



DECADE: Participation

How can people shape a building , place or service?

Ten years ago, there was a certainty about the design agenda and the role of built-environment professionals in changing places. There was a new policy on architecture. Designing Places was published. We had urban regeneration companies, specialist urban design firms, the emergence of charettes and a lot of talk about master planning.

Today, society's challenges are increasingly complex. We have structural changes: the recession, austerity, the Community Empowerment Act and migration. But we also want more representation and participation in decision-making, informed by local narratives, service needs and making more of what we already have.

Increasingly, the 'now' is about the uneasy journey of defining problems and solutions collaboratively, between citizens, politicians and professions. True participation means that the role of the professional in 'changing places' is changing.

Together, we need to address three future challenges:

- 1. Trust** – We must build a bridge between citizen participation to shape outcomes, and decision-maker collaboration to deliver them.
- 2. Purpose** – Dealing with large economic crises is about helping governments to change things for the better, faster. Public budget holders need to rethink their way of doing things. What skill sets do we need to reimagine, and are we asking the right questions?
- 3. Organisation** – Some things need to be planned centrally, like infrastructures and sewers. But we

also need spaces for co-creation and doing things differently. Can we move the public sector from direct service provision to platforms for co-delivery? This would channel activism, distribute ideas and openly share knowledge between neighbourhoods. Co-creation is about better and faster, together.

These challenges demand a new approach to professional practice – from control of ideas, to facilitating possibilities. It demands a new form of institution, which is localised, collaborative and system organised, not silo based. It implies a new form of empowered citizen with the capacity to act.

Participation could make placemaking central to the new politics of public space for the next decade. The question is, can we deliver?

Diarmaid Lawlor, Head of Urbanism and Schools, A&DS

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The case of Toronto's waterfront

by James White, University of Glasgow

Participation has been one of the central tenets of planning since the 1960s when thinking shifted from 'top-down' towards more 'bottom-up' decision-making. The reality is very different and efforts to broaden participatory practices tend to be uneven. Political and financial roadblocks, skills shortages and various other obstacles typically mean that engagement with local people, although well intentioned, does not move beyond top-down 'consultation'.

That said, the popularity of participation is growing. Terms like 'co-design' and 'co-production' are widely used and governments have made commitments to broaden engagement with local stakeholders. This rhetoric should be welcomed, albeit cautiously. It is not just local people, but businesses, real estate developers and agencies of government that fall under the 'stakeholder' umbrella. Questions must therefore be asked about power and influence. We cannot assume that having more participation means the public are more involved.

Participation in Toronto's waterfront speaks to these issues and, while imperfect, displays a level of sophistication that extends beyond basic 'consultation'.

The waterfront is currently being redeveloped by a public corporation called Waterfront Toronto, now noted as a 'master of public participation'. 200–500 people attend participation events and the corporation uses an 'iterative' consultation model that combines open-access public forums with smaller, more focused, stakeholder advisory committees to forge links between the redevelopment programme and the various groups and interests on the waterfront.

Crucially, Waterfront Toronto conducts engagement activities from the outset of its planning processes until buildings and public spaces are fully constructed, ensuring continuous involvement. This is important because it allows members of the community groups to witness why ideas might change, and also allows Waterfront Toronto to gauge early responses to shifting objectives.

It is important to highlight how the shift from a 'top-down' to a 'bottom-up' participation process emerged. Early on, Waterfront Toronto recognised it could do better and chose to listen to local community groups about how a public engagement strategy might be formulated for the remainder of the project. The overall result is that, for certain individuals and groups, the participation process has engendered a 'sense of ownership' over the planning and design process, and some of those involved consider it as much a 'community process' as a 'Waterfront Toronto' process.

Nevertheless, there is always room for improvement and more could be done to engage both with people from poorer neighbourhoods in Toronto, as well as with those who've recently moved to the waterfront. The corporation's stakeholder advisory committees could also be more transparent. There is scope for Waterfront Toronto to think innovatively about rotating membership to avoid certain individuals – well meaning or not – from controlling knowledge and decision-making. The big challenge for an organisation involved in new city building, such as Waterfront Toronto, is to adapt its participation processes as places change.

Assimilating ideas from planning theory with the experience of Toronto's waterfront leads to a short series of concluding principles. First, is a commitment to collaboration that extends beyond consultation at all stages of the decision-making process. Second, is the continual evaluation of participation efforts to ensure all members of the public have equal and fair access to the planning process. Finally, equal value must be given to expert and lay knowledge to encourage both mutual learning and a sense of shared ownership.

About the author:

JAMES WHITE is lecturer in Urban Design at the University of Glasgow. He studied at Cardiff University and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. His research focuses on the mechanisms that planning policymakers can use to shape the built environment.

An afterthought

by Cathy McCulloch, Children's Parliament

Sometimes, when we're trying to get to grips with something new, we keep making up new words in the hope that this new word will make it all much clearer.

I was reflecting on this during the Decade session when we were discussing 'who is the community?' Truthfully, I was thinking, 'really? We don't know what we mean by 'community?' And then I thought, 'hang on ... is there a theme developing?'

