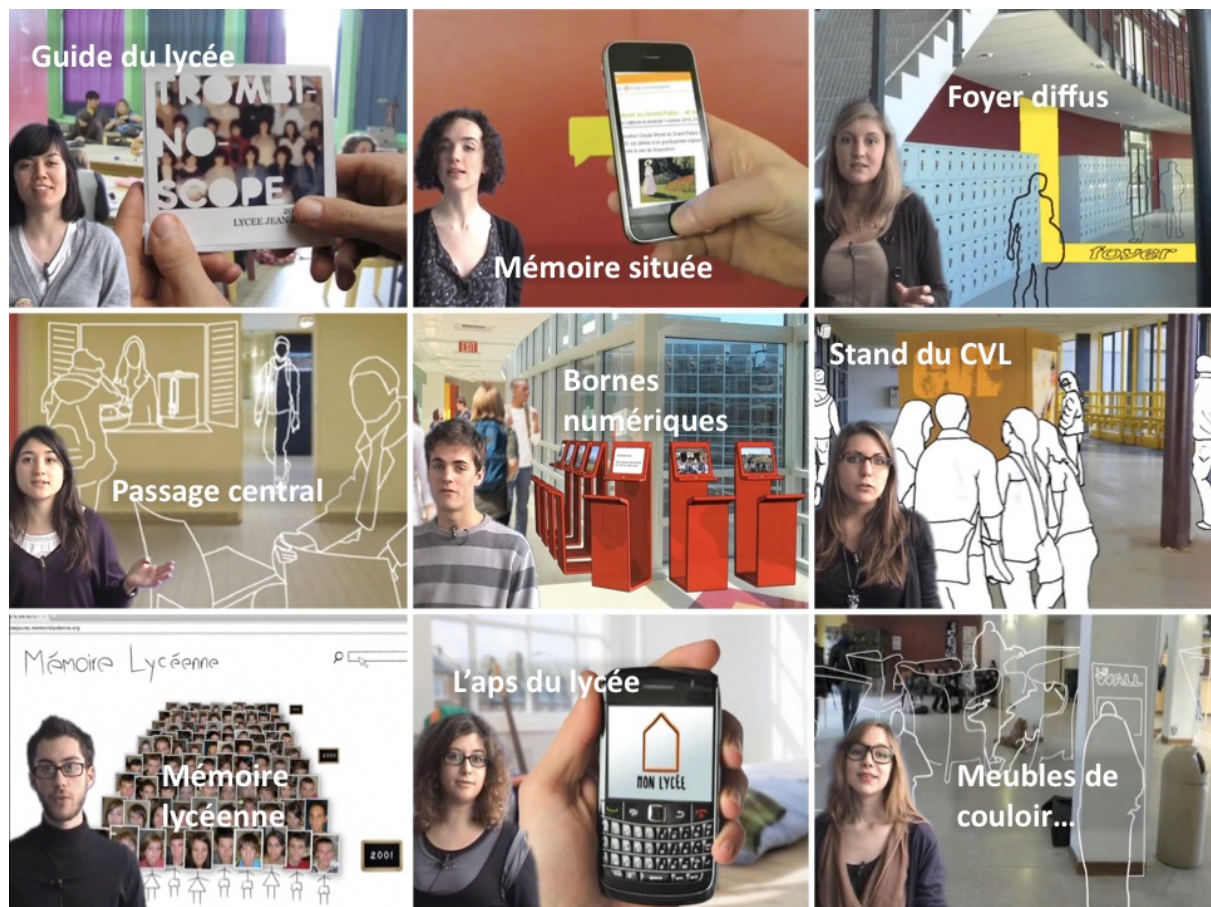


Figure 2 Output of the experimental studio consisting of 9 video-sketches telling scenario stories from the point of view of pupils in a 5-10 years horizon of time.

The students came up then with a sample of suggestions in the shape of short video-sketches challenging some of the bottlenecks regions often point in the development of college infrastructures such as: how to articulate the technological divide between the official Digital Working Space provided by the Regions and the range of ICT networking activities of the pupils growing at high speed? The students of the *studio* showed with the scenarios they present how in an open source logic, mobile phone *College Aps* developed for the colleges (and also by themselves) may enable a range of micro-services combining personal interests and didactic purposes. They proposed a *College Memory* system that keeps track of the generation passing and favour exchanges between the younger pupils and the ones already in higher education or professional life.

