

From Radical to Professional

*The Unspoken Link Between
Community Architecture and Co-Design*

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Declaration

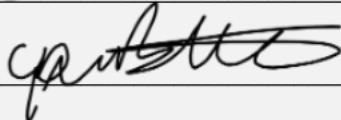
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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>The Radical Spirit of Community Architecture</i>	5
<i>Co-Design: The Professional Evolution</i>	12
<i>Compromise and Loss</i>	17
<i>Conclusion</i>	21
<i>Bibliography</i>	24

◦

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Annie's Loo, One of the First Tenement Retrofits (Neil 2023)</i>	5
<i>Figure 2: A typical consultation at Lymington and Pennington Town Council (Lymington and Pennington Town Council 2014)</i>	6
<i>Figure 3: Coin Street Housing (Coin Street Community Builders 2020)</i>	7
<i>Figure 4: Authors adaptation of Arnsteins's Ladder of Participation (Pimblett 2024, Arnstein 1968, Martell 2024)</i>	9
<i>Figure 5: Don Norman (Norman 2023)</i>	12
<i>Figure 6: A Sample Social Media Post from the CfCI Project (Centre for Civic Innovation 2024)</i>	15
<i>Figure 7: CfCI's Project Timeline (Centre for Civic Innovation 2023a)</i>	19
<i>Figure 8: A Typical Co-Design Process (Elbers et al. 2021)</i>	19

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Introduction

Once a radical challenge to top-down planning, 'Community Architecture' has transitioned to the current trend of 'Co-Design', with the latter becoming more accepted by corporations and governments. Community Architecture began by passing design decisions to communities, shifting the power from architects to users. The movement helped the voices of people directly impacted by development be heard and even be central to the process. Co-Design, an evolution of User Centred Design, has emerged as another engagement method in architecture and urban planning. However, as Co-Design becomes more integrated into governmental and corporate agendas, it risks losing the radical spirit that drove its predecessor, limiting itself to being a tokenistic practice.

This essay examines the meaning of Community Architecture and Co-Design, comparing their similarities, differences, and the impact of Co-Design's professional acceptance. Using case study comparisons, the essay will question whether Co-Design can still reach the crux of participation whilst enjoying the benefits of corporate acceptance. Can communities still be empowered in this new, professional setting?

The Radical Spirit of Community Architecture

The Community Architecture movement was born in the UK – the Local Trust even argues that the earliest Community Architecture came from the University of Strathclyde, out of the ASSIST organisation in 1969 (Wates and Knevitt 1987, p.29, Local Trust 2024, Young 2010). ASSIST used participation to help the tenants in Govan improve their homes, adding internal toilets and improving kitchens, which therefore saved the tenement block from demolition.



Figure 1: Annie's Loo, One of the First Tenement Retrofits

Wates (1999) defines Community Architecture simply as “Architecture carried out with the active participation of the end users.” Woolley (1985) expands the definition, explaining that Community Architecture emerged from a dissatisfaction with what has come previously, felt strongest in user groups who engage in direct conversation between the occupants of the building and their designers.

To describe this further, it's necessary to review the wider context in which the movement occurred. At the time, residents were settling into new homes after a

national trend of slum clearances and their replacement with high rises, which were often enforced without listening to the requests of those affected. “For many, slum clearance came to mean a forcible displacement to an unfamiliar high rise flat – a ‘prison in the sky’ – without friends or relations nearby” write Paris and Blackaby (1979, p.18). This lack of regard left communities distrustful of traditional architects and planners, and instead searching for a new type of professional to help solve their on-the-ground problems. This demand was met by radical young architects, willing to push against their traditional education to follow what they felt was socially correct.

The process of Community Architecture works by increasing the number of steps a project takes up the Ladder of Participation (Arnstein 1968, see Fig. 4). Most work currently sits at the “consultation” level of the ladder, but back when Community Architecture was at its peak, the conventional approach was to merely inform those affected (Make: Good 2017).



