

Civic Participation and the Right to the City Along the Wasson Way

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Public participation is now a standard part of revitalization and (re)development projects of all types in American cities. From public forums and design workshops to surveys and participatory mapping, policymakers and developers appear to be including the public in decision-making like never before. But does the ubiquity of such practices necessarily indicate a move toward greater democratization in local decision-making related to (re)development? This paper attempts to look closely at this central question in the context of a proposed rails-to-trails project in Cincinnati, Ohio, called the Wasson Way. Initially conceptualized and proposed by a small number of private citizens, the project receives a mixture of private and public funding and organizers have adopted various participatory practices in relation to community members in the six neighborhoods directly affected by the proposed trail. The overarching goal of the paper is to question the degree to which these practices empower local citizens to participate in the reshaping of urban space in non-trivial ways. The study begins by attempting to clarify what is meant by “participation” and introducing some relevant critical work and theoretical framing (in particular the idea of a “right to the city”, first formulated by Henri Lefebvre) that serves as a guide ultimately for thinking through the relation between participation and authentically democratic forms of producing urban space in the context of the Wasson Way.

In order to address participation in the context of urban development, it is first important to acknowledge the wide variety of meanings and uses attributed to it in theory and practice. Andrea Cornwall has described participation as an

“infinitely malleable concept” that “can be used to evoke—and to signify—almost anything that involves people”, and thus can be “reframed to meet almost any demand made of it” (269). Borrowing a phrase from development scholars John Cowen and Norman Uphoff, she calls for “clarity through specificity” as a way to, among other outcomes, distinguish “feel good talk of ‘participation’ that has little substance to it in practice, from forms of genuine delegated control that enable people to exercise a meaningful part in making the decisions that affect their lives” (Ibid 281). As a starting point for bringing clarity to this slippery term, Cornwall points to some well-known typologies, two of which are used here, that provide a series of ideal types, formulated in normative arrangements, along which participatory practices can be ranged. The first, developed by Sherry Arnstein in the late 1960s, is conceived as a ladder with eight rungs (Appendix A). The rungs are divided into three groups, ranging from the highest, citizen power, to tokenism and finally nonparticipation (Arnstein 217). Unabashedly normative in her arrangement, Arnstein assesses participatory practice from the perspective of the participant. The second typology referenced by Cornwall is Jules Pretty’s 1995 arrangement (Appendix 2), which, while also normative, looks at participation more from the perspective of the user of such approaches (Cornwall 270). The highest form of participation for Pretty is “self-mobilization”, in which “people participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems” (Pretty 1252).<sup>1</sup> These typologies provide a useful set of basic tools for thinking about participatory

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<sup>1</sup> Pretty goes on to note that such mobilization “may or may not challenge existing distributions of wealth and power” (Ibid), which Cornwall astutely identifies as an important distinction with Arnstein’s highest form of participation, citizen power (Cornwall 271).

practices in a variety of contexts, but as Cornwall points out, the distinctions illustrated in such typologies are rarely as clear in practice as they appear on paper.

Within the field of planning, a focus on participation is elemental to the recent shift from instrumental/rational approaches to orientations commonly referred to as “communicative planning” or “collaborative planning”, which now occupy a hegemonic position in planning theory, according to Mark Purcell (“Resisting Neoliberalization” 148). Judith Innes explains that “communicative action theorists see planners as actors in the world rather than as observers or neutral experts”, an approach rooted in the Habermasian ideal of intersubjective understanding (186). Though it is not necessary or possible to delve too deeply into the theoretical basis of this approach in this study, this is an important shift, as it illustrates a broader willingness among planners (and other actors using planning theory and practice) to “decenter the role of planner and the plan so as to appreciate more fully the dynamic role played by divergent “public” interests” (Foley 1). But has such broadened appreciation actually produced a more democratic mode of decision-making in urban spaces? Critics of neoliberalism argue that it has done quite the opposite. “What the neoliberal project requires are decision-making practices that are widely accepted as ‘democratic’ but that do not (or cannot) fundamentally challenge existing relations of power”, writes Mark Purcell. “Communicative planning, insofar as it is rooted in communicative action, is just such a decision-making practice” (“Resisting Neoliberalization” 149).

