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Abstract
Creative placemaking has become a popular strategy to revitalize distressed neighborhoods. Who is empowered to participate in these projects and in what capacity? Do such efforts reduce or reinforce existing race-class inequities in community development? Drawing on three years of participant observations, interviews with stakeholders, and analyses of project reports, we use Archon Fung's “Democracy Cube” framework to evaluate a creative placemaking initiative in one of the most segregated cities in the United States. We find that over the course of the project, participation patterns shifted from highly diffuse across many individuals with varied roles to highly concentrated, such that only a few individuals maintained knowledge of ongoing developments in the project. We
argue that this shift was not inevitable and discuss strategies that funders and organizations can use to increase equity in placemaking and community development endeavors.

The use of creative placemaking initiatives to revitalize neighborhoods that have suffered decades of disinvestment has grown in popularity in recent years. Such initiatives bring together residents, artists, community-based organizations, and government agencies to activate neglected public and private spaces through arts and cultural projects, often employing participatory decision-making structures to increase the voice and representation of residents. This study examines who is active in envisioning, planning, and implementing creative placemaking projects, and how residents’ perspectives and voices are incorporated through each stage of the process. Who is empowered to participate and in what capacity? Do such efforts reduce or reinforce existing race-class inequities in planning and development?

In answering these questions, we situate creative placemaking within a larger discussion about participatory governance arrangements, cross-sectoral partnerships, and urban inequality. As federal and state aid has fallen, cities have solicited private partners to help them address public problems (see e.g., Reckhow, Downey, and Sapotichne 2020; Stone et al. 2001). Assessing the governing arrangements in U.S. cities, Stone, writes: “Fragmentation stands out” (2019, 1528). In the mix, he continues, are a “varied assortment” of community foundations, advocacy groups, nonprofit service providers, universities, hospitals, and faith-based groups. These actors sometimes pursue their goals independently, but in many cases work alongside local housing and community development agencies.

On the one hand, these network-based, polycentric governing arrangements have created new opportunities for citizen participation (Fischer 2018) that may help strengthen social cohesion and trust (Elwood 2004; Fyfe 2005) and even produce a virtuous circle whereby citizens gain skills and efficacy to become even more active participants in public life (see e.g., Pateman 1970). Such public engagement may also provide an important means to check elite domination (Baiocchi 2005; Fischer 2000; McKay and Warren 2018).

On the other hand, engagement is not the same as empowerment (Fung and Wright 2003). Government or organizational partners may co-op the community (Jessop 2002) or define it in a way that ensures elite agendas go unchallenged (J.R. Levine 2016; McQuarrie 2013). Even scholars who see participation as a means to “give a voice to those without power” note that “participatory governance itself often exists as much or more as a strategy for struggling against political imbalances rather than for counterbalancing them outright” (Fischer 2012, 463). What’s more, this turn toward participatory governance has occurred as the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have taken on increased roles in urban service provision and governing, thus raising questions about transparency, equity, and accountability (J. Levine 2021; Reckhow, Downey, and Sapotichne 2020).

Yet despite broad recognition that non-electoral avenues of local political engagement matter, political scientists have paid much less attention to representation and accountability outside of the ballot box (but see Collins 2018; Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019) or in the context of “nonprofit governance” (but see J. Levine 2021; Reckhow, Downey, and Sapotichne 2020). In this paper, we seek to address this gap by shifting our attention to the local, everyday practices of participatory governance in a cross-sectoral neighborhood development project.
We have chosen a creative placemaking initiative in Milwaukee, Wisconsin as a “typical case” (Seawright and Gerring 2008) of how government agencies, foundations, and community-based organizations engage community members in visioning and redevelopment efforts. However, three features make it an ideal case to study the possibilities of participatory democracy. First, as a creative placemaking project, it brought together a wide diversity of individuals and groups, including residents, artists, city planners, law enforcement, community-based organizations, and local philanthropy. Second, the initiative emphasized the “inclusion of communities that have been left out of the planning process” (Vásquez-Noriega 2018, 1) and intentionally worked to mobilize and engage underrepresented and resource-poor residents. Finally, the project sought to connect two neighborhoods that epitomize the deep race-class divides in U.S. cities. Together, this case study provides an opportunity to examine the challenges such participatory efforts face in addressing and overcoming disparities in political voice and influence, particularly those where nonprofits and philanthropic actors play a central role in decision making. We draw on participant observations over the course of three years; semi-structured interviews of residents, project leaders, city government officials, and community-based organizations; and analyses of project reports and documents to evaluate resident engagement at each stage of the project.

Our article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss how creative placemaking can empower participatory governance. We draw upon Fung’s (2006) “democracy cube” framework to assess creative placemaking along three dimensions of participatory governance: scope of participation, mode of communication and decision, and extent of authority. We then introduce our case study, a creative placemaking initiative that eventually brought community organizations, residents, artists, and government officials together to redevelop an abandoned rail line into a bike trail and park that would link two segregated neighborhoods to one another. We use storyline analysis (Hajer 2003) to trace participants’ perspectives and roles as the initiative evolved from early planning to implementation.