They also try to tackle with other teasing questions such as how to ensure visibility to all the ever growing offers of services developed by the Region to support learning, facilitate orientation, diversify and open the teaching environment? Or how to organise a bottom-up participative approach and embed it in the very infrastructure of this mostly top-down organisation?

Here also the video-sketches developed show a *College Guidebook* built on a social map of the place and identifying and linking the different populations inhabiting the college; a pupils *Project Room* in the middle of the college setting action-learning at the core of the architecture; a *Diffused Pupil House* that makes the entire college a place for the pupils instead of limiting it to a single room...

Beyond being only a small range of 3 scenarios stories on 3 critical issues, all together, the sample of visions shows a more collaborative college, based on greater trust in relation to the pupils, more support between different generations and articulation with higher studies and professional arenas. The status of these visions is less a range of possible solutions to be discussed whether they should be implemented or not but it is rather food for thought. The easy and visual form of short movie sketches aims at disseminating these alternative visions among all the stakeholders involved in the conception and development of the colleges' infrastructures. And how to make it effective is the focus of the third track of *My College Tomorrow...* programme.

A series of stakeholder workshops within the Regions

Parallel to the residencies on the field and the scenario building process in a designer school, workshops have been organised to enrich the outputs of the two other project tracks and to explore how these results in terms of new visions and methods of production of colleges could be embedded into the Regional policies.

Civil servants from regional Education Departments, headmasters of colleges, teachers and experts of these fields meet and work together for half-day thematic sessions. The fact that they did not belong to the same Regions enriches the dynamic and the exchange of different experiences. It also allows opening more critical questions in terms of stakeholders interactions that would nether have been tackled if personal hierarchy and/or institutional relationships would have been touched.

This arena, partly renewed by new participants along the sessions was focused successively on future vision, stakeholder process and implementation approach.

Future visions.

As the experimental studio was developing a first range of visions alternative to mainstream colleges, the first stakeholder workshop follow the way open by the young designers to enlarge the number of alternative visions of colleges and enrich their content. The result is a somewhat exaggerated range of 18 colleges' visions, partly overlapping but especially challenging the established state of mind in France of what a college should and should not be:

For instance; what an *Open college* would mean? Open on and to the outside, with a rich but selective openness generating a continuum between the college and the eco-system in which it is placed... In concrete terms the college is not anymore a territory restricted to pupils and staff: parents are involved in participative projects, the civil society enrich the educational approach, companies are invited. Kids and adults engaged in a life long learning process enrich each other... The building itself may be shared with another institution such as a research centre or an association with synergetic potential for the college...

Another example: what a *College as a local resource* could be? A college is an important infrastructure in terms of buildings, equipments, personal... that is hardly used 8-9 hours, 5 days a week. If well anticipated, the infrastructure and all the services it provides could become a resource for the neighbourhood, the city, the region. Action-learning and project-based education makes it even more an opportunity for local development, a resource of young mind willing to act, contribute to their own living environment and in return get a richer and more stimulating educational experience.

More such visions have been co-developed and exemplified: a *College as tool*, player for local development; a *College of continuity* where the articulation with next steps is predominant; the *Reversed college* where formal education is considered peripheral to activities that are today optional; a *College of trust*; a *College micro-society*; a *Citizenship college*; a *College of population mix*; a *College of competences*; a *Shared college*; *Cooperative college*; *Anti-stress*... all these common ideas often misused as political claims were investigated and developed trying to search for consistency, existing examples, concrete

specification in terms of space, equipments, services, etc that could make these vision tangible and applicable.

Stakeholder process

The second workshop focuses on the process of production of the college: what are the main and typical steps? Who are the stakeholders and how do they interact? Where are the critical points and how can we get around, enrich the process or make the process more fluid?

Participants were involved in building a large process scheme of the construction or renovation of a college starting from evolutions of educational context that trigger a new national education plan or the change in the local context where the college is settled that induces new investment plan from the Region. Then the process goes through a series of interactions between the political decisional level and the technical regional services progressively defining the expectations for the project that is translated into a programme commanding a competition of architecture and finally resulting into a building process on the field.