Michael McQuarrie comes to a similar conclusion in an excellent study of the evolution of participatory practices as used by community-based organizations

(CBOs) in Cleveland, Ohio, since the late 1960s. His work is worth dwelling on here as it shows in detail how “participatory practices have been transformed from tools of democratization into tools of elite authority” (McQuarrie 143). In the years following World War II, Cleveland enjoyed a period of growth fueled by manufacturing industries that legitimized the political authority of the city’s white elite. But as the economic crisis of 1973 made it clear that this period of growth was permanently over, nascent racial frustrations shifted African Americans in the city into an alliance with a populist coalition opposed to growth-oriented elites and eventually gave rise to a crisis of governance in which neighborhood groups schooled in Alinsky-style community organizing, politicians, and growth-oriented elites all competed unsuccessfully for consent from the others. David Kucinich, a populist mayor who valorized neighborhoods but was ultimately unable to secure support from mobilized community activists (not to mention important growth-oriented factions like bankers), failed to achieve reelection and paved the way for a pro-growth Republican who was only too willing to devolve governance functions onto civil society organizations (Ibid 148-151). Eventually, this process saw the introduction of a new type civic redevelopment organization, the community development corporation (CDC), which drew funding and other support from the city’s elite. McQuarrie wryly notes that though growth was never restarted, “authority had been reestablished” (Ibid 152). But the CDCs empowered technocrats, funders, and lenders as representatives of community interests to such a clear extent that by the early 2000s even the city’s elites realized that “technocratic CBOs were unable to effectively consecrate the priorities of urban

elites because they no longer plausibly represented the city's neighborhoods", a realization that prompted a corrective return to community organizing. But the situation presented CBOs with a puzzle: "how to be legitimate representatives of the community when they were organized to respond to the imagined community of future residents" (Ibid 163). The solution is what McQuarrie calls "technologies of participation", understood as "arrangements of practices, metrics, discourses, and actors that perform community self-determination in ways that are *designed to realize specific goals* [emphasis added]" (Ibid 147).

Thinking of participatory practices as technologies is extremely germane to overarching questions about the potential for urban inhabitants to participate authentically and autonomously in the (re)shaping of city space. Mark Purcell argues convincingly for placing the concept of democracy at the center of such questions, outlining neoliberal strategy aimed at "capturing the banner of democracy" as a way to obfuscate ideological "deficits" inherent to neoliberalism itself ("Resisting Neoliberalization" 146), and calling for a renewed focus on the left on reclaiming democracy as "the best way forward" (The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy 3). At its most basic, Purcell conceives of democracy as the ability of "people to manage together and for themselves the conditions of their own existence (Ibid 35). This stands in stark contrast to the essence of participatory technologies and to the form identified by McQuarrie as having emerged as preeminent among CDCs in his study, consensus organizing (McQuarrie 163). Though this form of participation grants stakeholders "voice and venues to construct community solidarity", it comes at the cost of "formal mechanisms that

can hold decision makers accountable". In other words, writes McQuarrie, "this type of citizen participation leaves no room for the re-creation of a neighborhood counterpublic" (Ibid). Such a counterpublic is precisely what Purcell identifies, in slightly different language, as an important form of political movement capable of fostering authentic democracy. He conceives of such a movement in terms of "networks of equivalence", which he defines as "counterhegemonic combinations of differentiated but equivalent popular struggles" ("To Inhabit Well" 562). Such networks arise, he claims, following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, from an "irreducibly plural" political field that is characterized by conflict (The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy 59). Laclau and Mouffe claim that democratic politics "must acknowledge that any form of consensus is the result of a hegemonic articulation, and that it always has an 'outside' that impedes its full realization" (qtd in Ibid). Jacques Rancière shares this opposition to consensus. For him, "democracy is disruption; it is an unsettling of existing assumptions, norms, and practices, an interruption of the perpetual articulation of social order" (qtd. in Ibid). Not consensus, but "dissensus" (Rancière 38).

