Experts as Equals? Framing the Conversation in Public Workshops

Enrique Arcilla

Department of Urban Studies & Planning, UC San Diego

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Dr. Isaac Martin

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Introduction

When cities in California update their general plan, they sometimes hold public workshops where their citizens are invited to share their insights for use in showing city officials what the public finds important. In these workshops, citizens might hear brief presentations by city staff or participate in structured exercises where they can respond to open-ended questions like “what would you like to see done with public land in the next twenty years?” Visioning, the point in the process of updating a general plan which this all takes place in, may be contrasted to the plan’s actual approval, where the role of the public is markedly different. Their role is different at these two points because workshops, broadly concerned with scoping rather than approving, in theory allow the public to provide a guiding vision before a plan is ever written. By contrast, in public meetings later on in the planning process, the public is basically constrained to commenting on plans that have already been built out.

Although workshops are presented as neutral spaces where the public and the city work together to decide on shared goals, they still take place in the highly political context of planning. In planning, seemingly small issues like a lane expansion or a new apartment complex can spiral into protracted legal battles, emotional public hearings, and deep suspicion. Visioning workshops are not necessarily insulated from these political winds. As one planning intern at the City of Del Mar explained, the members of the public who show up at workshops are often also those fighting in later, more overtly political settings. Nevertheless, consultants and city officials communicate the public workshop as a place where people work together for an agreed-upon common good. A
public workshop is like a stage where the director asserts that everyone is working together, and actors with conflicting interests must adjust their self-presentation accordingly. This misalignment between the conventions of the public workshop and the reality of different political goals raises a question: how do city officials use presentation to further their political interests when bound by the collaborative expectations of public workshops?

This question has several possible answers. Sherry Arnstein, author of “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” might argue that city officials change public workshops into spaces of therapy, informing, consultation, or placation in order to retrench a more traditional balance of power which privileges the role of city staff. It is also possible to argue that officials will prioritize conflict avoidance over role assertion. My own hypothesis is as follows: city officials will use body language, physical “staging” like powerpoint, and precisely written prompts to present themselves as neutral facilitators while framing problems in a way that keeps workshop participants in tacit agreement with city goals.

I will test my hypothesis through observation of four in-person public workshops (two in San Marcos and two in Del Mar) and two sets of documents reporting on past public workshops (one in Kearny Mesa and one in Mission Valley). My thesis is significant because in city planners’ ongoing study of what can make or destroy genuine opportunities for participatory decision-making, there is a primary focus on what the outcomes of strategic choices are. Arnstein’s iconic article, for example, describes eight levels of citizen participation. My thesis focuses on the rhetorical strategies that
generate these levels, a less-examined but still significant part of the broader process that this strain of planning literature examines. This research will add to the planning profession’s knowledge of how/what specific presentational choices influence how predetermined the outcome of a public workshop is.

**Literature Review**

There has not been prior research on this specific research question. However, there has been pertinent work on several of the ideas addressed by it. That work was drawn out into two main strands of thought, for this project. The first strand was sourced from the literature of planning. Planning is an applied field which often centers its scholarship on what makes for better practice. To this end, the readings from planners commented on the risks of citizen power and how planners might integrate citizen participation into just planning processes, for just results. Many of the works in this category did not address visioning workshops directly, but still prove useful in showing the state of current thought on public participation. In contrast to the applied field of planning, the second strand of thought was sourced from the broader sociological canon. It concerned self-presentation, likening people to actors who try to convince viewers around them of a certain reality. This research project takes place at the intersection of these two lines of thought, attempting to learn about how officials in the conflicted, contradictory setting of planning in a public workshop respond to their conflicting directives by encouraging certain understandings of what the workshop is in the first place.
Much of the literature from the field of city planning focuses on how just outcomes can be pursued when in planners’ daily practice, “public participation” often means the disruption of planners’ hopes. In California especially, citizens’ groups are notorious for their use of delaying tactics on the political battlefield of local land use decisions. The groups are described in Fulton & Shigley’s (2018) textbook on California Planning:

Citizen groups have gained tremendous leverage over the land use process, and, if well organized, they can snag virtually any project they dislike in California’s vast legal underbrush. This power arises from the legal structure of planning in California, which is unusually open to the public (p. 12).

Fulton and Shigley later go on to describe the persistence of the threat posed by organized, disgruntled citizens. “Typically, an active citizenry is a response to a series of development disputes within a community... once they become politically active, these people rarely return to the role of passive citizens” (p. 122). To review, Fulton and Shigley established that (1) citizen groups have “tremendous leverage” over land use decisions and that (2) those citizen groups, once politically activated, are a consistent force in city politics. In this context, it stands to reason that city officials enter visioning workshops aware that despite the advertisements of workshops as neutral places for all to be heard, the broader context of planning is highly political and prone to conflict. They likely also see that the citizens attending the workshop may, in the near future, threaten to derail proposals supported by the city. The title of one study places this awareness on center stage. In “Collaborative Visioning: Proceed With Caution!”, Amy Helling
suggests that without setting outcome in addition to process objectives, maintaining an ability to force compromise, and/or setting a reasonable standard of credibility, efforts in collaborative visioning might result in unactionable, unproductive goals (p. 1).

The assertions of these studies shows that some planning scholars recognize that ideals aside, situations with high public power need to have boundaries established if the “just ends, just process” stated outcomes of planning are to be achievable. Other planning scholars respond, arguing that these boundaries risk turning participatory planning into a sham. They worry that city officials might manipulate how and what information is presented to a point where citizens are simply giving a rubber stamp of approval to entrenched interests. For example, in “Planning in the Face of Power,” John Forester argues that in a society that is “precariously democratic but strongly capitalistic” (p. 1), planners have a moral obligation to constantly ask themselves whether they are misinforming their publics. In sum, the planning literature often recognizes that public deliberation without guidance or prompting is a recipe to not getting what planners want. Yet, parts of the literature also fear that in using guidance and prompting to get what they want, planners make a mockery of citizen participation. The professional thought of planners around public participation is deeply conflicted.