Figure 2: A typical consultation at Lymington and Pennington Town Council

Community Architecture took a large leap upwards, sitting within the top three rungs of the ladder, “Citizen Power”. This process was completed using various

From Radical to Professional:

The Unspoken Link between Community Architecture and Co-Design

Chloe Pimblett

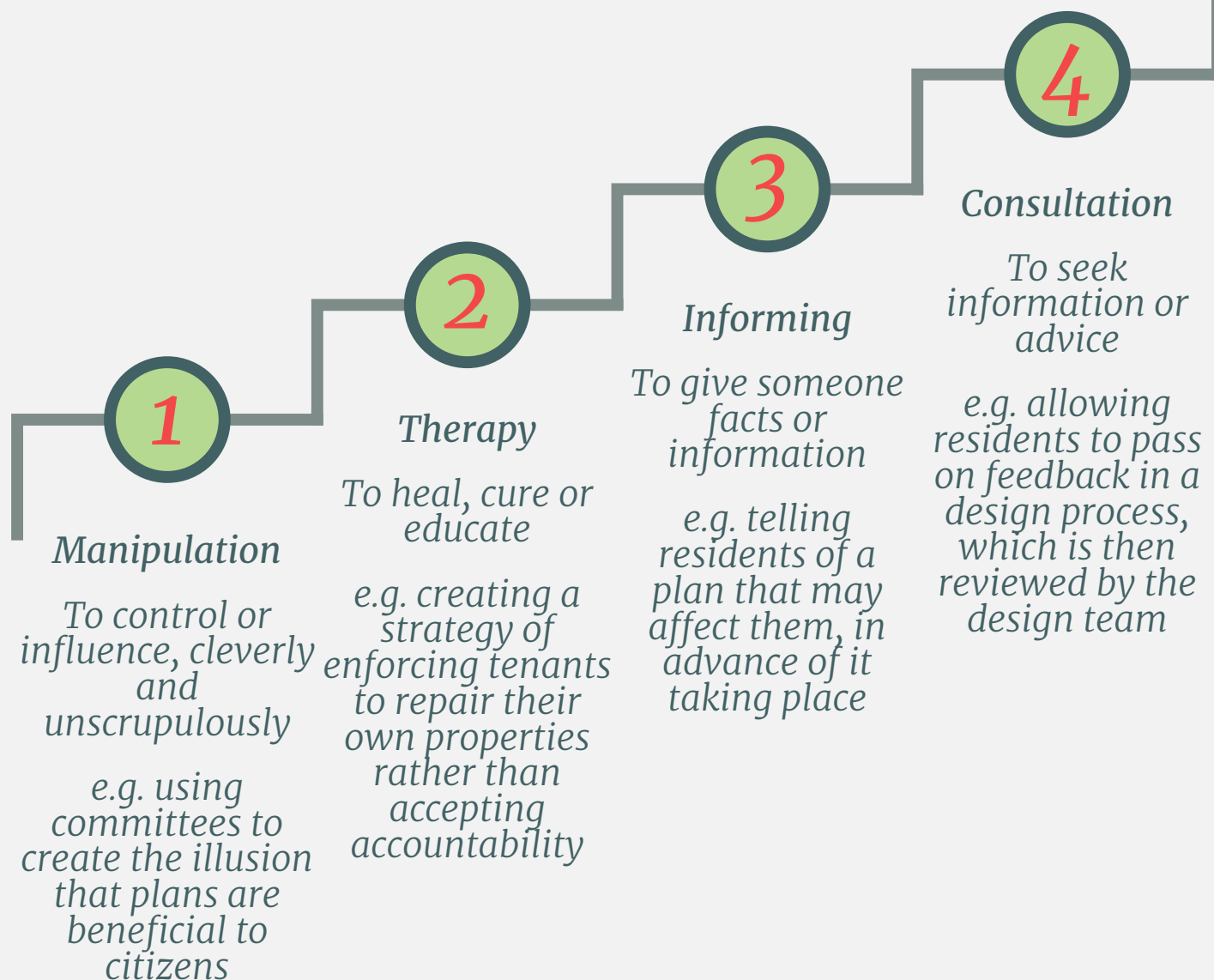
methods, from events and workshops to games and competitions (Wates 2017, p.23). The critical factor is that the community affected by the decision is continually engaged throughout the process, from brief formation all the way through to completion and ongoing maintenance.