What, then, would participation look like as a truly democratic action? It would be a form of contestation rather than a structured process of consent and legitimatization. It would thus also be creative, the *production* of space. The idea of a "right to the city", initially conceived by Henri Lefebvre in the late 1960s but explored and expanded more recently by numerous other scholars and activists, serves as a useful foundation from which we can think toward a democratic form of participation. Mark Purcell writes that "the right to the city reframes the arena of

decision-making in cities: it reorients decision-making away from the state and toward the production of space” (“Excavating Lefebvre” 101). He goes on to explain that producing urban space “necessarily involves reproducing the social relations that are bound up in it”. It is thus really a claim for a “right to urban life” more generally (Ibid 102). Lefebvre is calling for the “enfranchisement of those who inhabit the city” and in doing so shifting the focus of enfranchisement from a traditional notion of national citizenship to one based on inhabitance (Ibid).<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Lefebvre conceived of this as a “right to the use of the center” (qtd. in Ibid). Though Purcell notes that Lefebvre was not completely clear about what he meant by this centrality, it is clear that such a right would situate the inhabitant (or “citadin”, to borrow Lefebvre’s term) at the center of decision-making processes of all kinds as related to the shaping of the city. Such an arrangement is fundamentally incompatible with participatory technologies that provide citizens opportunities to share thoughts and ideas on already-in-motion processes in exchange for fundamental consent and deference to institutional authority and governance arrangements. Again, being at the “center” suggests a much more constitutive and agential form of privilege. It suggests democracy.

As David Harvey is quick to point out, it also suggests a right to organize collectively, to form the kind of counterpublic mentioned above. The right to the city, according to Harvey, is “a common rather than individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization” (Harvey). Kafui Ablode Attoh, in writing

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<sup>2</sup> This also points toward the focus on use value of space over exchange value, as inhabitants are primarily the users of urban space (Harvey).

about the right to the city in relation to urban transportation policy, notes that “the very ability to remake a “qualitatively different urban society” [quoting Harvey] not only hinges upon a right of access but the very terms of that access” (11). One can apply this line of reasoning directly to participatory practice as well; the right to the city demands not just the right to participate in decision-making, but to collectively shape the decision-making process itself. Again, this is clearly incompatible with participation as a mere “input in technocratic decision making”, to quote once again from McQuarrie’s work (167).

With this critical foundation we can now turn to the Wasson Way project currently being developed in Cincinnati. The project is conceived as a 6.5-mile paved, multi-use path, to be built on a stretch of unused railway spanning six neighborhoods on the city’s east side and ultimately connecting with a much larger system of regional trails (Wasson Way). The project was first envisioned by two private citizens (residents of one of the six neighborhoods connecting to the line) who organized a grassroots effort in 2011 to build support for the idea, eventually forming a nonprofit organization as the campaign expanded (Andress). One of those citizens, Jay Andress, serves as the volunteer president of the project and its primary promoter, and is joined by six or seven other volunteers who devote about 20-25 hours per month to the project. Volunteers contribute a variety of skills, including web design, social networking, event planning, and fundraising. The organization also receives occasional donations of time and services (such as

printing) from other community members, most of whom live in Mr. Andress' neighborhood, one of the wealthiest along the proposed line (Ibid).

In early 2013, the Wasson Way project succeeded in obtaining public support when the former Cincinnati City Manager Milton Donohey, Jr. announced plans to allocate \$3 million of city funds to the program, citing strong neighborhood support (Johnston). The funding was tied to a controversial long-term plan to lease city parking infrastructure that was scrapped later that year with the election of a new mayor, but the city remained committed to contributing funding by other means (Cranley).<sup>3</sup> In early 2014 the city's Department of Transportation also appointed Mel McVay, a senior planner normally tasked with developing the city's Bicycle Transportation Plan, as a Project Manager of the Wasson Way (McVay). The total cost of the project is currently estimated at \$7 million, not including an as-yet-undetermined sum needed to purchase the railway, which the city has committed to pursuing (Wasson Way, Andress).