In brief, we find that community members, integrally involved in initial visioning processes, contributed in a very limited fashion to actual planning and decision making. Contrary to some of the critiques of nonprofit governance, however, we find that project leaders and community-based organizations (CBOs) worked diligently to increase the active participation of less advantaged and marginalized residents. We highlight how the initiative successfully empowered residents in planning efforts, identifying the impactful strategies used to bring a diverse set of community stakeholders together around a shared goal. But though residents and CBOs were deeply involved in early work, consultants increasingly gained prominence in decision making and implementation. Overall, participation patterns shifted from highly diffuse across many individuals with varied roles to a highly concentrated network of influence, such that only a few individuals maintained knowledge of ongoing developments in the project.

Why did this shift happen? In the last section, we draw on Swyngedouw’s (2005) critical review of participatory governance to explain how vague definitions of who was a stakeholder, diffuse structures of representation, and the absence of accountability mechanisms combined to produce an unwieldy decision-making process that was eventually sidelined in favor of a more top-down structure that offered residents fewer meaningful opportunities for participation and influence. We conclude, however, that this shift was not inevitable. We argue that though civil society actors were present,
they operated largely in a civic vacuum. Stronger, more autonomous, neighborhood associations would likely have helped overcome each of these limiting factors. Our findings have important implications for other philanthropic-led neighborhood revitalization efforts that privilege the direct participation and engagement of residents.

Creative Placemaking as Empowered Participatory Governance?

Our case study, described in further detail below, is one of several creative placemaking initiatives whose lineage can be traced to a white paper written by Anne Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus for the Mayors’ Institute of City Design, a leadership initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). Markusen and Gadwa write:

In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. In turn, these creative locales foster entrepreneurs and cultural industries that generate jobs and income, spin off new products and services, and attract and retain unrelated businesses and skilled workers. Together, creative placemaking’s livability and economic development outcomes have the potential to radically change the future of American towns and cities (2010, 3).

As suggested by the quote above, creative placemaking captures a broad array of community development activities, so much so that it remains a “fuzzy concept” (Markusen 2013). What distinguishes it from other approaches is its emphasis on bringing the “imaginative power of artists to solve community issues” (Redaelli 2016, 389). Nevertheless, while creative placemaking creates a new role for artists in community development work, these initiatives often pursue broad collaborations with a wide group of stakeholders that span public, non-profit, commercial, and community sectors (Markusen 2013; Nicodemus 2013).

In turn, the ethos at the heart of creative placemaking is one of empowered participatory governance. Community members join artists, bureaucrats, local businesses, nonprofits, and other stakeholders in “collaborative problem-solving” (Markusen 2013, 292). Decision-making is presumed to be inherently bottom-up, driven by community interests and voices, and less so by government authorities or funders. Redaelli writes, “At the heart of these projects is that they are made with the community, rather than for the community: they are collaborative, organic, and iterative” (2018, 405, italics added).

In theory, we argue that creative placemaking should be considered as an effort at empowered participatory governance, in which individuals “have substantial and equal opportunities to participate directly in decisions that affect them” (Fung 2006, 3). Local autonomy is privileged over centralized authority, with efforts made to include voices from underserved groups.

At the same time, however, patterns of civic engagement and public speech remain stratified by class, race, ethnicity, and gender (see e.g., Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). Fung (2006) identifies “accountable autonomy” as one institutional design that can help address such power imbalances. Here, a centralized agency or actor works together with residents and other community stakeholders in the decision-making process to help ensure more equitable opportunities
for engagement and action. The central authority—be it a government agency, nonprofit, or foundation—can provide critical external support, such as financing or expertise, and help hold participants accountable through external evaluations and interventions. The key is to connect struggling neighborhoods to sources of external support without diluting participatory decision making or reinforcing existing disparities in political voice and power. As Fung notes, “support and accountability are two pillars of a reconstructed relationship between central power and neighborhood action that can reinforce local autonomy” (2006, 6).

As we will discuss, the creative placemaking initiative we studied developed a participatory governance structure that initially supported “accountable autonomy.” There were sustained efforts to engage a broad cross-section of community members and encourage their participation in planning efforts. Project leaders—grant-funded consultants hired by a prominent local foundation—provided technical expertise and resources, facilitated community conversations, and guided the initiative's activities. The goal of our research study was to examine such efforts in close detail to better understand whether the initiative was able to sustain the participatory goals first articulated in initial community meetings and the factors explaining the effort's strengths and weaknesses.

Evaluating Participatory Governance: The Democracy Cube Framework

Participatory governance covers a wide range of institutional possibilities. Archon Fung's “democracy cube” framework provides a way to assess and compare disparate institutional arrangements by examining participation along three dimensions: scope of participation, mode of communication and decision, and extent of authority.¹

Scope of Participation. Public participation is often prioritized when a central authority is presumed to be deficient in addressing the problem at hand (Fung 2006). But even when such public engagement is valued, the scope of participation can vary widely. Is the effort open to all, or are representatives, such as community-based organizations, presumed to speak for neighborhood interests? Are efforts made to selectively recruit underrepresented voices? Are all important perspectives included? Participant selection can be arranged along a continuum from more exclusive to more inclusive to create the first dimension of the democracy cube (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Participant selection methods.](Adapted from Fung (2006, 68).)
Mode of Communication and Decision. Once participants are selected, the second dimension of the democracy cube examines how participants communicate with one another, and how their voices are incorporated into decision-making processes. Fung begins with the deliberative ideal, informed by the New England town meeting, but notes that “the vast majority of institutionalized public discussions do not occur in this way, nor it is clear that they should” (Fung 2006, 68). Like participant selection, modes of communication and decision making vary widely across institutional arrangements. Community members might act as silent spectators or be given the opportunity to express their thoughts and preferences in public comments. Alternatively, decision making may be structured to encourage collective choice. For example, participants might spend time “exchanging perspectives, experiences and reasons with one another to develop their views and discover their interests” (69). Figure 2 arranges these modes of communication and decision making along a single dimension, from the least intense to the most intense, where intensity speaks to the investments, knowledge, and commitments required of the participants.

