Community participation is a critical part of Vision Zero, but it can also be a hindrance to progress. Participatory process researcher Michiel Stapper looks at how communities in Hamburg have revolutionized local democracy as a model to move Vision Zero forward in the most participatory possible way.
At the headquarters of PlanBude, a sign reads, “Sorry, we are today closed because of the negotiations.”
An important aspect of Vision Zero is building and sustaining collaboration between a diverse group of actors, so that traffic policies are designed and implemented in close collaboration with communities. These ideas about community process are not limited to Vision Zero. Since the 1950s, city governments around the world have implemented participatory structures to involve communities in urban development and infrastructure projects. The results of five decades of experimentation with community outreach show mixed results. There are promising examples of successful participation processes where communities could influence the outcome of a project in significant ways. However, participation processes often fail to engage meaningfully with communities. In practice, participation faces three major obstacles. The first obstacle concerns language. The consultants and civil servants that organize community outreach make use of professional language that can be difficult to comprehend for some community members. Likewise, it can be hard for non-community members to pick up nuances in the language of community members. The second obstacle concerns time. Participation is time-consuming, and not everybody can attend public meetings and workshops. The third obstacle concerns power. Often residents are asked to participate but lack decision-making power. That can make participation processes frustrating for community members. All these obstacles are related to broader barriers in society. Inequalities concerning race and class tend to be reproduced through participation efforts.

This is the paradox of participation: it promises greater influence for residents, but it does not always deliver. That is why, in many cities, community activists, politicians, civil servants, and developers are exploring new ways to reach out to communities. In this article, I examine the discussions around participation in the city of Hamburg, a major urban center of 1.81 million people in Northern Germany.

In 2013, in Hamburg, thousands of people took to the streets to demand more influence in urban development. These protests resulted in the streets to demand more influence in urban development. These protests resulted in the Right to the City Network, an umbrella organization for several initiatives that intend to create a new, democratic, sustainable method of urban planning. The movement is fueled by left-wing activism and stark criticism of neoliberalism. Through the pressure of the Right to the City Network, several community participation processes in Hamburg were transformed.

Q8 and Neue Mitte Altona
Neue Mitte Altona is a massive urban renewal project near the city center in Hamburg. The redevelopment of a train station and a brewery will result in a new neighborhood with 3,500 housing units, and new parks, schools, and spaces for businesses. The city government of Hamburg rolled out an extensive participation process to incorporate interests from citizens in the plan. A group of citizens were asked to be active in a citizen committee, and they produced a set of recommendations for the project. However, the municipality and the developers only partly agreed to incorporate the recommendations. The municipality argued that the citizens did not understand the legal and financial consequences of their recommendations fully. Although the citizens had invested considerable time in the participation process, they were not seen as stakeholders of equal footing. Moreover, the municipality wanted to push forward with the development project regardless, arguing that it was necessary because Hamburg lacks

ABOUT
Michiel Stapper is a PhD candidate from the University of Amsterdam and a former visiting scholar at New York University. He investigates participation processes in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and New York. The focus of his research is on how the input of residents is translated into contractual agreements.
housing. In the end, the citizen committee dissolved themselves in protest; they did not want to be co-opted by the municipality and the developers.

While this participation process was unsuccessful overall, one aspect of it was highly successful. During the Neue Mitte Altona community process, Q8—an organization that aims to make cities more inclusive to people with disabilities—organized several meetings to discuss how the area could be accessible for people with disabilities. This resulted in a manifesto, called *eine Mitte für alle*, or “one Mitte for all.” The manifesto introduced 30 goals and recommendations to make the neighborhood inclusive, including how to translate the recommendations in legal language, making them easy to implement in the policy documents and contracts. After the municipality agreed to incorporate the recommendations in the plan, they kept on collaborating with the authors of the manifesto, such as discussing the preferred pavement in the area. People that make use of wheelchairs tend to prefer smooth pavement, while people who walk with a cane tend to prefer tactile pavement. By discussing and testing different types of pavement together, the participants came up with a pavement that worked well for everyone.

**PlanBude and the Paloma Viertel**

Paloma Viertel is a redevelopment project in a neighborhood infamous as the red-light district of Hamburg. Initially, the neighborhood strongly opposed the redevelopment project, primarily because the redevelopment included the demolition of a housing complex. Thousands of people demonstrated against the demolition. However, the city government claimed it needed to demolish the building because they feared it would collapse. A group of activists called PlanBude, which included artists, planners, and social workers, proposed that they be put in charge of the participation process. The municipality agreed, giving them a blank check to manage a community outreach process and agreeing to compensate them financially. PlanBude came up with a participation process that was very creative and reflected the culture of the neighborhood, placing a small building at the construction site where people could come in and talk about their vision for the space. Next to the site, there were sound walks, education programs, and design sessions with clay and Legos. Beyond this creativity, the input of the residents was also quantified by a survey, available in six different languages.

From all these contributions from residents, the team of PlanBude distilled eight principles for development. This formed the basis for a design competition. Several architectural teams were invited to present their designs to the neighborhood. After they received feedback from residents, they submitted their designs to a jury that included two community members, as well as representatives from PlanBude, the landowners, and the municipality. The design that was selected included basketball fields and climbing walls.
on rooftops, a feminist sex shop, and culture incubators. After the design was selected, PlanBude entered lengthy negotiations with the landowners and the municipality about the realization of the design. This was a contentious and difficult process, but in May 2018, the development agreement was signed.

**Lessons from Hamburg**

Neue Mitte Altona and Paloma Viertel are telling examples of how participation is being redefined in Hamburg. Fueled by activism from the streets, the people of Hamburg are demonstrating how residents can be involved in urban development and infrastructure projects in a meaningful, transformative way. The lessons of Hamburg center on respect for the community and for the participants in the process. Community participation should not be a meaningless checkbox for developers, but a process of earning trust by listening and consideration. Residents should be co-organizers of the participation process, so that they are able to design a process that reflects the local culture. The people doing this work should be compensated financially for their help with organizing community outreach. It is important to be transparent about the input of residents, so, while being as creative as possible, the outcomes of participation processes must also be quantified. It is incredibly important to think through and actualize how the contributions of residents will be incorporated into the policy documents and contracts that manage development projects. Residents must have decision-making power, otherwise the process is a farce. City governments should make sure that residents do not only participate, but that the participation process reflects the local culture, and that residents have decision-making power. Putting participatory structures in place is a good thing. Democratizing cities is even better.

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On the street in Hamburg, testing different types of pavement for people with disabilities.