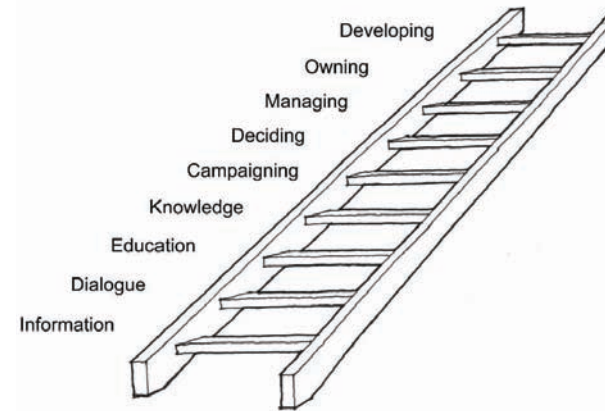


From Pioneering to Mainstream Introduction by John Thompson

Twenty years ago, I took part in a Community Planning Event in Pittsburgh, USA which radically changed the way I have practised as an architect and urbanist since. It was described as an Urban Design Assistance Team and for several days I worked intensively with other professionals and with members of the Pittsburgh community – drawn from all walks of life – devising proposals to improve what was then a very depressed city.

Since then, our practice, John Thompson & Partners, has adopted and adapted the key team working and participatory planning techniques that I first discovered in Pittsburgh. We progressed from being community architects involving residents in designing their own homes to community planners, using similar methods at a neighbourhood, town or city scale. 'Charrettes' and 'Community Planning Events' have become central to our philosophy and we are now applying these techniques on a wide variety of place-making projects throughout Europe and in countries and cultures as diverse as Iceland, Russia and Abu Dhabi.

We believe that sustainable development is most effectively achieved if the knowledge and commitment of stakeholders is engaged at every stage of the process. A structured participatory process enables the community, the private sector and the local authority to work together in a creative way, which ultimately adds value at all levels – physical, social, economic and environmental – leading to better and more sustainable places.



Ladder of participation
Community planning can take communities as far up the ladder as they want to go; but beware of starting unless you are prepared to go to at least the fourth step

Community Planning Events can be extremely successful both in galvanising community participation and in allowing collective decisions to be made in an efficient and effective way. An event that has been properly designed has the ability to create a unique chemistry of activity and energy, allowing all the potential players to work towards a common goal in a more effective way than by using conventional professional methods alone.

During the collaborative Community Planning Event process we take people up the 'ladder of participation' (see illustration above) to the point where they understand more about what is possible and what is not. Citizens from all walks of life learn about design and planning. Development professionals learn what citizens need in order to have a good quality of life. As a result, all those participating in the process begin to understand that the way forward is about negotiation, reconciliation and compromise. Once people share knowledge, a shared vision for the future becomes possible. One is closer to achieving consensus.



New approach to planning
Interdisciplinary, collaborative and community-based. Walkabout by architects and local residents during a Community Planning Event in Pontefract and Castleford, Yorkshire, UK. John Thompson is far left

The state of the art has progressed a great deal since the first edition of this book. Twelve years ago most of our Community Planning Events were organized for public sector clients. Since then we have demonstrated that they can be very worthwhile for the private sector too.

The breakthrough was at Caterham in Surrey where a five-day community planning weekend about what to do with a redundant army barracks was attended by over 1,000 people. The process transformed the community's previous hostility to any new development into positive support for the creation of a mixed use scheme that increased the development value of the site by £50 million and provided £2.5 million worth of new community benefits, to be partly owned and run by a not-for-profit community development trust; that represents increased development value of £10 million and community benefits worth £0.5 million for each day of the Community Planning Event. In addition, because everyone affected was involved in developing the proposal, the scheme passed quickly through the formal statutory planning process with no need for costly and time-consuming public enquiries. The development industry and government sat up and took notice.

Government commitment to community involvement in planning has increased dramatically in many countries and this is to be welcomed. But it is mostly seen as 'consultation' rather than 'participation'. The danger is that it may become merely formulaic, leading to superficial tick-box exercises carried out with little belief in the value of the outcomes.

It is crucial to recognise the difference between participation and consultation: consultation is now obligatory (in the UK and many other countries) but participation is not. Consultation without participation is simply asking people to agree with what has already been decided by others and is likely to prompt a negative reaction. Full participation, as in a properly organised Community Planning Event and ongoing process is not about getting people to agree to proposals drawn up by professionals; it is about creating better proposals and therefore better places. Improving quality of life becomes a shared goal, around which a vision for the future and specific projects can then be developed.

One of the most urgent challenges facing humankind is how to build more sustainable cities, towns and villages. Places that consume less energy, create less pollution and that are uplifting to live and work in. The quest is to identify and determine new forms of urbanism fit for the 21st century.

Community planning can play a vital role in taking this agenda forward and accelerating its delivery. The events described in this manual can produce results, and quickly. They can be used for any scale of project and the formula can be adapted in an infinite number of ways to suit different circumstances. This book will be an invaluable tool for guiding you along the way.

John Thompson, Chairman, John Thompson & Partners, Chairman, The Academy of Urbanism