# Building a Foundation for Public Engagement in Planning

## Carissa Schively Slotterback & Mickey Lauria

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50 Years of Impact, Interpretation, and Inspiration From Arnstein's Ladder

Carissa Schively Slotterback     Mickey Lauria

**A**t the 50th anniversary of Arnstein's (1969) field-shaping "A Ladder of Public Participation," the influence of her article is clear and continues to become more apparent. Her work is pervasive and growing in its presence in the urban planning literature, as well as in other fields. As of April 2019, the article has been cited more than 17,000 times, with more than 13,000 of those citations in the past decade. In the first few months of 2019, authors cited Arnstein's "Ladder" more than 300 times in journals focused on planning but also on topics as diverse as forestry (e.g., Evans, Flores, & Larson, 2019), social work (Hollinrake, Spencer, & Dix, 2019), marine policy (Terry, Lewis, & Bullimore, 2019), and criminology (Factor, 2019). Further evidence of Arnstein's impact is the listing of her work among just three articles highlighted in *The Essential Planning Library Revisited* (Paul & Meck, 2007), a 2007 Planning Advisory Service memo recommended as a resource for those preparing for the AICP Certification Exam. The significance of Arnstein's work is further evidenced in the tremendous response to the call for submissions to this 50th anniversary special issue. In spring 2018, we received more than 90 abstracts and invited 37 to submit full papers. This special issue certainly represents just a subset of the wide-ranging research contributing to both theory and practice in public engagement. Yet, it spans a range of scholarship from contexts as varied as postdisaster Haiti and Fresno (CA), to planning processes focused on food systems and transportation megaprojects, and to engagement efforts targeting youth, immigrants, and descendants of Texas freedom colony founders.

Before we begin, we want to share a few words about our use of the term *public engagement*. Although *citizen participation* amounted to standard terminology at the time Arnstein was writing, the language used to describe this activity has evolved. Particularly in the U.S. context, the term *citizen* connotes an exclusive and even divisive legal categorization irrelevant to planners, assuming that we are striving to serve the public interest in the manner called for by the AICP Code of Ethics: "We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence" (AICP, 2016). Pushing even beyond the language in the AICP Code, we are intentional in using the term *engagement* rather than *participation*. We discuss this further below.

Arnstein's work provides a foundation for many of the central concepts that shape public engagement research and practice today. Although her

## ABOUT THE GUEST EDITORS

### *CARISSA SCHIVELY SLOTTERBACK*
(schiv005@umn.edu) is associate dean and associate professor of urban and regional planning in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

### *MICKEY LAURIA*
(mlauria@clemson.edu) is professor of city and regional planning and director of the transdisciplinary Planning, Design, and Built Environment PhD program at Clemson University.

conception of citizen control can be held up as the ideal or criticized as impractical in the context of local political decision making, even more significant is the standard she sets for public engagement. We summarize the expectations that Arnstein defines and contextualize them with examples of more recent public engagement scholarship to position the state of our knowledge and practice.

Most important, Arnstein (1969) offers planners an objective for public engagement: The redistribution of power from the "powerholders" to the "have-nots" (p. 217). Planning research has offered essential evidence not only about who is not represented but also who has been excluded from planning processes (Sandoval & Maldonado, 2012; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). For example, low levels of trust in planners and public processes among immigrant, refugee, and colonized groups combined with a lack of culturally appropriate planning approaches have often limited their engagement (Allen & Slotterback, 2017; Umemoto, 2001).

Planning research has also pointed to strategies for engaging the public and communities with the aim of redistributing power, giving the public "the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Extensive work on communicative and deliberative planning processes by Innes, Healey, Forester, Margerum, and many others sets a baseline for public engagement. Their work has been complemented by recent scholarship that points to engagement strategies targeted to historically excluded and marginalized groups. Strategies include small-group and flexible workshops (Laurian & Shaw, 2009), storytelling (Zapata, 2009), intentional recruitment from underrepresented groups via community organizers and civil society organizations (Fung, 2006; Kondo, 2012), and a therapeutic approach to engagement that creates space to consider underlying fears and hopes (Sandercock, 2000). There is a growing literature as well on participatory technologies for public engagement (Afzalan & Muller, 2018; Radinsky et al., 2017).

In addition to strategies, the conduct of those strategies is important to get not just redistribution but what Arnstein (1969) terms "real power" (p. 216) or "citizen power" (p. 217). Quick and Feldman (2011) distinguish between participation and inclusion, revealing that power and capacity are gained by going beyond participatory practices targeted solely to increasing input on decisions. Inclusive processes generate power for participants by building "the capacity of the community to implement the decisions and tackle related issues" (Quick & Feldman, 2011, p. 274). Social interaction among participants is essential because it builds

social capital and trust (Mandarano, 2008). Engaging participants in generating knowledge and working together further contributes to capacity and agency (Sheppard et al., 2011), as well as a sense that they can solve problems together (Feldman & Quick, 2009).

Though much of "A Ladder" is focused on procedures and structures of decision making, Arnstein also helps planners anticipate what participants are able to bring to the table. Her descriptions of the upper rungs of the ladder make it clear that she presumes knowledge exists in communities as she writes about citizens describing a new model neighborhood, planning for neighborhood programs, and creating local boards that intentionally draw on expertise from farmers and community organizations. Recent research on public engagement has offered much to planners' understanding of the prospects for and impacts of knowledge in communities. Engaging participants can offer essential contextual knowledge that can improve plans and designs (Crewe, 2001; Van Herzele, 2004), as well as social networks that can be mobilized quickly (Shandas & Messer, 2008). Corburn (2003) suggests that among other benefits, engaging local knowledge can inform more effective decisions and implementation strategies aligned with "'street-level' realities" (p. 429) and elevate distributive justice concerns by offering finer scale knowledge about local impacts.