Coin Street, on the South Bank in London, is a successful example of Community Architecture in practice. In the 1970s, the area was made up of a working-class, post-industrial population, with ever-growing dereliction. The surrounding areas were being commercially developed, pricing out the existing community, and putting pressure on local shops and schools. This culminated in 1979 when the Greater London Council's architects presented plans for a series of commercial tower blocks, which the community then followed by presenting their alternative plans. After a lengthy campaign process and multiple "fruity clashes" (Dyckhoff 2004), the developers pulled out due to community pressure, and by 1984 the community had acquired the land. Coin Street Community Builders created a site with a mixture of social housing, a public park, and various community facilities.



Figure 3: Coin Street Housing

These are funded by community-owned commercial endeavours, such as the Oxo Tower or a public car park. Today, Coin Street is considered "a successful model for



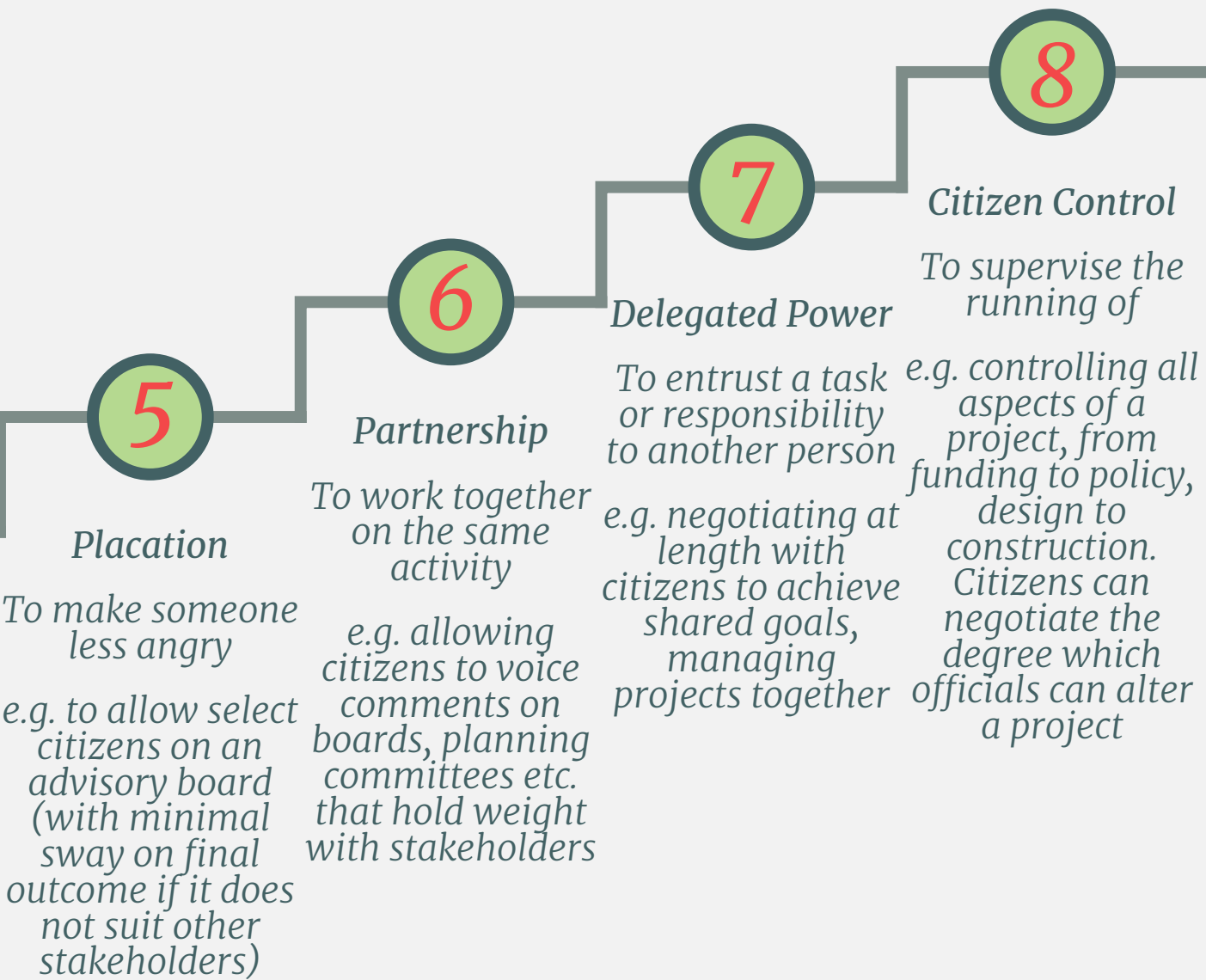


Figure 4: Authors adaptation of Arnsteins's Ladder of Participation using Oxford Dictionary definitions and Martell's analysis, submitted for Design Studies 5A

implementing self-managed social housing which could be replicated elsewhere”. (Dyckhoff 2004, Spatial Agency 2011) It can be considered an achievement of many of community architecture’s goals, using a combination of local knowledge and architectural experience to ensure the best outcome for the community, rather than allowing development by businesses to continue gentrification in the area.