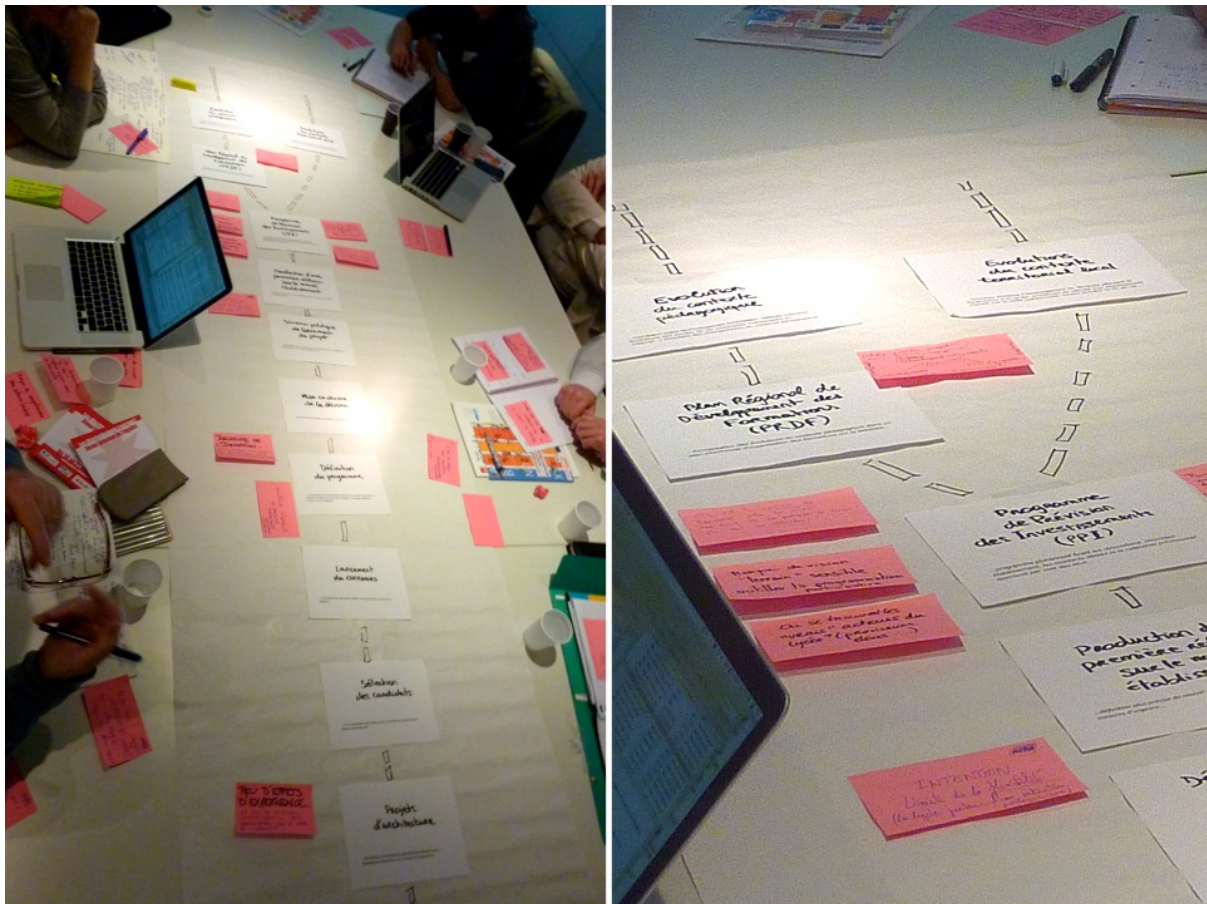


Figure 3: participant in the workshop rebuild the production process of a college resulting in a 3 meter long scheme where they identified bottlenecks, difficulties, conflicts, etc and suggest ways to overcome them.

Beside the many local difficulties in such a long and complicated process, what strikes the participants considering the scheme they have reconstruct is that the users are nearly absent from all the steps. The very pupils, professors, staff, parents and citizens living around are hardly involved beyond the democratic representation through the local elected people. They are informed – when they are – of a long process happening above and beside them resulting in an infrastructure that will be delivered to them but in which they neither have taken part nor have had the chance to give they requirements.

Residencies or the type of approach they use based on diving into context, building trust and empathy with the inhabitants, involving them in a round of collaborative experimentations, supporting the emergence of a shared understanding of the situation and of a range of related directions for change or suggested solutions, would be very helpful. In particular for the construction of the programme, it would help to reconnect the process to the field and make sure the architecture project is rooted in local practices. It will kick-off engagement and result

into more interest and interaction in the initiatives of participative democracy to associate the users and the stakeholders around into the development and fine tuning of the project.