![Figure 2. Modes of communication and decision.](image)

Adapted from Fung (2006, 69).

Authority and Power. The third dimension of the democracy cube explores the link between public participation and public policy and action—that is, how much influence the public has on the outcomes of the decision-making process. In many instances of public participation, participants have little authority or influence; rather, they participate out of a sense of civic obligation, commitment to the public good, or desire to become more informed about matters of public importance. Communicative influence occurs in instances when officials or civic leaders revise decisions based on public comment and testimony. In co-governing partnerships, community members work directly with elites to create policies and develop strategies to address issues. At the highest level of empowerment, participants may exert direct authority over the decision-making process and available resources. Figure 3 arranges these types of influence and power along a single dimension, from the least to most authoritative.
We can put these dimensions together into a three-dimensional space, or democracy cube, to represent the diversity of “institutional design choices according to which varieties of participatory mechanisms can be located and contrasted with more professionalized arrangements” (Fung 2006, 70). In our configuration, the volume of the cube produced reflects the diversity of participation, intensiveness of communication, and extent of authority and power such that a larger cube suggests more public engagement in each dimension. We use this configuration of Fung's democracy cube framework to trace the evolution of the Beerline Trail Neighborhood Development Project over three years. We describe the details of our case study and methods below.

Case Study: Beerline Trail Neighborhood Development Project

Milwaukee remains one of the most segregated cities in the United States (Massey and Tannen 2015; Reardon and Bischoff 2011). Perhaps no other street captures the stark race-class disparities in Milwaukee better than Holton Street, which separates the Harambee (85% African-American) and Riverwest (20% African-American) neighborhoods. The Beerline Trail crosses the divide between Harambee and Riverwest, running north-south along the western side of the Milwaukee River. An abandoned railroad line that once transported hops to Milwaukee's breweries, it was named the Beerline Trail in 2011 as a homage to that past, though some residents in Harambee—a neighborhood that has its own storied history in Milwaukee's civil rights movement (Jones 2009)—take issue with the name.

Since 2002, the City of Milwaukee has spent over $1 million on physical trail improvements, including clearing railroad tracks, making the right-of-way accessible to neighborhoods, and creating a paved trail. Facing limited resources to support trail enhancements and the creation of a linear park, the city leveraged philanthropic dollars to activate an undeveloped segment of the trail that residents in both neighborhoods widely considered a nuisance (City of Milwaukee 2019). In line with the growing prevalence of cross-sectoral partnerships in cities across the country, Milwaukee partnered with local organizations to secure private funding to revitalize this public space.
Some of the early work on this segment of the trail, however, was first initiated by a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) urbanist. Living in Riverwest at the time, “Noah” was concerned about the rhetoric surrounding the Harambee neighborhood: “I moved to Riverwest in 2009 and lived on Wright Street. Over the course of changing roommates, 90% of the time the main question asked was ‘what side of Holton [a street that separates Riverwest from Harambee] is your house on?’ … That predicament was so blatantly racist that I had a hard time understanding it.”

Noah led a network of DIY urbanists to form an organization, described as a “social + spatial network improvising spaces to build community” (Project narrative), and began to work on the undeveloped segment of the trail in the summer of 2012. The group added art installations created from repurposed industrial materials and defined gathering spaces (tables, lighting) to the area. Although such DIY efforts were welcomed by some community members, others objected that the new additions looked “junky” (field notes). Although the art installations fit Riverwest's aesthetic, they contrasted sharply with the brightly colored murals and motifs that celebrated Harambee’s African-American heritage. Some Harambee residents noted that the recycled materials looked too much like the discarded tires and trash that used to be dumped along the trail.

The city and a prominent local foundation took interest in these efforts and proposed a creative placemaking project that would complete infrastructure improvements on the trail, more directly engage residents, and create a robust network of stakeholders who could bring additional resources to the initiative. A new partnership, which included the city, a local foundation, and community-based organizations, applied for and received funding from ArtPlace America for a “Creative Trails” project in 2013. The dirt path was paved into a ten-foot wide asphalt trail (completed in 2015), and grant funds helped pay for a number of other trail installations, including an on-site alternative learning space, a community table, performance stages, sculptures, and trail signage and lighting.

In 2014, the partnership received another creative placemaking grant from the Kresge Foundation for a comprehensive neighborhood development initiative. The project’s goal was to “sustain and enrich the lives of people in Harambee and Riverwest by promoting health, well-being and prosperity through increased circulation of resources, voices, ideas, labor and creativity” (Greater Milwaukee Committee 2016). A new leadership team took over to unify the project and systematically engage residents. This more formalized structure created some tension between the grant-funded project leadership and Noah's organization, with the latter eventually leaving the project. As this DIY project transitioned into a formal grant-funded collaborative initiative, the difficulty would become balancing community engagement with the demands of external stakeholders. Project leaders recognized this challenge from the outset and worked to design an institutional structure that would directly involve community members in planning and decision-making processes.

