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Rethinking the link between public engagement and project success

Vivien W Y Chow  
Department of Real Estate and Construction, University of Hong Kong  
(vivien.chow@gmail.com)  
Roine Leiringer  
Department of Real Estate and Construction, University of Hong Kong  
(roine.leiringer@hku.hk)

Abstract

The practice of engaging the public in decision-making during the planning or development stages of construction projects has become prevalent around the world in recent years. This is especially true of government projects, where the end users, and hence the people affected the most, are members of the public. A strong theoretical link exists between public engagement and successful planning, drawn from democratic theory. The same cannot be said for links between public engagement and project management. From a project management perspective, public engagement practices are often justified as a deterrent against public protests which may lead to bad press, political upheaval, and possible eventual frustration of the project. The success of public engagement then is linked to how it might enhance the possibility of success for a project, using whatever metrics by which project success is usually measured. While this view has been useful in its application in numerous studies, conceptualising public engagement in this manner also has its limitations. This paper critically evaluates the theoretical assumptions that have been used to establish the dominant view of public engagement as a risk management exercise strongly linked to project success. In doing so, we propose an alternative way of conceptualising public engagement, which views public engagement as a phenomenon decoupled from project success. An argument is made for accepting the uncertain nature of public engagement processes and placing emphasis instead on how events change and develop over time.

Keywords: Public engagement, project success, project governance, processual research, phenomenology
1. Introduction

In recent years, public engagement has become more commonplace, allowing for the public to be involved in decision-making activities that have formerly been regarded as strictly state-related. Examples of the mechanisms that facilitate public engagement include lay membership on science committees (e.g. Irwin et al. 2012), citizens’ juries (e.g. Rowe et al. 2005), and consensus conferences (ibid.). Within the built environment, the mechanisms deployed include the distribution of community surveys and the organisation of focus groups (e.g. Legacy 2012). The moral rationale for engaging with the public is particularly salient for public sector projects, such as urban development projects, since a large proportion of the end users will be members of the public.

As the nature of urban development projects involve transforming conceptual designs into physical built forms, public engagement in this context tends to focus on collecting opinions that may be transformed into design solutions. The questions asked tend to be of a quantifiable nature, such as: How high? How dense? What sorts of land-uses? These types of feedback have to be incorporated into the project as it is being actualised, so the timeframe for public engagement process needs to work in parallel with the overall project. As such, public engagement issues are also project management issues.

The literature on public engagement tends to be more established in planning studies than in construction management studies, perhaps due to the strong philosophical link between planning and democratic theory. From a policy level, planning is seen as an activity of the state, so garnering public interest legitimises these activities. Under these circumstances, the public interest has been established as a criterion for evaluating planning and the various policies, projects and plans that are produced as a result of planning processes (Alexander 2002). These same planning and design activities may also be validly viewed as project management activities as part of the development life cycle. Yet the argument linking public engagement to projects in management studies is less congruent. From a project management perspective, public engagement practices are commonly viewed under the rubric of stakeholder theory. The activities are often justified as a deterrent against public protests, which may lead to bad press, political upheaval, and possible eventual frustration of the project. Thus, the success of public engagement is linked to how it enhances the possibility of success for a project, using whatever metrics by which project success is usually measured. However, as this paper will strive to demonstrate, the link between the public engagement and project success concepts are not robust enough to substantiate such a claim.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to critically evaluate the theoretical assumptions that have been used to establish the dominant view within construction project management, and assess their robustness. We begin by deconstructing the definition of ‘public engagement’, using the typology set up by Rowe and Frewer (2005) as our point of departure. An overview is then given of how public engagement is commonly depicted within project management literature, with particular focus on stakeholder theory. The assumptions connecting effective public engagement to project success are laid out and explored systematically, first by investigating
what is meant by project success, then by assessing what, if any, causal relationships can be established between the two constructs. We then draw attention to the characteristics of temporal dynamism inherent in public engagement and how this influences the way it may be studied. We posit that focus needs to shift from how public engagement affects project outcomes to how it interconnects with project management processes. We conclude with suggestions of how these alternative values may be considered in future studies.

