Next Generation Engagement project

Infrastructure Planning is Political: An urban planning perspective on engagement

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Infrastructure planning is a political act. Many the political party has risen and fallen on the back of an infrastructure project. The cancellation of Perth’s Freight Link and Melbourne’s East West Link, both undertaken as Labor election promises, are just two examples of the role of community opposition and political cycles in influencing infrastructure decisions. In Sydney, the WestConnex project is beset by dramatic cost and time escalations, staunch community opposition, and accusations of conflicts of interest. At the same time, community trust in government institutions, the media and business has fallen dramatically in Australia. This is partially because the community (often correctly) interprets community engagement activity as a tokenistic attempt to justify a foregone conclusion.

Traditional, ‘rational’ planning enjoyed its hey-day in the 60s and is based on a conception of planning as a linear process of problem identification, research, option analysis and then decision-making based on an apolitical analysis of facts. This idea of value-free, non-political planning is now defunct, at least as far as planning scholars are concerned. Particularly within large-scale infrastructure projects, there are too many players and agencies involved, too much complexity and uncertainty in modelling and too many competing policy goals at stake to even consider infrastructure-planning as a non-political act. Transport infrastructure decisions are rarely made based on rational decision-making processes and are more often solutions in search of a problem. Increasingly, urban planning research focuses on communicative and consensus-building approaches to decision-making that acknowledge multiple forms of knowledge and attempt to include multiple perspectives in planning decisions. Communicative planning acknowledges that formal planning processes are typified by unequal power relations. It attempts to identify and recognise instances where power imbalances occur in order to address them before plans or projects come under threat.

Governments embed community engagement obligations within approvals for infrastructure projects and communities expect to be involved in decision-making. However, urban infrastructure is rarely associated with progressive conceptions of participatory planning and more commonly engagement is a tokenistic ‘box-ticking’ exercise. Within our current political context, greater focus is given to creating certainty to attract private sector participation in development. Citizen participation can become a form of co-optation as infrastructure ‘problems’ and potential ‘solutions’ are framed as unquestionable.
Harnessing local knowledge and values

Communities are valuable sources of knowledge about their local area, their needs and potential strengths and weaknesses of a project. Technical and scientific advisers can not possibly anticipate the broad spectrum of ideas, opinions and knowledge required to make sustainable and democratic decisions. Similarly, community engagement and other communicative approaches to planning can help to establish shared values or a “shared language.” Often contention surrounding infrastructure is due to differing systems of meaning and modes of reasoning, moral perspectives, cultural expressions and material conditions.

Community buy-in

Community engagement can also be a mechanism for involving impacted stakeholders in the creation of solutions. This process can create relationships and a sense of ownership with the plan or project and thus may increase acceptance of a project. Recent examples of controversial transport projects, including the East West Link in Melbourne, demonstrate the impact of a lack of legitimacy in infrastructure decision making and the power of oppositional groups to end projects. The staunch opposition to the East West Link can be partially attributed to the positioning of the project as a ‘done deal’ and concerns about a lack of transparency around business cases, rushed participation processes and attempts to expedite contracts to occur before an election.

Challenging the status-quo

Community engagement and community protest can unsettle status-quo solutions. Effective protests can reveal how ‘decisions’ are really ‘fait accompli’ and highlight power inequalities, especially between community members and project proponents. Today, many communities have significant power to disrupt infrastructure decisions and, while this is a challenge for the governments and companies seeking to deliver these projects, it is also an expression of democracy and grass-roots activism. This activism can challenge dominant policy narratives (e.g. car-dominant positions in transport) and question the necessity of projects that do not reflect community values or needs.

Co-learning opportunities

Community engagement may also produce outcomes greater than the sum of their parts. The process of collaborating on a project can create new connections and create new opportunities for knowledge-sharing. This may create a more informed public and a more informed proponent. Collaboration can change future expectations about how infrastructure planning can be done and inspire institutional change away from “command and control” approaches to a more consensus-based approach to decision making.

The benefits of community engagement

Despite these structural barriers, genuine community engagement is an essential aspect of infrastructure planning and delivery. Genuine community engagement can harness local knowledge to improve outcomes, help establish a social license for a project, help to challenge status-quo solutions and deliver co-learning benefits.

Engaging with communities can help to identify and respond to the underlying issues surrounding infrastructure projects.

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Community engagement done poorly: Risks and pitfalls

While community engagement has the capacity to improve democracy and deliver better outcomes, poorly-delivered engagement can do more harm than good. Genuine and meaningful public participation in urban planning remains an elusive goal despite decades of rhetorical commitment by decision makers. There are many inspiring examples of well-delivered engagement, including those highlighted annually by the IAP2 awards. However, engagement can also go wrong for several reasons.

**Solutions looking for problems don’t solve much**

Communities can often sense when engagement is being used as a tool to justify a ‘done deal.’ This is the nature of many infrastructure projects; communities are usually only consulted once a solution, or several similar solutions, have reached a stage where they can be easily discussed. Consultation occurs only once the project is sufficiently mapped and the impacts detailed. While this is often a pragmatic reality for infrastructure projects – it is hard to engage a community about ideas that do not directly impact them or are too abstract – it also means there is virtually no capacity to challenge underlying assumptions about the need for a project or propose alternative options. This issue has been described as a problem/solution nexus that essentially excludes communities from discussions about the problem the proposed transport project is expected to address.