Radical stances can be seen as ones that avoid being confined to existing circumstances, ones that critique the dominant method, and ones that transform (rather than reform) the status quo. (Chicago Humanities Festival 2024, Alberro et al. 2021). For these reasons, a radical position can cause plenty of criticism, and a heavily critiqued idea can be considered radical. The Community Architecture movement demanded large changes in how the planning system worked; “Putting Community Architecture into practice involves a radical restructuring of the development industry” (Wates and Knevitt 1987, p.120). Woolley (1985) reiterates the message, saying “There are many ideas within Community Architecture that appear to represent a radical departure from conventional professionalism”.

Because of this, Community Architecture was generally unpopular with conventional architects, who voiced “a barrage of cynicism, particularly from some prominent architectural critics who rarely left their offices in central London and, perhaps, saw it as a threat to their livelihood”. (Wates and Knevitt 1987, p.36). As well as this, those working as Community Architects “had to break professional codes to operate”, threatening their livelihood (Woolley 1985). As the movement grew and gained support, so did the doubts. By 1985, Community Architecture was being described as “frantic uncoordinated activity” and “like pissing into the wind” (Hannay 1985). A lack of research, coordination or even a specific definition meant that anyone could claim to be a Community Architect, with minimal follow-up to ensure the projects met the goals of the movement.

Just a few years later in 1989, the new President of the RIBA stated that the movement was over – “It was not simply killed, it was overkilled. It was a PR exercise masquerading as a crusade” (cited in Towers 1995, p.217). Jenkins et al. (2010) explain this further, describing the way that Community Architecture had been seen by conventional architects as a potential new area for earning fees, rather than a movement they truly aligned themselves with. This, combined with a political shift that undermined local authority power in favour of the initiative of individuals, meant that “Local authorities cut community-oriented programmes” and therefore “For many architectural practices this led to a simple reversion to “business as usual”” (Jenkins et al. 2010, p.14).

Co-Design: The Professional Evolution

The core principle of Community Architecture was the redistribution of power in the design process—moving from architects to the communities they served. This is very similar to the current trend of ‘Co-Design’, where according to Fiehn, Buchanan, and Haward (2023) “its success depends on collaboration – on a two-way flow of information between designer and user. The architect brings to the table expert knowledge, while the user brings history and lived experience, each of which is given equal significance.”

Co-Design originated in Scandinavia, where in the 1970s, workers were required to adapt their jobs around computers and other digital tools. The “Scandinavian Approach” was used to create “tools and activities to allow for workers, unions, workplaces and government departments to design software, working conditions and staff support services” (Co-Design Tools 2024). From here, Don Norman reformed the process into what became User-Centred Design, re-prioritising user interests to be more important than usability. (Sirk 2019)

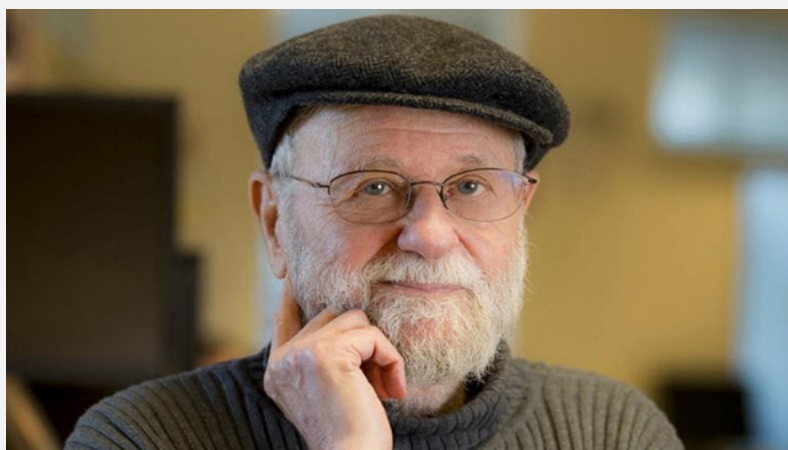


Figure 5: Don Norman

This then continued to evolve into two distinct fields: Service Design and Co-Design, used for processes and products respectively. (Queensland Government