We began our study of the Beerline Trail Neighborhood Development Project (hereafter termed “Beerline Trail Project”) in early 2015 when the initiative officially launched under the direction of new (Kresge-funded) leadership. Framing our study as an interpretive policy case study, we sought to understand the processes of decision making in the Beerline Trail Project in terms of how they were understood by groups of participants, or interpretive communities (Yanow 2015; Yin 2017). Accordingly, over the next three years, we attended and documented meetings and events in field notes. We also collected artifacts including meeting handouts, reports, online communications, and
other representations. Finally, as the community-engaged portion of the project began to wind down, we interviewed eleven participants.

In the course of data collection and initial analysis, we identified two pivotal processes in the project: Strategic Action, beginning in February 2015, and Designer Selection, beginning in August 2016. The Strategic Action process began with a conference that appeared to launch an inclusive community-engaged neighborhood revitalization project organized through the activities of stakeholder working groups. However, this design was revised and tightened in subsequent meetings when participation was reorganized into five initiative areas. The Designer Selection process began in early 2016 with a request for qualifications (RFQ) announcement and culminated with the selection of a Landscape Design Architect to coordinate the construction of a linear community park along the trail.

Through our own observations and informal conversations with participants, we identified these processes and their outcomes as central artifacts in the Beerline Trail Project due to the significance and contested meanings attributed to each process in participants’ descriptions of the project (Yanow 2000). Interview participant selection initially highlighted individuals who were identified through both participant observation and informal conversation as influential in decision making. Using snowball sampling methods (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), we proceeded by asking each interviewee to recommend additional participants who could offer insight into the Beerline Trail Project process and/or decision making. Because participants tended to recommend influential members of leadership committees on this small project, we quickly reached saturation, with recommendations for further participation identifying previously interviewed participants and perspectives provided largely reflecting those already existing in our dataset.

Our analysis produced themes resonant with the dimensions of Fung’s (2006) democracy cube. Accordingly, we entered the second phase of coding in which we considered transcripts and documents in relation to the insights offered into participant selection, modes of communication, and extent of authority and power granted to participants in decision making. We produced “democracy cubes” representing citizen engagement at the beginning and end of each process as described by participant experiences and our own observations.

Results

Strategic Action Session and Work Teams
In February 2015, project-funded consultants led 65 participants, including community members and leaders, business owners, city agency representatives, artists, and nonprofit staff in a two-day Strategic Action Session (SAS). Participants had in-depth conversations about the needs of the community and debated potential directions for the project. Ultimately, participants settled on seven work groups, supported by a project leadership structure that would help guide and facilitate collaboration.

In these early months, participation in the Beerline Trail Project resembled a “mini-public” (Fung 2006). SAS participants were selectively recruited to share their concerns about and visions for the trail. As noted in the project’s SAS document:

The social diversity of the participants was a core asset to the SAS process. Key stakeholders from a wide array of backgrounds and disciplines, working together, created an opportunity to address
more than just the structural and financial components of the neighborhoods. The group was also able to tackle challenging issues that underlie community development work in Milwaukee: race, equity, economic disparity, youth engagement, and collaboration across political and organizational silos (17).

The importance of equitable participation was a common theme in our interviews. As one project consultant told us, “we’ve been careful to try to maintain the engagement among people who have agency as well as people who do not have agency in these decision-making processes and make sure that all of those voices are represented.” Project leaders carefully curated invitations to specific representative stakeholders, community leaders, and residents. Though many Riverwest residents were connected to the work given previous activism, engaging residents in Harambee was more challenging. A smaller CBO in Harambee played an intermediary role in reaching out to residents in that neighborhood. Overall, SAS participants represented a broad cross-section of the two neighborhoods, and many continued to participate in planning efforts over the next six months. Given the resource advantages among Riverwest residents, this kind of “open, targeted recruitment” resulted in a more inclusive set of participants.

Once selected, participants in the SAS spent two days in intense and sometimes difficult conversations regarding racism, segregation, inequality, and other important issues within the neighborhoods. Participants identified neighborhood needs, learned about others’ perspectives, and worked to create a shared vision for the project. As one participant observed, “… I just think it’s a really tough part of the work and you can get really emotional about it. But to have space for those conversations, let people get mad sometimes, let them feel like they need to leave for a little while and come back. Just make a space for them to come back to and feel heard and build real relationships.”

Open communication was encouraged during the SAS, and the priorities that were defined by SAS participants came to structure further interactions. Thus, in the first several months of the initiative, modes of communication could be characterized in Fung’s framework as “deliberation and negotiation.” Although professional consultants facilitated conversations, priorities were established through a bottom-up process. Participants felt empowered to voice their views on what the community needed and joined project workgroups that allowed them to contribute their skills and knowledge in shaping project goals and actions. A representative of the funding foundation and SAS participant shared the following in an interview:

I think the strategic actioning session was a really pivotal point. Those sessions can be really emotional and raw and I think it allows for really honest, it takes maybe a day to get there, but it allows for really generous and honest conversations to happen for people and kind of some airing of grievances, but also a path forward in that you leave being like I know what I’m going to do next and I know I can make a difference in the work.

Following the SAS, residents began to identify areas outside of the physical trail that could be positively impacted through the project. Issues such as increased property values, neighborhood safety, youth engagement, and entrepreneurship opportunities were added as potential project outcomes. In short order, participants began to expand the project beyond the development of the trail. As one participant told us,
... everyone began to realize that it wasn’t just building a trail, it was can we develop makers spaces, can we have more entrepreneurial initiatives, can we find ways to do work force development for people who are out of work, are there ways that this could also help to stabilize housing in the area, how many resources do we need to develop this into to help build something that’s tethered to the community and responsive to it at the same time?