At the same time, the interpretation of Arnstein's model depends on the perspective of the reader, as will be illustrated by the authors (researchers, practitioners, and activists) whose work follows in this special issue. Some authors here interpret her work as inspiration to develop participatory/engagement strategies and methods that push local political and economic elites to share decision-making power with area residents. Others argue that Arnstein's conceptualization of power is partial and simplistic and must be broadened to include aspects other than effects on decision making such as human self-actualization and more complex understandings of justice, drawing from Fainstein (2010, 2014), Fraser (2009, 2013), Mouffe (2000), and others. The authors coming from a political economic perspective interpret these efforts as instrumental methods of distracting and depoliticizing real power politics in alignment with the literature on postpolitics (Allmendinger, 2009; Purcell, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2014). Finally, others find validity in all of these interpretations and develop alternative approaches to what they might refer to as authentic democracy outside of formal local engagement processes (e.g., Irazábal & Huerta, 2016; Miraftab, 2009).

Building on Arnstein and others, the articles in this special issue offer further evidence and add critical new

insights to the foundation of knowledge about public engagement in planning. They simultaneously inspire future research and the practical application that we strive for as planners. This collection is ordered to follow the conceptual threads discussed above, starting with a historical contextualization of Arnstein. Gaber's article discusses the influence of her work in the juvenile justice system and in desegregating hospitals prior to joining the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Model Cities Program, offering new insights on the origins of her conceptions of power and partnerships in citizen participation. Sloane, Hawkins, Illum, Spindler, and Lewis follow, demonstrating how planners and practitioners have taken Arnstein's siren call and developed a process of public engagement that enables local residents, health professionals, and city planners to partner in incorporating food system issues and other health and wellness components into three Los Angeles (CA) neighborhood plans. Contreras uses Arnstein's work to develop an evaluative framework for assessing nongovernmental organizations' participatory activities during postdisaster recovery following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. She argues that such assessments are crucial in improving the quality and sustainability of engagement practice. Karner, Brower Brown, Marcantonio, and Alcorn evaluate a participatory budgeting effort in Fresno (CA), assessing its promise as a mechanism to delegate decision-making power to local area residents. They find, however, limiting factors, including overreliance on established community groups for outreach to the detriment of engaging those new to city planning processes, as well local governing elites' unwillingness to designate a significant portion of the budget without constraining project criteria.

Articles by Botchwey, Johnson, O'Connell, and Kim; Lee; Lyles and Swearingen White; and Roberts and Kelly all point to significant omissions in current public engagement efforts related to who is engaged but, even more important, how planners and the public interact in engagement processes. Acknowledging the historical disenfranchisement of youth in planning, Botchwey et al. examine how youth and adults interact in several youth engagement programs. Their findings add nuance to our understanding of how to design and conduct youth engagement in planning with an aim toward greater partnership. Lee focuses on the contemporary exclusion of non-citizens in public engagement processes. She assesses the outreach and engagement practices of immigrant/refugee-serving nongovernmental organizations offering essential public services to those not served by or who avoid public services in Los Angeles County. She uncovers strategies for building

trust that public-sector planners can use to augment their public engagement efforts. Lyles and Swearingen White critically analyze Arnstein's article for the normative/scientific emotional paradox mirrored in planning education and practice. They offer insights from psychology and neuroscience that can increase planners' effectiveness in engaging meaningfully with others via greater humility and compassion. Roberts and Kelly apply and document an intuitive/emotive approach to public engagement in the context of the preservation of freedom colonies in Texas. Their use of ethnographic and participatory action research methods center partnership and power sharing in this creative and place-based—yet absolutely replicable—public engagement effort.

Inspired by Arnstein's focus on power, the remaining authors in this special issue bring an intentionally critical lens to structures and institutions that obstruct citizen control in public engagement. Haughton and McManus take a political economic approach to examine public engagement in the context of a major transportation project in the Sydney (Australia) metropolitan region. Their work offers inspiring examples of communities demanding power but also the persistent barriers to redistributing power in the current neoliberal political economic context. Rosen and Painter argue that to achieve Arnstein's goal of citizen control it is necessary to move beyond the linear static conceptualization of engagement to a dynamic and iterative coproduction approach to Arnstein's partnership. Their work in the Coachella Valley (CA) points to a model for sharing not just decision making but also political and economic power. Examining Detroit's (MI) community development efforts, Laskey and Nicholls critique the intersection of political and economic power held by community development corporations, their entanglement with the planning establishment, and their role in undermining public engagement. The authors demonstrate that insurgent organizing strategies can be necessary and effective in achieving community control and equitable planning outcomes. Finally, Blue, Rosol, and Fast's more synthetic essay expands Arnstein's focus on the distributive effect of resident influence on decision making to include a broader conceptualization of justice following on Nancy Fraser's ideas about redistribution, recognition, and representation. They illustrate their reformulation with examples from public engagement in climate change initiatives.

It is clear Arnstein's work continues to have impact and offers inspiration for work on public engagement in planning and well beyond. The work offered in this special issue continues to grow an essential body of

scholarship that sharpens planners' focus on redistributing power; reveals barriers to this work within ourselves, our communities, and our political economic context; and empowers us with new knowledge and tactics to build planners' capacities and that of communities we work with and the publics we serve. There is much here to digest that is necessary to help move planning research, education, and practice closer to Arnstein's vision from some 50 years ago.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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