From Radical to Professional:

The Unspoken Link between Community Architecture and Co-Design

Chloe Pimblett

2020). However, it is only very recently that the term “Co-Design” has taken on a relationship to Architecture, where it has quickly “become a buzzword” (Spocchia 2023). The earliest discussions of Co-Design relating to Architecture are by Sanders and Stappers (2008), who published a piece in the journal “CoDesign” which reads “architecture and planning are the last of the traditional design disciplines to become interested”. Despite this slow start, by 2010, the Municipality of The Hague was using Co-Design methods for participatory urban design (Steen et al. 2013), and by 2017, Co-Design was “quite common at local spatial scales and within individual sectors—in the urban context typically at precinct and building levels” (Webb et al. 2017). One of the most recent examples is The Centre for Civic Innovation in Glasgow, a team that sits under the City Council, defining their role as a group to “Co-Design with the city” (Centre for Civic Innovation, n.d.).

So how does Co-Design differ from Community Architecture? Almost identically to Community Architecture, Co-Design works by “addressing the needs of community stakeholders by engaging them in processes” (Bradwell and Marr 2008). Tools for Co-Design, much like Community Architecture, include role-playing, storytelling, prototyping and interviewing (Service Design Tools 2019). However, where Community Architecture was confrontational and radical, Co-Design has become a tamer, more accepted practice.

As the Centre for Civic Innovation demonstrates, Co-Design is readily accepted by those in power. Councils and governments across the world are implementing Co-Design into their policies (Newham Council 2019, Remesar 2020). The UK Government, via Hughes (2021) explains that they are doing this because “This approach helps us to understand what our users need from a particular service or transaction, and make sure that we design services that meet those needs.” Because of this, the Co-Design process is not radical, instead being accepted and integrated into large-scale political landscapes.

Though making Co-Design mainstream increases the visibility and perceived authenticity of the movement (Fiehn, Buchanan, and Haward 2023), it also creates a situation where the most powerful voice holds control over the process, risking alienating minorities or putting political interests above those of the community. (Purcell 2009, Cooke and Kothari 2001, p145)

To fully appreciate this, the following part of this essay briefly reviews the aforementioned Centre for Civic Innovation project, as an exemplary case study. The CfCI originally proposed that the project would “Provide £1million to each Area Partnership to support infrastructure improvements within neighbourhoods. Each AP will be presented with options for investment, examples of which could include pothole and pavement repairs, improving street lighting, new street furniture such as benches or bollards, and improved traffic signals and pedestrian crossings.” (Executive Director of NRS & Head of Communities 2024).¹

In the Your Citizen Voice project description, the CfCI writes that they aim to “Co-Design a new way of working in Neighbourhoods”. This was done via two phases of engagement – the first allowing residents to prioritise themes and submit ideas, the second allowing residents to vote on the themes suggested. This process happened over 18 weeks (Centre for Civic Innovation 2023), exceptionally fast for co-design, where normal processes take “between 6–18 months” (Healthcare Improvement Scotland 2020). Though the CfCI claim that this was to “have shorter, more regular feedback loops”, it could also be read that the decreased

¹ Area Partnerships have been operational in Scotland since 2018, and are a Government initiative to help support policies on local placemaking. Area Partnerships “main aim will be to form a community engagement platform to develop priorities and outcomes for the area. They will act as a community consultation body, not just for the Council, but other service providers in the area” (Doyle and Nelis n.d.). The Area Partnership groups are made up of a selection of local stakeholders, including representatives from community groups, but are not open for the public to join. (Scottish Borders Council 2024)

timespan was due to institutional goals such as efficiency and cost, leading to a rushed engagement process that didn't allow for real community involvement.