Rather than focusing on the immediate task of developing the trail, residents and others focused on community revitalization itself, with the trail becoming a small part of a much larger vision. Project leaders did little to re-focus participants’ attentions, and over the next several months’ residents, community leaders, nonprofit organizations, and city planners met in their chosen workgroups to brainstorm, debate ideas, and create action plans. The working groups continued the participatory governance structure of the larger SAS meeting. Groups were self-selected from a larger targeted representative group, participants deliberated and negotiated among each other, and it appeared that each group would have some authority over project outcomes. In this way, the working group structure kept the co-governing aspect of the project intact. Situating the first six months of the initiative within the democracy cube framework (Figure 4), we find that participation was inclusive, deliberation and negotiation were encouraged, and authority and power were given to participants through a co-governing structure. In these ways, project leadership had created a participatory structure that supported accountable autonomy.

**Figure 4.** Democracy cube: strategic action session.
In July 2015, after close to six months of collaborative planning, project participants convened at a follow-up session. Some participants expected that the groups would present their plans to the leadership team. At least one group had put together a budget request. Contrary to these expectations, project leaders explained that the working groups would transition into new initiative areas. Cards identifying each new initiative area were displayed on a series of round tables and participants were encouraged to find the table that spoke to their group’s work and interests.

This transition was very challenging for some participants to understand. Although the seven initiative areas maintained some consistency with the priorities established during the SAS, they did not directly incorporate the working groups’ efforts. Leaders also altered accepted modes of communication and decision making. Rather than directly informing project planning, resident participation was now limited to attendance at quarterly meetings where residents were given updates on the project.

Some participants we spoke to described confusion about the need for such a shift in participatory structure and expressed concerns about losing influence on project outcomes. Several left or become increasingly disengaged from the project. As one participant explained to us: “I think it kind of came down to like a lack of decision-making authority that prevented people from getting more involved because you know they came and [gave] their input but then they don’t have much say in how things work after that.”

However, in contrast to some organizations and residents who described this period as a time of poor communication and frustration, others described it as all a part of the natural progression of the project. Reflecting on the declining resident engagement, one project consultant told us:

... the duration of this, it’s harder to maintain that critical mass of momentum. People who have economic security and have that agency want development to happen a lot faster. People who don’t have those resources don’t stay connected for a long process, their lives get busy or they are not necessarily in the area. So, I think one of the difficulties has been maintaining that critical mass as we’ve been moving forward, and maintaining funding resources as well.

Community organizers tended to straddle these two perspectives, acknowledging how the challenges facing residents limited their participation, while also pointing out the ongoing interest in activities and events on the trail. Indeed, community organizers—some funded by the grant and others representing organizations—continued to reach out to residents, going door-to-door and to local businesses to talk about the project and solicit resident feedback. These organizing efforts largely ran parallel to project planning and implementation. To further illustrate this shift in participatory governance, we describe another critical milestone in the project: the selection of a landscape design architect.

Selection of the Landscape Design Architect
Only one of the seven initiative areas gained traction and funding as the project evolved: the creation of a “neighbor-centric park” along the trail extension. Project leaders, along with a few residents, began the planning for the linear park by visiting places that had implemented similar projects. Project leaders reported on their visits and offered their reflections at open public sessions. Leaders then developed a list of possible landscape architects based on their own research as well as recommendations they received from other community-based organizations.
In 2016, the project's leadership team put out an RFQ to the pre-selected landscape design architects. The call for RFQs rather than a request for proposals was purposeful: project leaders told us that they wanted to ensure that the finalists would interact with the community to create a collaborative vision for the space rather than simply telling them what they were going to create. Project consultants then used the RFQs to narrow the field down to three finalists.

In August 2016, project leaders invited city officials, prominent community members, and residents to attend a Designer Experience Day during which each of the three selected finalists facilitated a 90-minute workshop to develop a vision for the neighbor-centric linear park. Local resident participation was limited to the Designer Experience Day. Only a few key stakeholders were involved in the actual decision-making process, including project consultants who conducted a nationwide search, an advisory committee of individuals from outside of Milwaukee who had familiarity with creative placemaking initiatives, and a steering committee that was responsible for the final selection. When placed within the democracy cube framework, participation moved from open-targeted recruitment (inclusive) to professional stakeholders (exclusive).

Modes of communication also shifted away from the two-way conversation that characterized the SAS and early workgroup meetings. Instead, residents were first asked to listen as spectators and then invited to express their preferences in surveys that project consultants administered at events held on the trail. Project leaders then synthesized this community input and relayed it to the steering committee. Project leaders saw their roles as intermediaries, speaking for the community in residents’ absence from these discussions. As one consultant told us, “... the people who were tasked with making the selection were mindful of the people for whom they were selecting for, which was the community at large.” Overall, however, residents had few opportunities to engage in intensive conversations with each other or with the finalists.