2. What is public engagement?

The notion of involving the public in decision-making of governments is in large part driven by the democratic ideal that deems it desirable to promote open discussion between private citizens and the state, within what Habermas would term the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1974). Within planning theory, Arnstein’s (1969) seminal work on ‘citizen participation’ remains a cornerstone for the movement in public engagement. In brief, her ‘ladder of citizen participation’ posits that engagement and participation with the public should aim to lead to a redistribution of power, and that different levels of participation progressively allow for this transfer of power to take place. It has subsequently been debated as to what levels of participation need to take place, and to what end (cf. Fagence 1977), but nonetheless, Arnstein’s work still underlies much of the present debate within planning studies on public engagement and participation. These tactical and operational strategies for engaging the public have been mobilised under a range of umbrella terms such as ‘community consultation’, ‘public engagement’ and ‘public participation’, although there is a tendency to favour the term ‘engagement’ over ‘participation’ in recent times (Delgado et al. 2011). For the sake of consistency, we shall throughout this article use the term ‘public engagement’ (cf. Rowe and Frewer, 2005).

In their meta-literature review, Rowe and Frewer (2005) identified three main aspects of public engagement: public communication, public consultation, and public participation. These three forms of public engagement mechanisms hold distinctive properties that need to be considered separately when the question of effectiveness is raised for public engagement. In general terms, public communication entails the process of the project owner distributing information to the public, without any effort to collect opinion or feedback in return. Public consultation entails a process initiated by the project owner to collect and record information from the public, without any specific obligation to act upon or deal with this information. Public participation involves information exchange between members of the public and the project owner. A certain level of dialogue, usually in a group setting, is required for information exchange to occur. During this dialogue, each party is allowed time to respond to whatever information might be tabled, which may lead to one or both parties to change their opinions over time.

The comprehensiveness and representativeness of the typology described above may, of course, be debated further, but for present purposes it suffices in forming a working definition. Broadly speaking, ‘public engagement’ refers to any number of processes which allow the public to participate in decision making processes; whereas ‘public engagement mechanisms’ are more specific, and is defined by the enactment of mechanisms that facilitate an open dialogue.
between parties to enable the privilege of decision-making to be shared. Several distinctions do, however, need to be highlighted. Firstly, the three elements of ‘communication’, ‘consultation’, and ‘participation’ need to work together for the whole notion of public engagement to have any merit. Secondly, there is an implicit chronology that is promoted in the definition, namely, that the public first needs to be informed with the relevant facts, then given the chance to discuss the matter at length, and then given time to digest the matter and give their feedback. The project owner, on their part, needs to prepare adequate and appropriate information for dissemination, spend time to communicate this information with the public, collect any views the public may have on the information presented, and be open to discussions that may serve to change their opinion of the project. Additionally, viewing public engagement as a chronology of events means that the time spent between the stages of communication, consultation and participation is a critical component in the engagement processes. Participants are explicitly given time to reflect on the project and to give comments and feedback in due course; and the project sponsors must allow time to digest, analyse, and make changes to the program accordingly.

Finally, it should be noted that the underlying assumption for public engagement is that the feedback from the public has a chance to be taken on board by the project owner, although the extent to which feedback could (or should) be integrated is difficult to quantify. If project details are already settled before public engagement commences, with no intention of change, then the exercise will not meet the definition of public engagement. The public participation component will be missing meaning that it will be public communication and consultation at best. This position also aligns with Arnstein’s view of ‘citizen participation’, which aims to redistribute power from the government to the individual citizen. Hence, the ‘citizen’ must have an avenue to affect the outcome of a decision for the process to claim to be genuine (Lane 2005).

3. Public engagement from a management theory perspective

From a management perspective, stakeholder theory is often used to explain the relationship between the various parties involved in a project. The commonly accepted definition of a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives” (Freeman 1984: 46). It follows that a project will have a variety of stakeholders, such as the shareholders, the staff, external governing bodies, and other parties that are not directly connected to the project, but who nevertheless have a stake in its outcomes. The project management literature commonly recognises the wider community as external stakeholders to the project (e.g. Moodley et al. 2008; Smyth 2008; Walker et al. 2008).