'The community' is 'residents', 'citizens', 'stakeholders', 'local people', 'tenants', 'homeowners', 'community agitators', 'community reps' ... I could go on. Language can be used to obfuscate, and when we're talking about something like community empowerment there are as many views on what that means as there are people with views.

From my perspective, which is looking at when, how and if we involve children and young people in community empowerment opportunities, I look at the list above and recognise that, for most people, children and young people don't feature. They are almost always defined as a separate group – we can't take for granted that they'll be automatically included in community processes because they're not generally regarded as citizens. Sounds harsh, but if you think of community engagement processes you're aware of, I'd be surprised if children's participation was built into them as a core feature.

And, continuing the honesty theme, they're not included because most adults aren't convinced that children have got anything particularly useful to contribute to 'big picture' agendas. I frequently find myself in the

position of making a presentation which people tell me they find engaging but when it comes to questions and comments afterwards, it's unusual to get more than a couple that relate to the participation of children. That's not surprising; we revert to what we know and feel comfortable with. However, if we want our communities to truly be shaped by the people who live in them, we need to include *all* the people who live in them, and that means thinking differently.

Your man Einstein said, 'The definition of insanity is doing something over and over again and expecting a different result.' I wonder if we're all on the same page in terms of what we consider a successful 'result'.

Public bodies now have a statutory duty through the Children and Young People Act (Scotland) 2014 to ensure the views of children and young people influence policy and practice. Great – a start. Now we must guard against the biggest block to effective change – tokenism.

We need to start building alliances to support one another in making sure the processes we create to meet the statutory duty are done because we believe children's views will make a difference, not so they can tick the participation box.

Let's not make up any new words. Can we agree that 'community engagement' means everyone; the young, old and older ... the waged, the unwaged, the cared for, the uncared for? Don't leave it to those of us who work with children in our day job ... join with us, ask us to join you ... ask questions, challenge, encourage. Agitate.

About the author:

CATHY MCCULLOCH is the full time Co-Director of Children's Parliament, an organisation that came from children being involved in a built environment modelling project in 1992. Children's Parliament exists to bring children's voices into the main social, cultural and political landscape.

Participation: who, why, how ... and then?

by Keira Anderson, Snook

'Participation', carried out with honest intentions and appropriate resources, can generate a far more impactful and long-lasting legacy than mere consultation.

Co-production, co-design, collaboration – or any other 'co' term you might wish to mention – used effectively and transparently, allows the end user to play a significant role in the design of their environment. Thus, solutions answer the needs of their intended audience. Additionally, the process builds trust and understanding between decision-makers and the public.

Ultimately, this will ensure the long-term success and viability of any project. Great in principle – but, there are pitfalls to avoid and barriers to overcome.

Here are four points to think about:

1. Who?

Consider the stakeholders – intended users, the wider community, professionals, decision-makers etc. Engaging a broad range of individuals can prove tricky; frustrating even.

We designers need to reduce barriers to a minimum. Take the work to potential participants and offer engagement at a variety of levels: day-long workshops, one-off encounters, multiple times, digitally, face to face, by post, in public and private spaces, remotely etc. Seek involvement from the unusual suspects – not just the loudest voices. Be confident that the insights and opportunities identified do more than scratch the surface. Go beyond listening – support users and providers to *show* you how issues might be overcome.

Use this opportunity to build a supportive community around your project for the long term.

2. Why?

Give clear purpose for engagement. Establish this in participants' minds from the start and reiterate throughout. Aim to be transparent about goals and processes. Participants must see that they're a vital piece of the puzzle. Will they develop skills working with you? How can you highlight and support this?

3. How?

Design is an evolutionary process. Co-production cannot be achieved through one workshop. Exercises which ask communities to approve decisions already taken are manipulative. It's not enough to engage communities only in research. Instead, work collaboratively through the full design process. We must do more than placate users and clients alike. Create an atmosphere which draws on assets, allowing ideas to be born and flourish.

4. And then?

You've conducted a gold-standard participation process. What happens next? When and why? Set clear expectations for participants. They must see the bigger picture, understand why certain decisions are taken or why their ideas might not appear as part of the final outcome. Without this follow-up, you will create a disengaged, disenfranchised audience who won't be so quick or willing to participate again.

Participative processes are labour intensive, time-consuming, resource heavy and expensive. Why subject yourself, your colleagues and your clients to this?

Carried out honestly, with respect for participants and with a clear strategy for outcomes and further actions, co-production delivers more than just comprehensive solutions which meet the needs of your users. Users will understand, respect and be invested in the process you undertook to develop your outcome together.

The community of participants built around your project, and the extended community surrounding them, will also take ownership of and embrace the final outcome. In the long term, nothing can be more cost effective than that.

About the author:

KEIRA ANDERSON is Co-Design Lead and Project Manager with Snook, an award-winning service design agency that specialises in customer experience. Snook's process is underpinned by co-creating solutions and concepts with the people who will use them.

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