After the landscape architect was selected, residents and other community stakeholders were invited to a meeting where they were asked to provide feedback to help flesh out the design of the park. We attended this meeting and observed some missed opportunities to engage residents in decision-making processes. This meeting took place in a large open loft space. In the middle of the room was a long table with a map on it to represent the trail. Round tables were scattered around it where participants first sat and listened to the architect’s presentation and then engaged in small group discussions. Project leaders asked participants to imagine what they would like to see on the trail and encouraged them to write their idea on a post-it note, attach it to a small wooden block, and place it on the imagined trail. Participants moved around the room, talked to one another, and reacted to what others placed on the “trail.” In this way, the meeting resembled the early meetings where residents engaged one another's ideas. But while it was an active and relatively deliberative process, project leaders did not appear to collect or synthesize the conversations, and it was unclear how this information was ultimately conveyed to the landscape architect.

For example, several residents talked about the lack of fresh food options in the neighborhood and placed blocks down on the trail to represent where fruit trees and community gardens could be planted. Observing the broad interest in urban agriculture, one resident turned to another and noted that educational efforts would need to be part of the plan. She had lived in the neighborhood a long time and loved to garden but said that she always used raised bed gardens to grow vegetables because...
of widespread soil contamination. Her local knowledge was in line with expert opinion. Just a few tables over, in one of the notebooks of supplemental information the project leaders had assembled for the group, was a map showing the concentrations of heavy metals and other contaminants that had been detected in the soils. Yet her comment was made in passing to another participant. At no point were there efforts to discuss and elaborate on community ideas.

Figure 5. Democracy cube: selection of landscape architect.

Not surprisingly, the shift in communication that occurred between the SAS and landscape design architect selection extended to the amount of influence community members had over project development. Although there were co-governing opportunities early in the project, power and authority were eventually reduced to communicative influence. Some residents did express their preferences about desired amenities through surveys and, to a lesser extent, at meetings. But the ultimate direction of the project was in the hands of a steering committee, which as one participant noted,

... was really tasked with trying to help shore up the advice of the advisors, and it was a more narrowly selected group of people who were associated with the project or tied to development regionally or locally. So those two committees, the advisory group just advised and the steering committee made the selection.

Indeed, in July 2018, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), an intermediary organization that pools resources and links organizations to advance neighborhood development efforts, announced another RFQ on “behalf of the Beerline Trail Project Leadership Team”—this time for a management consultant who would “lead the effort to facilitate the regular convening of key stakeholders, create a formalized Equitable Implementation Plan ... and coordinate the implementation of trail-related projects.” The RFQ continued:

Community engagement including the presence of intergenerational neighborhood leadership has run throughout and shaped all aspects of the Beerline Trail Project .... At this point in the project, there is concern regarding ‘plan fatigue’ and a well-developed desire to translate previous
engagement into action and outcomes based in equity for all neighbors. Therefore, the amount of new resident and other neighbor engagement activities expected to occur in conjunction with the development of the Equitable Implementation Plan is limited.\(^4\)

In many ways, this statement is a fitting summary of the project's attempts at participatory governance. The creative placemaking initiative invited a diverse group of residents, community leaders, and organizations to come together to devise a broad neighborhood revitalization strategy. But in the end, project leaders struggled to move this engagement from the planning and visioning stages to project development and implementation. It had to hire someone to move the project forward to the next stage, and residents would have no clear role in these efforts. Project leaders assumed that residents had finite resources to contribute and that their participation would need to be time-bound. Community input—collected and archived—would be available to project consultants if they asked for it.

Combining all three dimensions (participation, communication, and decision making), Figure 5 illustrates what participatory governance looked like nearly three years after the creative placemaking initiative was launched. What had initially been a more inclusive and participatory structure, eventually came to resemble a more traditional, top-down structure of governance and decision making, represented by a cube narrowed in every dimension.

Discussion
Throughout the project, we observed concerted efforts to engage neighborhood residents. Community organizers were key project leaders and prioritized mobilizing harder-to-reach populations, including younger and low-income residents. Many of these organizers were artists themselves and used their creative talents to connect with community members, such as through storytelling and community art projects. But as time went on, the leadership team struggled to maintain the participatory structure it had established in the first few months after the SAS, and community engagement work became increasingly disconnected from project planning and implementation. Although community organizers and consultants continued their outreach as the project progressed, they abandoned the strategy, first employed at the SAS, of getting residents to talk to one another about their desired outcomes of the Beerline Trail project. Reflecting on how the project evolved over time, one participant suggested to us that the project might have been better served by returning to its DIY roots. When we noted that some residents had been skeptical of the guerilla-style approach, the participant agreed that the early work did not always reflect what residents wanted. Ultimately, however, he could not imagine how to combine the grassroots energy that characterized the DIY initiative with the purpose and resources provided by the more formalized grant structure.

Was an alternative possible? Reflecting on the turn toward governance arrangements “beyond the state,” Swyngedouw (2005) notes that stakeholder ambiguity, diffuse structures of representation, and lack of accountability mechanisms can undermine participatory efforts. These factors do help to explain the trajectory of public engagement in the Beerline Trail project, reflected in the diminishing volumes of the “democracy cubes” presented above. First, although project leaders curated a very intentional list of individuals to participate in the SAS, there was also an implicit tension with restricting participation in this way: while it helped channel a representative collection of perspectives into a set
of defined project goals, it was hard to maintain this focus once the initiative was opened up to the broader public. Not wanting to exclude anyone from the project, the initiative soon became all things to all people, setting up unrealistic expectations for what could be accomplished given the project's budget. But such stakeholder ambiguity was relatively easy to address. Indeed, as the project progressed, leaders did address this stakeholder ambiguity by more clearly articulating the project's programmatic scope and budgetary constraints, though these limitations could have been communicated from the very beginning.