Figure 6: A Sample Social Media Post from the CfCI Project

Communities were engaged via presentations at Community Council meetings, card-sorting workshops with Housing Associations, and the sharing of social media posts. Despite this, the low total participation rate (0.5% of residents) is indicative of the lack of genuine community engagement (Centre for Civic Innovation 2024, NR Scotland 2021). Citizens said that they thought they needed to make a “compelling case” for any ideas (McKenna, 2023) and miscommunication in the project FAQs meant that members of the public did not understand which ideas were suitable for the project, causing 12% to be rejected. (Centre for Civic Innovation 2024). This misalignment in expectations is likely to have frustrated those who initially participated, making them less likely to continue with the project. At the end of the process, a resident “thought it was a failure as there has been no action” and was disappointed to see that the programme was going to be implemented in other local neighbourhoods

(Longman 2024). This proves a lack of citizen empowerment or control, and instead merely frustration with the pace of a bureaucratic process, and therefore comfortably sits within the “tokenistic” rungs of Arnstein’s (1968) Ladder of Participation.

This example clearly shows that Co-Design has become more accepted by organisations – helping to increase awareness for the movement and validate it as an improved participatory method. However, as the process becomes accepted and implemented by larger organisations, it risks becoming so mainstream that it loses its radical roots, leaving it unable to represent true community goals if these goals challenge the progress of the organisation managing the process. Instead, Co-Design could end up with a similar fate to traditional consultation, being a tokenistic gesture that is used to justify existing agendas, rather than being a tool to empower. (Monno and Khakee 2012)

Compromise and Loss

As both evolutions of the Participatory Process, Co-Design and Community Architecture share many principles. Despite their different historical backgrounds, they both prioritise the engagement of end users of a design above all else and attempt to take a step up on the Ladder of Participation. Similarly, they both situate the architect's importance as equal to (or perhaps even below!) the community's. Because of this, it is clear that the two methods are incredibly similar.

The key difference between Community Architecture and Co-Design lies in their relationship with professional bodies. Community Architecture emerged as a radical response to top-down systems, aiming to empower communities to challenge the status quo and take control of their environments. It was rejected by industry professionals at the time and situated itself in direct opposition to governmental organisations. Co-Design, by contrast, can operate within institutional frameworks, prioritising gradual improvements to consultatory processes instead of a systemic overhaul. Monno and Khakee (2012) explain that these are two entirely separate models of participation, which are not likely to be compatible with one another.

The professional acceptance of Co-Design has brought advantages. Co-Design is much more accepted by the RIBA (Fiehn, Buchanan, and Haward 2023), governments, and local councils (Centre for Civic Innovation, n.d.), allowing it access to funding and resources for large-scale projects.¹ It has become a recognised method of consultation that allows the public opportunities to influence larger, urban-scale developments in ways Community Architecture struggled to achieve (Batchelor et al. 2023).

¹ An example of this would be the \$5m budget in New York used for citizen engagement in budgeting decisions (Hennebury 2023)

However, this institutional acceptance comes at a cost – Co-Design’s alignment with existing power structures reduces its potential. While processes may begin with community input, the final decisions are often controlled by the institutions funding or managing the project. In their research, Cooke and Kothari (2001) cite Cristoplos (1995, p.20), where they say that participation “did not reveal an alternative to the official view [...] but served to further legitimise (the official) discourse”. This is not an issue if the ‘official discourse’ is that of a legitimate community interest group, but if instead this is a process run by a large governmental organisation it can lead to tokenistic engagement, for example where communities are encouraged to select predetermined options but lack real influence over outcomes. As Purcell (2009) writes, engagement in this way “tends in the long term to reinforce the current status quo because it seeks to resolve conflict, eliminate exclusion, and neutralize power relations, rather than embracing them as the very terrain of social mobilization”.

This is exactly the case in projects like the Centre for Civic Innovation, where institutional priorities overshadowed the community’s voice. Although it used Co-Design methods, the process fell short of genuine collaborative engagement and did not empower the community it acted within. Issues such as low participation, unclear communication, and misaligned project goals left residents discouraged, and without this citizen power, the project is left as “tokenism” on Arnstien’s Ladder of participation. This tokenism often arises from structural constraints within institutional frameworks. Institutions, driven by political timelines and funding cycles, prioritise quick, measurable outcomes over genuine community engagement. This dynamic was evident in the CfCI project, where the fast-tracked timeline and misaligned goals limited participation, reflecting the broader challenges of corporate organisations using highly participatory methods.