The literature on stakeholders can be classified as being normative, descriptive, and instrumental. It is normative because it acknowledges that stakeholders have legitimate claims on project goals and consequently, their interests have normative validity. It is descriptive because it provides a model of a corporation which describes the network of entities within it. It is instrumental as it allows for the examination of connections between the practice of stakeholder management and the achievement of various critical performance goals (Donaldson and Preston 1995). Extensive effort has been exerted to determine how stakeholders should be
identified and how their influence to the organisation may be ranked or judged. For example, Mitchell et al.’s (1997) stakeholder saliency view, which is based on resource dependency theory, posits that resources within an organisation is limited and, thus, the resources used to manage stakeholders need to be prioritised. In this manner, any groupings of stakeholders may be sensibly ranked according to their salience, which is determined by assessing their power, legitimacy and urgency in relation to the organisation. Stakeholders who are demonstrated to be more salient should then be given priority in having their issues addressed (ibid.).

In the construction management literature the main focus when dealing with external stakeholders (including the public) seems to be how to manage them in order to minimise the adverse effects they may have on the organisation, or on the project. The key assumption for the application of stakeholder theory is that stakeholders have intrinsic value and the ability to affect the outcomes of the project. Hence, the appropriate management of stakeholders will impact on a project’s success. A large number of studies have in this fashion advocated the use of stakeholder theory for engaging with the public (e.g. Hillman and Keim 2001; Olander 2007; Olander and Landin 2008; Yang et al. 2011). It is commonly argued that the effectiveness of stakeholder management can directly influence the success or failure of a construction project (e.g. Bryson 2004; Kolk and Pinkse 2006; Rowlinson and Cheung 2008). The dominant perspective is that the deployment of public engagement mechanisms is closely tied to the enactment of appropriate stakeholder management strategies.

4. Relationship between public engagement and project success

Despite its recent ubiquity in management studies in general, and construction management in particular, it would do well to note that by itself stakeholder theory does not have any predictive power of how stakeholders may behave. It also rarely addresses how the relationship between stakeholders and organisations develop over time (Friedman and Miles 2006). Problems further arise when attempting to apply the standards of project success, which are commonly used to study stakeholder management activities, to study public engagement mechanisms. Firstly, quantifying project success is not straightforward and is contingent on a number of issues, few of which have direct relevance to public engagement. Secondly, the link between project success and public engagement is tenuous at best. Thirdly, studying public engagement retrospectively confines it to be viewed as a product or an object. As public engagement is meant to encompass public communication, consultation and participation, it would be more appropriate to view it as an ongoing process. The following section expands upon the above argument and proposes an alternative method for studying public engagement.

4.1 Measuring project success

There are numerous models for examining and measuring project success; the most well-known of which is the ‘iron triangle’, coined by Martin Barnes in 1969. The ‘iron triangle’ places ‘cost’, ‘quality’ and ‘time’ at its apexes indicating that a successful project should be on budget, on time, and of a good quality. Its relevance in the modern era has been repeatedly contested. In
particular, how it ignores aspects relating to ‘people’ and how different stakeholders are likely to view success in different ways (cf. Atkinson 1999; Vahidi and Greenwood 2009), and how this success is best judged by the primary sponsor (Turner and Zolin 2012). Of particular importance to this line of argument is that stakeholders’ attitudes toward project success are likely to change as the project progresses. Or in other words, how success is assessed is time-dependent (Shenhar and Dvir, 1997). For example, Shenhar and Dvir (2007) propose a model of project success that is based on five dimensions judged over different timescales: project efficiency; team satisfaction; impact on the customer; business success; and preparing for the future.

