

Community Engagement for Practical and Collective Discovery

Peter Krebs

Planners have an ethical (or even legal) obligation to listen to the public—this is axiomatic. Many authors make a powerful moral argument that planning that does not fully involve and empower the citizens is a cooptation of democracy, an “empty ritual.” (Arnstein 1969, 216) But ethics are far from the only reason for engaging with the community.

There are also a host of very practical reasons for planners to work closely with a broad spectrum of the public. Token interactions provide few perspectives and omit crucial facts (or skew them). They do not improve decision-making. They alienate partners who will be needed for implementation. Worst of all, they can pit segments of civil society against each other, coarsening what dialog does exist and making it harder to move forward.

During the first half of the course, we looked at several approaches in which an individual or small groups brought grand, abstract visions of what a city *ought* to be that planners either sold to- or imposed upon- the public. These approaches might not have been wrong in their earnestness to make the world better, but in their fascination with their own visions they ignored as uninteresting the particulars of what the city actually *is*. Such an approach is bound to fail for the people who live there because it does not address the city they inhabit.

I am therefore interested in the potential for inclusive processes to bring crucial place-specific intelligence to the planning process. This is fairer and it produces more just outcomes and it will also yield a plan (and crucially, a planning environment) that is more effective and dynamic. The planner’s role—still crucial—is to foster and nourish the discussion.

Collaborative discovery creates new truths.

Judith Innes’ (1998) *communicative action* model proposes that the process of sharing perspectives does not only supply data for a planning algorithm—it *is planning itself*. It is a form of collective cognition. The hearing of perspectives and the process of comprehending them transforms the questions—and the participants’ themselves. In Innes’ approach, the truth is not *discovered* in the discussion—it is *made* there. It will be new and different from anything the participants brought in.

Innes’ approach differs from traditional planning research, which mirrors the scientific method, starting with a hypothesis and assembling evidence. I contend that confirmation bias often causes researchers to unknowingly, but actively, seek to prove their thesis; so the only question really is *how true* their proposition will appear. If that is the real goal, there is no reason to involve the public and it’s back to the public alienation Arnstein describes.

Innes’ approach is actually more realistic in that it acknowledges that information is not an objective thing to be gathered and impartially used, nor is there such a thing as a value-neutral analyst. It is also strategic because it transforms *stakeholders* into *shareholders* who have framed parts of the issue. Not only does this approach strengthen ties *with* stakeholders but also *among*

them. Nourishing civil society is a powerful secondary benefit and one that is crucial for building a community that is adaptive, with capacity to solve future problems.

Not all planners or theorists think proactive collaboration is the way to go. In practice it often seems rather the exception than the norm. We can categorize three main critiques as those relating efficiency, equity and efficacy.

Efficiency Argument: Proactive community engagement takes a long time so it only really makes sense when there is no particular urgency.

Even if it takes time, it is better to find a durable solution than a quick but limited one. Yet, it doesn't need to be unduly slow either. Hoxie, Berkebile and Todd (2012) cite a Greensburg (Kansas) case study in which a community devastated by a tornado came together to chart a new vision for itself. It would be difficult to imagine a more urgent situation than an entire town rendered homeless, yet they found time for discovery prior to planning and they reached results that are highly satisfactory to the residents and acclaimed by critics.

Furthermore, the most complex and interconnected problems can only be addressed through interdisciplinary approaches that include those affected. Projects that ignore truths visible only to those on the ground often do more harm than good. From a functional perspective, we must also remember that truly wicked problems change before our eyes so processes intended to address them must also be adaptive. Dialog can self-modify in the face of new information (Dukes, Firehock and Birkoff 2016) while paper plans can remain obdurate and actually get in the way (Bearegard 2012).

It should be noted that Greenburg residents became less happy and less connected as the reconstruction moved out of its collaborative phase and into a more prescriptive design phase (Hoxie et al., 74).

Equity Argument: Fainstein and many other others point out that deliberation can be captured by the powerful or the passionate. Fair or correct procedure by no means assures just outcome. Economic power will operate behind the scenes and even a corruption-free debate is likely to be won by those who are best resourced, most passionate or best prepared, which is not the same as being right or in the public interest.

In order for get from fair process to just solution (as Fainstein argues it must) it falls upon the planner to represent interests and stakeholders who are not in the arena, such as the environment, the unborn or even those who simply could not make it to a public meeting. The question of *who* is at the table is undeniably determinative. A collaboration without equitable representation is a cabal. Yet, it will not always be feasible to include everyone, so the planner must really know their community and be ready to stand up for their interests.

A planner must be extremely careful in this role. It is all too easy to be wrong about what someone else wants or to confuse a facilitative role with a prescriptive one. In a collaborative

process, the stakeholders must hold each other—including the planner—accountable so, at a minimum, there will not be a single view of fairness or justice.

Efficacy Argument: If opposing parties hold opposing and deeply entrenched beliefs they will not step away from their positions and if they don't disagree, there's no need to meet. Therefore, engagement is a waste of time.