Despite this public support, the Wasson Way remains largely a citizen-led project, and the participatory practices highlighted here are generally organized by the Wasson Way nonprofit itself. The most utilized form of participation related to the project is information sharing through online social networks, including Facebook, Twitter, and an email list. The project maintains relatively active accounts on both platforms and publicizes information related to the project including major developments and announcements of events (including fundraising and informational functions), as well as information related to a small number of allied

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<sup>3</sup> The new mayor, John Cranley, continues to offer strong public support for the project (Ibid).

organizations working on similar issues such as regional bike trail or urban bike infrastructure advocacy. Organizers (typically Jay Andress) also attend community council meetings and other neighborhood forums or gatherings related to development and neighborhood revitalization to spread awareness about the project (Andress). Each of these practices is fundamentally informational, and when assessed using Arnstein's typology, fall squarely within the tokenism grouping (Arnstein). In the terms of Pretty's typology, the practices range from "passive participation" to "participation by consultation" (Pretty). The group has also hosted a "community design workshop" in the fall of 2013, but this too would fall within these groupings as participation was managed by organizers and "experts" (Andress). In short, participation in this form has been limited to the type of "technologies" described by McQuarrie because participation is invited insofar as it remains oriented toward pre-determined goals.

The kind of pluralism emphasized by Latour, Mouffe, Purcell, and others as a constitutive part of authentic democracy is extremely difficult to achieve through this kind of participation because of the homophily associated with all social networks, online or off (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook). Eszter Hargittai, a researcher at Northwestern University, sums it up nicely: "people use these sites [social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter] to connect to people they already know" (Richmond). Thus, community members more easily associated with the Wasson Way organizers (closer to the "center", so to speak), seem to have greater access and thus a better chance of shaping city space according to their own desires. Those with more economic power, in particular, might be expected to have

more productive access as well, though further research would be needed to investigate how this actually plays out behind the scenes. Fundraising is, after all, another aspect of participation particularly sought after in relation to this project, and developers already in possession of land or other resources along the proposed route are viewed almost habitually as stakeholders worth listening to (Andress, McVay).

In general, civic participation related to the Wasson Way project functions through what Cornwall calls “invited spaces”- spaces of dialogue opened through invitation (275). She notes an important contrast between “spaces that are created through invitations to participate and those that people create for themselves” (Ibid). Participatory processes in line with the former “can serve to deepen the exclusion of particular groups unless explicit efforts are made to include them” (Ibid 277). In the case of the Wasson Way, while explicit efforts are made by organizers to inform diverse parts of the community, there is little evidence that such efforts extend to agential forms of participation in decision-making. Without this, efforts to characterize this project as truly democratic do not ring true.