Furthermore, what it means to successfully manage a project, which only considers factors leading up to a project’s completion, may be markedly different compared to how a project might be considered successful afterwards. To this end, some scholars have made efforts to distinguish between ‘project management success’ and ‘project success’ (Cooke-Davies 2002; Munns and Bjeirmi 1996). A similar argument could be applied to stakeholder management. The successful management of project stakeholders have different implications when comparing long-term benefits, such as business growth and continuity, to shorter-term goals such as client satisfaction and project performance (Rowlinson and Cheung 2008). However, the stakeholders usually referred to in this line of argument are internal stakeholders, i.e. those whose own interests largely align with the intended project outcomes. The same cannot be said for external stakeholders. Due to their proximity to the management and control of the project, as well as their dispersed nature, it is unlikely for all of the interests of external stakeholders to align with the intended project outcomes. At times, the two are in direct conflict with one another. In these cases, the successful management of stakeholders may not lead to long-term benefits for the organisation.

4.2 Relationship between public engagement practices and project outcomes

As alluded to above, there is often a direct clash between the goals of public engagement, and the goals of the project. This is unsurprising, given that the main goal of public engagement is citizen empowerment, whereas the goal of a successful project is the accomplishment of critical success factors for the owners of the project. Acknowledging this clash, some choose to view public engagement as part of a risk management strategy (e.g. Loosemore et al. 1993). The main argument put forward is that the failure to manage project stakeholders can lead to the mobilisation of community based protests, which in turn can indefinitely delay or frustrate the project (e.g. Teo and Loosemore 2011). The proposed solution is a conflict management approach that essentially sees the public as a risk to the project, which needs to be managed, suppressed, and minimised. At times this might well be convincing, but the connection between the mechanisms for public engagement and conflict management is by no means clear. The tendency is to assert that public engagement will lead to minimised conflict for the project, without giving reasons as to how this might occur. The literature on public engagement is equally insufficient in support for a causal relationship between an increase in public participation and a corresponding decrease in participants’ conflict with project goals. In the
cases where it is brought up, conflict management usually refers to managing conflict within discussion groups to facilitate fruitful discussions in order to garner useful feedback. There is, as such, little focus on how to minimise the animosity participants may hold towards the project.

The question then becomes what the rationale for assuming that an increase in public participation will lead to a decrease in animosity towards the project is. We can think of three lines of argument that goes towards supporting such a link. The first builds on the ‘deficit-model’ approach to decision making, where public disagreement with official proposals are caused by sheer ignorance or misunderstanding of the technical details of projects (Rowe et al. 2005). The second relates to the ‘consensus-building model’ approach to decision making, where project goals are defined and advanced collaboratively between stakeholders and project sponsors (Innes and Booher 1999). The third argument relates to ‘trust-building’ with the view that successful public engagement should lead to increased levels of trust between the public and government (e.g. Tsang et al. 2009).

The first of these arguments relates to successful public communication rather than public engagement. The second implies a shifting of project goals, and hence a reassessment of critical success factors, rather than a risk management strategy established to meet certain project goals. Accordingly, both causes are inadequate for justifying public engagement as risk management strategies in project management. As for the third argument, it can be argued that the complexities in optimising engagement efforts coupled with the imprecise underlying definitions of ‘trust’ dimensions means that a link between the two concepts cannot be readily established (cf. Petts 2008).

4.3 Dynamic and uncertain nature of public engagement

Studying and theorising around public engagement is by no means a trivial affair. Public engagement undergoes continuous change through time in response to shifts in the environment, which makes predicting its outcomes difficult. Deploying public engagement mechanisms relies on the reflection of information disseminated, as well as on the collection of feedback from the public. The mechanisms have time sequences in-built explicitly for this purpose. Hence, it would be most appropriate to view it as an ongoing process. During this process, opinions are formed, developed, and morphed as information is presented; as time is allowed for reflection; and as discussion with other participants ensue. Yet, academic discussions have tended to focus on ‘efficiency’, ‘success’, and ‘optimisation’ (Rowe and Frewer 2004), which places emphasis on the results of conducting public engagement, rather than the practices of doing engagement. This predominately results-oriented approach necessitates studying public engagement in hindsight, or at most, under fairly simplistic temporal notions of ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’. The alternative is to view public engagement as a dynamic and complex phenomenon and acknowledge that a myriad of relationships that are formed and disbanded in the process; and that these relationships, in turn, affects future events. Of course, the tendency to focus on results is not confined to public engagement or stakeholder management. Recent years have, also, seen increased calls for a pluralistic approach to project management that similarly incorporates
process research. This means studying the project during different phases of its lifecycle and acknowledging projects as temporary organisations with evolving behaviours (Söderlund 2011).