In *Dealing with Differences* (2009), John Forester underlines the importance of simultaneous deep listening and criticality. To truly understand one another, we must untangle *positions* (what stakeholders ask for) and *interests* (what they want and need). There are numerous reasons why a stakeholder might blur their objectives and values—not least being that *they themselves* might not know the difference. He offers numerous concrete suggestions to help gently separate the two through mediated negotiation. He recommends a stance that avoids gamesmanship, assumes possibility, asks many questions, listens to understand (not to rebut) and works together to gather facts or data to guide a decision.

The purpose of this negotiated co-discovery is not to meet in the middle: it is to create value for both parties, for them both to have something that they would not have had otherwise. It is *new value* as opposed to division of spoils. This generative approach is the heart of Innes and Booher's (2010) *collaborative rationality*. The churn of debate digests *contentious difference* into *diverse perspectives*, which are the most indispensable ingredient for sustainable development. It is about small-p process and the result cannot exist without the work: they are one and the same.

Dialog is not always appropriate but it might be useful even in difficult cases.

Collaboration may not always be appropriate. If two parties are likely to harm one another they should be kept apart, for actual conflict will only make future negotiation more difficult. Furthermore, because the process is about mutual gain, if one faction holds a true monopoly of power, then negotiation is irrelevant (Forester 1987, 426). The planner needs to be clear-eyed, because pretending there is equality when there is not is to further tilt the playing field in favor of the powerful (ibid., 433).

Nevertheless, many issues an American planner will face, including some of the most difficult, can pass these hurdles. We will close this discussion by looking at the case of Charlottesville's 2016 Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials and Public Spaces. They are charged with providing the City Council with options for telling a broader story of the city's history with respect to race, a process that crystallized around a controversy about what to do with statues of Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson. This is not an easy topic and their work is ongoing but one can see some patterns emerging.

The process is based on dialog and sharing stories—of which there were hundreds over the course of twelve public meetings. The organizers worked hard to maintain a civil atmosphere and a positive attitude and they have been mostly successful. Because the process is about getting to higher ground and not harming any of its participants, it is not surprising that the commission's recommendations are entirely additive: leaving the statues and contextualizing them;

commemorating sites where unacknowledged oppressions took place; adding honorary street names and building a new park.

Yet, even if the process helps the City to understand—and commemorate—its history better, it was not necessarily an ideal process for *planning*. Although the process was well facilitated, it was not *mediated*. Broadly speaking, it was a discussion between an oppressed population and those who honor the oppressors. Fairness and justice are complicated questions in that situation and simply giving everyone a voice may not bring justice. Underlying power dynamics remain in play.

There was also really no discussion of what the city might be like without the statues—an obvious question an imaginative planner would raise. Instead the discussion became about how best to accommodate the objects. One might ask why the passions of the old are given so much weight, inanimate sculptures have incumbency rights, yet the young and unborn are not represented at all. As a listening and learning process, it can have good outcomes: a more diverse telling of the city's history, new understandings between people who might have once been adversaries and perhaps relationships and alliances that form the basis of civil society.

Yet, in focusing almost exclusively on how citizens feel about the past, scant attention was paid to the future. If I were to redesign the process with a planner's values, I would be sure to include at least one session that focused on alternative futures: considering the possibility of a city without the statues. If people can be brave enough to talk about segregation, they can also draw on a blank page. There are many iterative collaborative processes to do that kind of imaginative inquiry but they are topics for another paper.

The crucial point here, and we saw it in the Memorial Commission's work, is that a collaborative process can bring people together even around difficult questions. Authentic dialog does not simply allocate resources; it creates new possibilities that did not exist previously. But it does not do so without help: the planner's role is not simply to facilitate or referee, but to actively curate the discussion.

That should be a planner's ultimate endeavor: building civil society to do its own work. The benefit is in the *process*, which *involves* stakeholders and brings in new voices. I think this approach is timeless but it merits special attention in this historic moment, so riven with distrust yet with so much work to do. The help we need is out in the community; they need to be invited in and they need orientation once inside.

Bibliography

Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35(4): 216-224.

Beauregard, Robert A. 2012. "Planning with Things." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 32(2): 182–90.

City of Charlottesville. 2016. *Blue Ribbon Commission on Race, Memorials, and Public Spaces Draft Report*.

Dukes, Franklin, Karen E. Firehock and Juliana E. Birkhoff. 2016. *Community-Based Collaboration: Bridging Socio-Ecological Research and Practice*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Fainstein, Susan. 2013. "Spatial Justice and Planning," in *Readings in Planning Theory* (4th Edition), edited by Susan Fainstein and James Defilippis, 258-272. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Forester, John. 1987. "Planning in the Face of Conflict" in *The City Reader* (5th edition), edited by Frederic Stout Blackwell and Richard LeGates, 421-434. New York: Routledge. Originally published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

Forester, John. 2009. *Dealing with Differences*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hoxie, Christina, Robert Berkebile and Joel Ann Todd. 2012. "Stimulating regenerative development through community dialogue" *Building Research and Information*, 40(1): 65-80.

Innes, Judith. 1998. "Information in communicative planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 64(1).

Innes, Judith and David E. Booher. 2010. *Planning with Complexity*. New York: Routledge.

Suarez, Chris. 2016. "Just how do you reinterpret history?" *Charlottesville Daily Progress*. Nov 27. [http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/local/just-how-do-you-reinterpret-history/article_70ab4f3e-b43c-11e6-98d3-0bfc9d1787a9.html]