**Time is of the essence**

The timelines of infrastructure projects also create challenges for successful community engagement. It can take decades for a large-scale road or rail project to transition from an idea to a built form and the project can move through multiple design iterations, communication strategies and political framings. As projects move from vision to detailed planning to funding and delivery, decisions are often made without community engagement or transparency. Similarly, short-term election cycles can impact on project timelines and success as infrastructure motives often reflect electoral politics and private sector interests.

**Private-Public Partnerships**

The increasing emphasis on Private-Public Partnerships to deliver infrastructure is also a challenge. During project planning, confidentiality of commercially sensitive information has often been invoked to withhold key details about project design, toll levels, funding arrangements, and noncompetition clauses. There are incentives for “strategic misrepresentation” by consultants and decision makers in the selection of major transport projects.

**Power imbalances are unavoidable**

Power imbalances are unavoidable. Community engagement runs the risk of hiding power dynamics by neutralising them within the process of communication. Engagement can become a form of manipulation as community groups feel they have a capacity to make changes but are co-opted into supporting projects. Communicative planning is often accused of being naïve and reflecting an impossible ideal.
Strategies for better engagement

Linking infrastructure to broader planning strategies

The recent landscape of infrastructure decisions in Australia has been characterised by see-sawing federal and state policies. For example, the Abbott Government’s 2013 decision to cut funding to public transport projects and subsequent Liberal-led state government decisions to back road megaprojects was a substantial departure from successive metropolitan strategic plans that emphasised public transport. Substantial resources have been invested in developing metropolitan-wide strategic plans that link transport and land use planning in Australia. These plans are based on participatory processes and inclusive public dialogue. Supporting transport projects that do not reflect the values, aspirations and policy priorities in these plans not only negates and ignores the immense work undertaken to prepare them but also is an explicit departure from democratically derived outcomes. While it is often extremely difficult to involve communities in problem framing and abstract discussions about transport need, their voices can be incorporated by reflecting on metropolitan strategies.

Managing the process

Good engagement is about bringing diverse and interdependent people together in situations that allow for authentic dialogue, co-learning and the capacity for meaningful contributions to project outcomes. Decision-making processes should be predictable and transparent. Key documents and data should be universally accessible. Stakeholders should have fair opportunities to provide input and there should be transparent processes for integrating stakeholder contributions into final decisions. It is also important to provide a variety of formats and opportunities to engage. For instance, community members will have different levels of digital and language literacy, different time commitments, different levels of confidence engaging with formal procedures and differing levels of accessibility. Providing a variety of engagement opportunities is fundamental to creating an equitable engagement process.
Technology: an opportunity and a challenge

Advances in technology, including 3D modelling, virtual reality, animated videos, interactive environments, website design and data collection based on community interaction with websites and other digital media, are providing more and more opportunities to engage with hard-to-reach audiences. New technologies also provide a level of clarity that is difficult to achieve in other formats. In particular, online communication is an excellent way of engaging with rural communities that would otherwise have limited opportunities to engage face-to-face with engagement practitioners. Similarly, digital engagement can entice younger community members and is accessible to full-time workers who are often excluded from traditional town hall meetings and community action groups.

3D modelling can instantly answer questions about sightlines, overshadowing and flood impacts. It can convey a range of completely accurate and immediately understandable infrastructure options and allow users to flick between options and provide comment on their preferred solution. Allowing a community member to walk or drive a car through an interactive model of a proposed project can greatly increase clarity about a project. Similarly, advances in participatory mapping are opening up new avenues for citizen inclusion.

Online forums can also raise questions about genuine community engagement and opinions. For instance, one might question the authenticity of anonymous comments written on online forums and question how much capacity there is for meaningful co-learning, conversation and mutual problem-solving within this platform. Digital approaches to engagement are vital in today’s infrastructure environment, but they can never completely replace face-to-face conversation.

Digital approaches to community engagement provide a new suite of tools for inviting input and sharing information. However, they also deliver a new range of ways to co-opt and manipulate engagement outcomes and need to be held to the same standards as more traditional engagement processes.

Partnerships and knowledge-sharing

Partnerships between academia, government and private industry such as the Next Generation Engagement project, present wonderful opportunities to showcase best-practice engagement. Resilient Melbourne’s Pilot Project program, for example, is designed to encourage and academically document best-practice community engagement for developments in Victoria’s capital city. Partnerships like this one, aimed at forming to achieving mutual learning, will be critical to the success of future community engagement.

Associations like IAP2 that provide training and opportunities for networking and knowledge-sharing also reflect this goal. These examples and many others demonstrate the progression of engagement as a practice and research area. Research like the Next Generation Engagement project are also critical to building understanding of best practice to improve community and environmental outcomes from major infrastructure delivery, deliver tools and an evidence base to improve decision making and project outcomes and to support the professionalisation of engagement as a discipline.

Key challenges and opportunities

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References


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