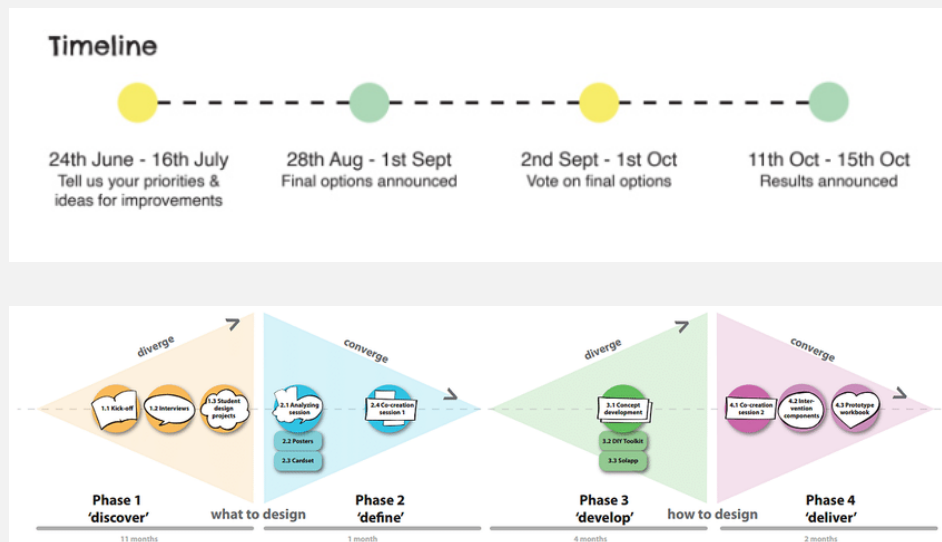


Figure 7: CfCI's Project Timeline
 Figure 8: A Typical Co-Design Process

If this process continues, the furthest end of the scale leaves Co-Design's professionalisation re-configuring the power dynamics within participatory design, in the wrong direction. As Co-Design is used by those in power, communities are returned to the position of advisers or contributors, with the final decision-making control remaining firmly in the hands of the organiser. This is a dramatic shift from the intent of Co-Design, and instead would reduce the process down to a manipulative fake.

Community Architecture's strength lay in its ability to challenge normality and push for community-led solutions. This radical spirit left the movement unpopular, ultimately leading to its decline. In contrast, Co-Design's adoption into more formal organisations has made it much more palatable. Still, it dilutes its grassroots power, preventing it from challenging norms or reaching the highest levels of participation.

For Co-Design to avoid becoming a re-branding of other tokenistic participatory methods, it must acknowledge the progress and limitations of Community Architecture. It must ensure that communities remain central to the process, not merely as participants but as equals to both the designers and the funding source of the project. It must balance the resources and legitimacy provided by large

From Radical to Professional:

The Unspoken Link between Community Architecture and Co-Design

Chloe Pimblett

organisations with a commitment to challenging problematic goals from within. If it is to be used by powerful organisations, Co-Design must define its values, set clear metrics for true participatory design and assess projects that claim to meet this standard. Ultimately, it must look back to head forward, recognising itself as the other side of the scale from Community Architecture and striving to reach a balanced midpoint.

Conclusion

The evolution from Community Architecture to Co-Design represents more than a change of name – it brings a shift to the role of formal organisations in participatory design. While Co-Design owes much to the radical ethos of Community Architecture, by becoming more accepted by both political and professional bodies, it has become a more palatable process. This shift has brought undeniable benefits, such as broader reach, increased funding opportunities, and the ability for communities to influence larger-scale projects. However, it has also come at a cost: the loss of the ability to empower communities.

Co-Design's growing popularity has helped bring participation into mainstream conversation, but this acceptance raises questions about who the process is for, and if they benefit. As Co-Design becomes used by – and aligned with – those in power it risks sidelining the voices of the communities it claims to serve. The challenge, then, is for Co-Design to resist the temptation of compromise and tokenism, and instead find ways to re-balance power in favour of true community participation.

Though it could be argued that Co-Design has turned its back on Community Architecture, there is space for a more optimistic view. If Co-Design can reclaim some of the boldness and bottom-up energy of its predecessor whilst using its acceptance to create real change, it has the potential to not just honour Community Architecture's legacy but to recognise its flaws, and adapt the movement into an even more meaningful form.

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