On top of the lack of user participation, the whole process is characterised by very few creativity inputs. Innovation seems all concentrated in the hand of the architect. College's infrastructure is perceived mainly as the physical space, the outer box which will play an essential role as a landmark and as an image at political level. The inside of the box, the interior architecture and how this big machine will work is less in the focus. It is left to comply a series of norms and standards where very few innovations are input. Moreover, the service dimension of the infrastructure is much less regarded. The very fact that a college is a macro-service finalised at delivering a large range of services around the education of generation of pupils and their preparation to become citizens is not at all the way a college is thought and sometimes even considered by the stakeholders as a loss of value. The result is that in terms of service, average colleges are not well designed: the administrative structure suffers from inertia in adapting to changing needs, corporatism between the categories of population cohabiting the place, lack of fluidity in innovation processes...

Implementation approach

The last workshop was aimed at proposing solutions with their possible implementation in particular considering possible convergences of the innovative visions, challenging ideas, creative inputs, etc gathered in the first workshop to 'irrigate' the somewhat 'dry' process of production of colleges. How could visions penetrate the administrative mechanism, raise awareness on solutions alternative to the mainstream way of doing and inspire the interaction between regional civil servants, national education programme, local elected peoples, headmasters and professors, pupils and parents?

From the process scheme elaborated in the second workshop, the norms and standards defining the background of the college project emerged also as a critical point to focus on. Beyond the general building safety regulation, Regions elaborate each a framework of what a college should be and sediment it in what is known as a document of references. These documents introduce the political project of the Region and give a conceptual vision of a college: what are the main spaces? How they relate to each other? What are the different rooms? How they should be equipped? etc. In practice, these references set the common

background on which a specific programme of architecture will be elaborated. Most of them are hardly better than dry briefs, setting the minimum requirements, giving the limits more than suggesting possibilities, and generally lacking of food for thoughts. Moreover, these documents don't provide any examples of how to achieve what they require: how to welcome the parents in the college and profit from their potential contributions and collaboration? How to design an open professor room that encourage interaction with the other populations? How to facilitate bottom-up initiatives and provide an environment enabling take-off of projects?

The visions and ideas collected and developed along *My college tomorrow...* programme will be organised in the form of a *Sample box* to put in annex to the Region documents of reference. As a sample box of material or paints that show the range of possibilities in terms of textures or colours and stimulate a new thoughts in the project of a new product, this *Sample box* of scenarios is thought to open the mind of all the players participating to the production of a college. It will show them a range of alternative approaches, stakeholder-based, experimental, collaborative, etc; picture how their role may evolve in the process and display a selection of diversified solutions to prompt more creativity, more experiences away from classical paths and more ambition from the project promoters. This *Sample box* is aiming at being used by elected people to exemplify their views, by the civil servants from regional Education Department to challenge their calls for offers, by the project developers to stimulate the range of perspectives and by the different populations of the college to exchange their ideas and help them to shape the development of their college...

3. Conclusions

My college tomorrow... shows how public innovation labs as La 27e Région could enable collective public action towards more participative, collaborative and sustainable living. In particular 3 points of conclusion could be drawn from this experience.

Questioning and resetting public action

Immersive collaborative sessions as residencies enable local stakeholders to question their interaction and reset the way they collaborate. Education is a very controversial issue. The shared responsibility between the national Ministry of Education and the Region is often the place for strong political tensions in France. The heavy, inertial administrative institutions in questions have difficulties to take action. In this context, a residence acts as a 'bubble of

experimentation' free enough from the institution to challenge it but rooted enough to stimulate its evolution. It's an operation between bottom-up and top-down, relatively short in time, light in budget but not so small to have a communication impact and reach the momentum to stimulate change.

Schools as agent for social change

Schools through project-based and action learning can play the role of active agents supporting local sustainable social change. The *experimental studio* in this case organised in a design school represents a creative task force. It provides a range of fresh and varied ideas, scenarios, visions in a form of projects. These projects are realist in the sense that they are coherent and feasible within a short/medium horizon of time. The enthusiasm of the students multiplied by their number represents an important force of engagement in co-design processes. The output of their work is often rich enough to create an alternative challenging the mainstream and consistent enough to leverage on it and call for change.

Renovating public policies...

The public innovation model can evolve towards a new model of co-evolution participating from the interplay of both bottom-up local participative micro-experimentations and top-down enabling policy framework. A multi-faceted action-research as *My college tomorrow...* programme could be seen as the prototype of such co-evolution process where different parallel streams interact: immersive moments deeply rooted into specific local realities to 'take the real temperature' on the field, frame opportunities and difficulties as there are now; a creative engine that generate positive and inspiring solutions to explore possible futures and show that alternative to the current mainstream are not utopia; a partnership with the public bodies that create the proper conditions to escape the classical postures of sponsor or of call for offer toward a unilateral participation process.

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