Second, although polycentric structures of representation can help disperse power and create new opportunities for marginalized groups to participate, we also observed how they can produce an impoverished form of participation. In the case of the Beerline Trail project, residents were given the semblance of voice in later stages of the process—invited to give their comments at meetings or to take a quick five-minute survey on the trail—but how their input was aggregated or translated for the project leadership team was never communicated to participants. Several participants told us they felt that too many resources were going to pay for project consultants and not toward neighborhood improvements. However, to our knowledge, few of these concerns were eventually communicated to the project leadership team.5

Finally, it was difficult for participants to hold leaders or funders accountable for their budget priorities or to engage in public debate about the direction of the project. Though the Beerline Trail is a public space, and its physical improvements were financed with public dollars, the creative placemaking initiative itself was funded by private, philanthropic dollars. However, this distinction was not always obvious to residents. The City of Milwaukee, for example, remained on the cross-sectoral leadership team and issued public reports on the project's progress (see e.g., City of Milwaukee 2019). That said, although there were no formal channels of representation and accountability, the inclusion of residents and responsiveness to neighborhood concerns were stated priorities of the project. We observed concerted efforts by consultants and project leaders to engage residents in both neighborhoods. But by extending our research over time, we were also able to observe how patterns and forms of participation changed and thus assess the underlying dynamics underpinning these shifts in engagement.

Indeed, although the limits to participatory governance arrangements outlined by Swyngedouw (2005) were present, they do not sufficiently explain how community engagement unfolded over the course of the project. Rather, we argue that the Beerline Trail project struggled to maintain its participatory structure because it largely operated in a civic vacuum. On the surface, this expansive creative placemaking initiative engaged a wide range of residents, nonprofits, government agencies, and civic leaders. But underneath, there were no mass-membership groups that independently organized residents or connected them in ways in which they could wield influence and power. Residents’ connections to the project depended upon the intentions of project leaders and the efforts of project-funded community organizers. These community-organizing efforts, in the end, had very little organizational infrastructure to build upon. Moreover, because the community was not independently organized, it did not speak with a single loud voice, which in turn made it difficult for the artists and project leaders to find clear direction in their engagement work.
Differences across four organizations that were involved (to varying degrees) in the Beerline Trail project help to illustrate the gaps in the underlying civic foundation. The key (and largest) CBO involved in the project was a community development corporation (CDC), which was tapped to serve as the fiscal agent and one of the four project leads. In many ways, it made sense for this CDC to take on this role: it was centrally located within the planning area and had a strong reputation for neighborhood economic development. But as a CDC, it had less experience in community organizing and generally relied upon its AmeriCorps volunteers and a smaller CBO in Harambee to conduct community outreach efforts. In contrast, Riverwest had an active neighborhood association as well as its own local radio show and neighborhood paper, which made it easier to connect and communicate with residents. Thus, while the highly curated list of invitations to the SAS helped ensure that Riverwest residents were not overrepresented in the initial visioning discussions, the organizational and social capital differences between the two neighborhoods became more apparent once the project began to move outside the confines of the SAS.

A fourth neighborhood association, however, suggests that these differences in organizational capacity and social capital were not just a function of resource differences between the Harambee and Riverwest neighborhoods. One neighborhood association located further from the planning area, on the western edge of the Harambee neighborhood, offered some early criticism on how resources were being spent on the Beerline Trail project. Residents in this neighborhood association were well connected to one another and had a long history of organizing around community development efforts. The engagement of this group exemplified how an organized community could speak up with one voice. However, because the neighborhood association existed at the margins of the Beerline Trail planning area, they were never actively involved in project planning or implementation. Nevertheless, the presence of a neighborhood group that was able to identify and communicate a critique of the project suggests that the quiescence from many Harambee residents reflected as much (if not more) a lack of autonomous capacity to organize residents in the neighborhood.

Thus, we argue that those interested in creative placemaking (and other participatory planning efforts) should give careful attention to whether the underlying civic foundation can adequately support such governing arrangements. To be clear, we are not suggesting that foundations and other funders avoid projects in communities with less organizational capacity, which would only serve to widen disparities in public goods provision and related investments. Rather, where the civic infrastructure is relatively weak, we argue that sustained efforts and resources are needed to shore it up. For example, progress reports could include critical reflections on engagement efforts, identifying areas of weakness, and outlining action steps to address them. Similarly, project leaders might ask whether structures and expectations for engagement continue to fit the scope of the project. Resources could also be earmarked for activities designed to build social capital within the community. Outside groups may not be able to build grassroots power, but they can help strengthen civic relationships.

Again, the Beerline Trail project offers some insights into how this might be done. Consider the SAS, which brought together a diverse group of residents, community leaders, and organizations together to discuss race-class subjugation in Milwaukee, including the history and consequences of racist planning practices and the everyday experiences of racial and economic exclusion. Those we spoke to all noted that these were uncomfortable conversations that helped build trust among participants and
gave a sense of purpose to the creative placemaking initiative. This was not just a talk. In the months after the SAS, groups of residents worked with artists, organizations, project consultants, and planners to develop strategies and priorities. However, without an autonomous, organized group of residents to help lead (and check) the effort, it was difficult for project leaders to sustain these bottom-up, participatory decision-making processes, which were eventually sidelined in favor of a more top-down approach. As a result, the initiative shifted to more traditional forms of community engagement, from open forums where residents received updates from project leaders to community surveys administered by project consultants.

