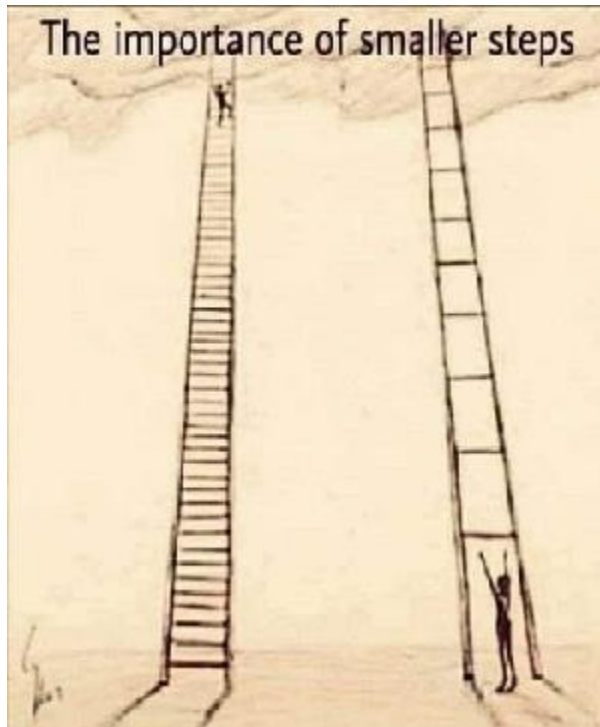


How Do We Climb The Ladder?



The Rungs

Participatory planning is an approach which seeks to involve a multiplicity of voices in urban development projects. It was originally conceived to make the planning process more democratic and cities more just but extreme difficulties exist both for the planners and citizens trying to achieve this goal. In 1969 Sherry Arnstein published *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. She equates citizenship participation to citizen power, a “redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.” (Arnstein, 1969). Participation without the redistribution of power is an empty ritual allowing powerholders to claim they considered all sides but in reality continue along as they would regardless. To help us understand the different types of participation, she organizes them as rungs of a ladder. The bottom rungs of the ladder are Manipulation and Therapy. On these bottom rungs there is no actual participation, instead powerholders persuade, educate, and advise the citizens not the reverse. The middle rungs are Informing, Consultation, and Placation. These are levels of “tokenism”, citizens can hear and be heard but lack the power to ensure their views are heeded. Partnership, Delegated Power, and Citizen Control are the highest rungs and are levels of true citizen power. The bottom 2 rungs are wholly unethical “chicanery” which most citizens are game to these days.

Stuck in the Middle

The middle rungs are all too often where we end up in practice as discussed in many of this week's articles, like the 2017 Legacy article describing the botched process surrounding the East West Link. Residents of North Denver are constantly being sought for their input on projects; surveys, flyers, meeting requests, info sessions but their concerns are not heeded, classic examples of Informing and Consultation token levels. Obviously when this is continuously repeated, people are not going to participate any longer and worse, develop distrust for the city and its officials. Now community engagers in North Denver are frustrated by low turnout at city-organized meetings (Milkman, 2021). As planners we strive to operate on the upper 3 rungs but how do we get there?

Rising Up

How can we elevate citizen participation to the upper levels of the ladder? Both Arnstein and Milkman present some solutions. Arnstein says "Partnership works most effectively when there is an organized power-base in the community to which citizen leaders are accountable; when its citizens group has financial resources to pay its leaders reasonable honoraria for their time-consuming efforts; and when the group has the resources to hire (and fire) its own." This idea is supported in Milkman. Community activists there are advocating for leading participants to be paid and another engager mentioned the importance of acknowledging the long-term contributions of the few people who always show up. Additionally, the recent creation of a Community Land Trust will hopefully be a step in developing this power-base. Arnstein talks about a neighborhood corporation that received a grant of which it had complete control over. This is like Denver's participatory budgeting process where residents decide how to spend a portion of the city's budget, which in turn is perhaps modeled off of the 1989 Porto Alegre participatory budgeting case (Fischer, 2017, Melenez, Martinez-Cosio, 2021). In my opinion, one of the simplest strategies for meaningful involvement given by a community engager in Denver was to slow down and build relationships with the residents. Yet another said "I need to learn more and shut my mouth and slow down."

Recognizing the flaws and pitfalls of participatory planning is key to overcoming them. Time spent to ensure true citizen participation is worth the risk of repeating the same old mistakes. This week's readings did a good job of explaining what we should avoid and what we should aim for but it's up to planners and other "powerholders" to keep working toward the goal of a democratic and just process. Rosabeth Moss Kanter says "When we do change to people, they experience it as violence. But when people do change to themselves, they experience it as liberation." This quote, to me, sums up why citizen participation in planning is so important.

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