The public workshop can be seen as a place where these tensions between just process and just outcomes are manifest. It is designated as a place where the public can influence what goes into a plan, aligning with the desire for a just and open process. It also is potential staging for rhetorical strategies that fold citizens’ “input” into preexisting plans, aligning with the desire for just outcomes. This tension in the event’s
nature is experienced and enacted by those working inside of it. City officials’
presentational choices are what define (and thus carry out) the public workshop. This
project examines how city officials use strategies of presentation to enact the tension
that the planning literature describes.

The canon of sociology provides language to study this with. Erving
Goffman’s “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” outlines a way of understanding
social interaction in terms of theater. In theater, a routine (in this case, the routine of a
public workshop) prompts its actors to behave in a certain way. The actors (in this case,
city officials) in turn use different kinds of showmanship to convince their audience that
they are a certain character or the show is a certain way. This dramaturgical metaphor
might seem unnecessary, but it will prove useful because it describes how shared
reality is constructed as a result of presentational decisions. At its core, this project is
about planners’ tactical use of presentation to shape the social expectations which
influence how a powerful public behaves. Goffman’s dramaturgy is helpful for this topic.

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

Site Selection

My research question also provided criteria for site selection. In order to answer
a question about how city officials were using presentation to further their interests in a
setting that expects egalitarianism, a site was needed where (1) there was downplaying
of the differences in people’s abilities to get ideas into a plan, and (2) there was
potentially substantial disagreement between city officials and the public. The first item
is an important criterion because the research question is not simply concerned with
how power is expressed, it is interested in how power is expressed in a social setting
where the role of the expert in shaping policy is supposed to be diminished. The second
item is an important criterion because if city officials and the public do not disagree with
one another, it is difficult to tell whether city officials may be shaping the conversation.

These two criteria were then used to select sites on two different levels of
abstraction. The first level of abstraction is the general type of public event. Public
workshops, city council meetings, and online AMAs (“ask me anythings”) are categories
on this first, more broad level of abstraction. The second level of abstraction is the local
instance of the general type: a more specific version of whatever the general type is,
specified by location, topic, attendance, or other secondary criteria. A San Marcos
public workshop about housing or a Fresno city council meeting about electric scooters
are examples of categories on this second, more specific level of abstraction. These
levels are simply a tool for the researcher, intended to encourage consistency with
research goals on both a micro and macro scale.

Using the two criteria and the two levels of abstraction, the sites that were
selected were as follows. Two were upcoming public workshops in the City of Del Mar,
both about housing, observed in-person. Another two were upcoming public workshops
in the City of San Marcos, one about housing & land use and one about mobility &
circulation, observed in-person. The fifth was a 2017 public workshop in the San Diego
community of Kearny Mesa, about the entire community plan, observed by reading
documentation posted by the city. The sixth was a 2019 public workshop in the San
Diego community of Mission Valley, about the entire community plan, also observed by reading documentation.

On the first, more general level of abstraction, all of these field sites were public workshops. Public workshops were selected because they satisfied the criteria that there must be a downplaying of the differences in different groups’ ability to get ideas into a plan. In public workshops, an expectation is set that the ideas the public offers will actually make their way into the final document that is approved. This contrasts to public hearings before a plan is approved, where it is clear that city officials now have the power to decide what is in the plan, and the public can either be upset or acceptant. The selection of public workshops as sites allows for research in a setting where the role of the expert in shaping public policy is deemphasized, as demanded by the research question.

On the second, more specific level of abstraction, all of these field sites included the issues of housing growth, density, or transportation. Public workshops planned to cover these topics were selected because they satisfied the criteria that there must be potentially substantial disagreement between city officials and the public. Housing growth and density increases are the twin boogeymen haunting NIMBYism (“not-in-my-backyard-ism”). Given the history of California land use politics, the presence of housing growth or density as topics is an effective signal for potential disagreement between city officials and the public. Transportation is a similar historical sticking point, as evidenced by the constant battles over traffic and public transportation around the state. The selection of public workshops with these contentious topics as
sites allows for research in a setting where city officials’ attempts to shape the conversation are more visible.

**Gathering Data**

Data will be gathered using the techniques of ethnographic field research when in-person, and rhetorical analysis when looking at documents. Because this project examines complex, dense, multivariate social settings, it cannot focus on only a few variables. It instead must aim to build as holistic a view of these settings as possible. That being said, a complete transcript of everything happening in any social environment is not attainable, so a few key themes must be selected to guide the observation. When gathering data, there will be special focus on who is present, how the workshop is introduced, how participants introduce themselves, what background information is given, how space is physically arranged, what prompts are offered to the public, what phases the meeting is divided into, and how participants position their body. This first-order observation is intended to build a record of what the facts of the event are for later analysis. Observations will initially be written as brief “jottings,” and then reconstructed (typically within the day of reading or observing) into full notes of everything that can be remembered from the event. It is an unusual decision to combine ethnographic observation of some workshops with analysis of documents from others, but the research environment demanded adjustment when in mid-March 2020, planned in-person workshops were cancelled given the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice to examine documents of past workshops is a response to the shutdown of public meetings for the foreseeable future.
Analyzing Records

The records of the six public workshops will finally be analyzed for themes and trends. Particular attention will be given to what the public workshop is presented as, what information is included in or excluded from prompts, what divergences there are between the interests of city officials and those of the public, and how city officials present their role to the public.
References