It is possible that the leadership team could have focused more attention on power-building efforts. For example, they might have sustained the working groups that emerged following the SAS, refocusing efforts around the development of the linear park. Relationships were formed and nurtured during this time, but momentum and social capital were lost after the project shifted to a different organizational structure. In this way, the project could have organized residents as groups rather than as individuals. Instead, many hoped that the creativity expressed in the project would engage residents and expand opportunities for their participation. In the end, individuals and their families did come to create and recreate on the trail, but they did so largely as consumers, rather than as co-creators, of a revitalized public good.

Conclusion

Many cities and funders have turned to creative placemaking approaches to engage residents in neighborhood revitalization efforts. In this article, we adapt Fung's “democracy cube” framework to evaluate one such effort in Milwaukee. In 2015, a CDC and a local foundation partnered with the City to launch the Beerline Trail Neighborhood Development project. Over the next three years, we followed the evolution of this project through participant observation, interviews, and analyses of project reports. In the beginning, we argue that this initiative could be characterized as empowered participatory governance. A representative group of residents were involved and had meaningful opportunities to shape the direction of the project. However, over time, we also observed how participation patterns, modes of communication, and extent of influence shifted, such that by the end of the project it resembled a more traditional, top-down, community development project. We conclude that the absence of an autonomous, mass-member organization that could have held project leaders and funders accountable and provided direction to the project hindered participatory governance in practice. Project leaders, consultants, and artists largely operated in a civic vacuum. Thus, despite their ongoing commitments to resident engagement, they ultimately favored decision-making processes characterized by community consultation rather than empowerment.

To be sure, the award-winning project did accomplish many of its goals (see Vásquez-Noriega 2018). The trail is now paved and adorned with public art pieces. Residents do recreate on the trail in ways that they never had, drawn to the trail itself, the surrounding art and green space, and the park programing that now activates the formerly neglected and underutilized area. Community events and pop-ups have brought residents from the Harambee and Riverwest neighborhoods together. But our findings also suggest that the project was less successful at empowering residents in decision-making processes, and as a result, has fallen short of its own goal to “amplify local voices.”
Our research underscores the importance of a community's civic infrastructure, particularly the presence of mass-membership organizations, to participatory governance. In the case of the Beerline Trail project, such organizations were lacking. Although project funders and leaders prioritized community engagement, residents were generally engaged as individuals, not as organized neighborhoods, thereby making it difficult to sustain participation over an extended period. Eventually, participatory decision-making processes were reined in, creating a vicious cycle in which residents, who could have served in leadership capacities, felt disenfranchised and withdrew from the project, thereby creating even greater incentives for a more top-down governing structure.

In this study, we leveraged temporal and geographic variation to trace patterns of community engagement within a creative placemaking initiative. The project we have studied shares several similarities with community development efforts in other U.S. cities, including its reliance on cross-sectoral partnerships and philanthropic funding (see e.g., Thomson 2021) and stated commitments to community engagement and inclusive development (see e.g., J. Levine 2021). However, our analysis is limited to a single case study. Future research could extend our theoretical framework, which draws heavily on Archon Fung’s “democracy cube,” to evaluate other creative placemaking or related initiatives. We see the particular benefit in employing comparative case studies to test our inferences about the relationship between participatory governance arrangements and strong, autonomous neighborhood organizations. Finally, we echo calls for nonprofit and philanthropic actors to pay more attention to “the ability of constituencies to organize into durable, and effective, mass-member organizations capable of exercising power” (Rahman and Gilman 2019, 81). Indeed, in recent years, the philanthropic community has taken up such issues of inequality, power, and accountability (see e.g., Giloth 2019; Kent 2017; WINGS 2019). Despite finding an erosion of influence over time in the Beerline Trail project, we nevertheless continue to see an opportunity for community organizers to empower residents through creative placemaking. In the end, the project mobilized (for some time) two highly segregated neighborhoods around a shared goal of inclusive development, and these efforts bore fruit in new neighborhood amenities. Importantly, the project’s early work could be a model for future creative placemaking initiatives or other participatory cross-sectoral partnerships. In highlighting these strengths and weaknesses, we hope to show how our framework could be used by funders and community organizations to assess their own development efforts and identify strategies to sustain grassroots engagement and influence.

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Footnotes
1. Fung's “democracy cube” is an analytic tool that builds upon previous research on participatory democracy, such as Sherry Arnstein's “ladder of citizen participation” (Arnstein 1969).
2. Property values, for example, are 4 to 5 times higher in Riverwest than in Harambee.

3. The leadership team includes the City of Milwaukee, a local foundation, a CDC, LISC Milwaukee, and a creative placemaking consultant.


5. Consequently, the leadership team did not have the opportunity to address these perceptions. It is, of course, quite possible that resource allocations were reasonable for the scope of the work and that additional communication would have assuaged these concerns.

6. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for raising this concern.

7. During our research, we observed how organizations in Milwaukee have nurtured civic relationships by creating block clubs and sponsoring social gatherings where residents talk to one another about neighborhood issues.

8. Given the civic vacuum that existed, the creation of social capital was an important (and perhaps underappreciated) outcome during the first year of the project, particularly given how unequal social capital formation can be in highly segregated places (see e.g., Wichowsky 2019).


References


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