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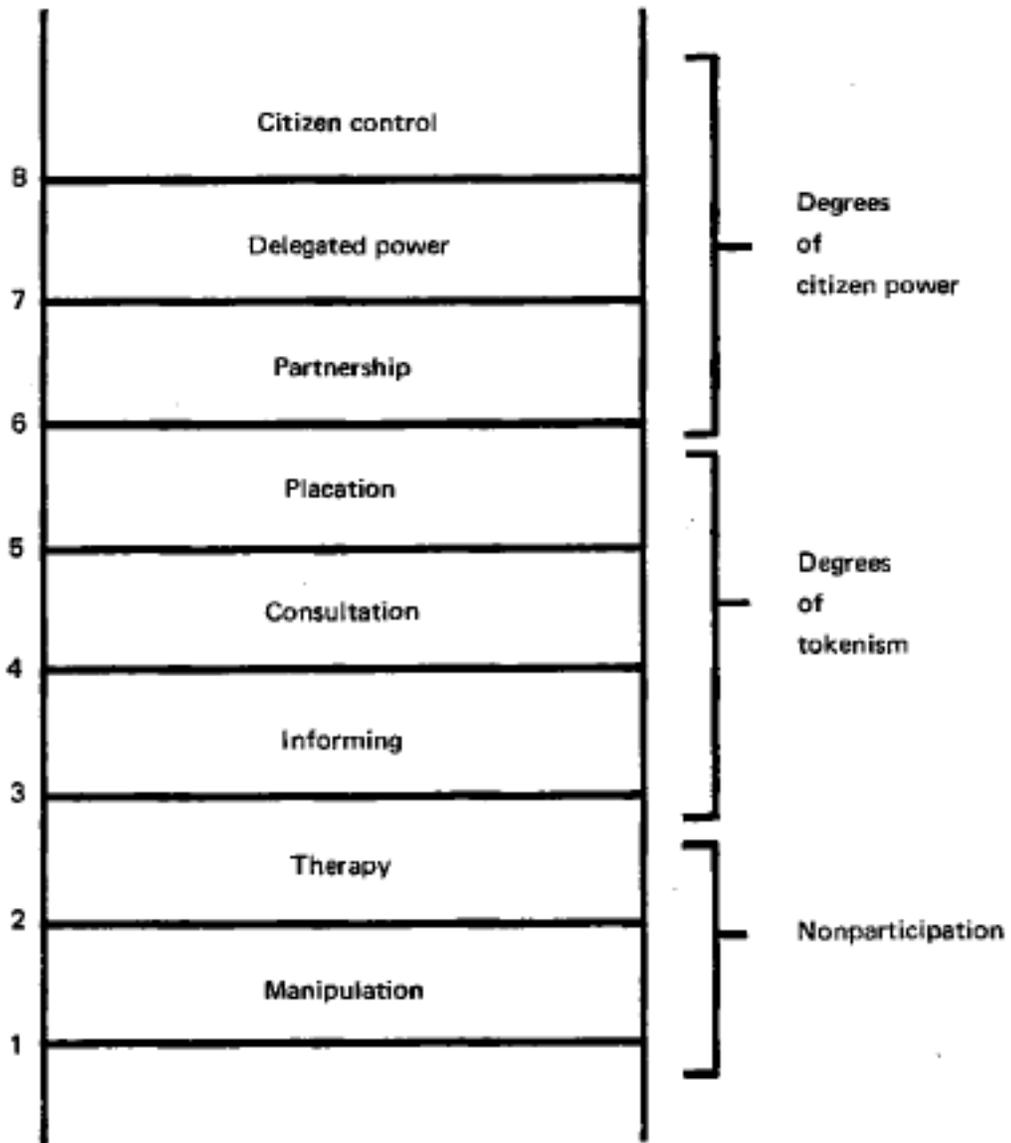
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Appendix A  
Arnstein's ladder of participation



From Sherry Arnstein (1969).

Appendix B  
Pretty's typology of participation

Type	Characteristics of each type
Manipulative participation	Participation is simply a pretence, with 'people's' representatives on official boards, but who are un-elected and have no power.
Passive participation	People participate by being told what has been decided or has already happened. It involves unilateral announcements by an administration or project management without any listening to people's responses. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals.
Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted or by answering questions. External agents define problems and information-gathering processes, and so control analysis. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
Participation for material incentives	People participate by contributing resources, for example, labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Farmers may provide the fields and labour, but are involved in neither experimentation nor the process of learning. It is very common to see this 'called' participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging technologies or practices when the incentives end.
Functional participation	Participation seen by external agencies as a means to achieve project goals, especially reduced costs. People may participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement may be interactive and involve shared decision-making, but tends to arise only after major decisions have already been made by external agents. At worst, local people may still only be co-opted to serve external goals.
Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and formation or strengthening of local institutions. Participation is seen as a right, not just the means to achieve project goals. The process involves interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systemic and structured learning processes. As groups take control over local decisions and determine how available resources are used, so they have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
Self-mobilization	People participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Self-mobilization can spread if government and NGOs provide an enabling framework of support. Such self-initiated mobilization may or may not challenge existing distributions of wealth and power.

Adapted from Andrea Cornwall (2008).