5. Implications for future research

Having deconstructed the way public engagement is studied in the construction management literature, and the inherent problems of linking it to project success, the onus is now to offer an alternative way of conceptualisation. It would seem that part of the difficulty in merging public engagement with management theory has been the inability to rationalise public engagement in such a way that it bear clear associations with established constructs within management theory. Another problem seems to be the tendency to neglect the temporal dimensions of public engagement when exploring its impact both within its own system, and on other systems with which it comes into contact.

To address these problems, we posit that instead of trying to rationalise public engagement by finding specific connections to project outcomes, attention should be focused on understanding the public engagement processes. This would shift attention to uncovering insights that lead to discovery of underlying connections between public engagement and project management processes. That is to say, it places more emphasis on the processes of managing the public as stakeholders to the project, rather than on how specific types of interaction will impact on project outcomes. The starting point would be to study public engagement as a phenomenon rather than as a means to an end, and to embrace its processes for all its dynamism, multiplicity, complexity and subjectivity. With this goal in mind, three major characteristics of public engagement are presented below.

5.1 Public engagement events attract a loose membership of participants

Public engagement for urban planning projects are exemplified by the inclusion of a large cohort of stakeholders, who break from their usual living routines to come together to discuss a particular project, within a specific and well-defined timeframe. Because many of the events are open to the public, participants may come and go as they please. For many of the open forums, there is no pre-requisite for attendance apart from pre-registration, and someone who participates at one event may not necessarily return to the next. Closed door discussions and focus groups may be more selective in its membership, but individuals may still opt to attend events out of sequence, or may become involved with the discussion at a later stage than the majority. Their membership within the public engagement process is changeable and eludes definition, and their involvement is contingent on their presence and participation. Each member who interact with the project impacts it in different ways and to varying levels of depth, magnitude, and permanence.
5.2 The public engagement process is subjective and value-laden

All individuals enter the sphere of engagement with their own agendas. A participant may merely be curious about the project and wish to obtain more information. Alternatively, they may be personally affected and have a personal stake in the design, or may wish to lobby on behalf of a collective for certain facilities to be provided in the local vicinity (or conversely, to be removed from the vicinity). These ulterior motives are unique to each individual and will colour how they interact with the process. Similarly, project owners, as well as their technical consultants, also carry ulterior motives. It is worth noting that the value judgements held by owners and consultants, in themselves, have no greater inherent validity than those held by laypersons (Rowe et al. 2005). Accordingly, public engagement processes can never be value-free.

5.3 The timeline for public engagement differs to the timeline of the project

There is a temporal mismatch between the public engagement and the project design period, such that what may be achieved during public engagement exercises may be restricted by the information available about the project. For example, if the participants’ estate has been earmarked to be demolished to make way for new development, their most likely concern would be the amount of compensation they can receive, and where they will be relocated to. However, the project owner will not be able to provide them with this level of information if they are still in the plan-making stage. Similarly, a hypothetical new development, which may bring vibrancy to the area and bring relief to the shortage of housing, will target to benefit a population that does not yet exist and, hence, is unable to represent its interests at public engagement events. Conversely, those who are presently affected will dominate the proceedings. In these types of scenarios, which are by no means uncommon, consensual decision-making is unlikely to ever be reached, and support for the development are unlikely to be garnered.

6. Concluding remarks

The three observations given above provide some indications as to the complexities of public engagement processes. Some of the problems discussed might benefit from the application of management theory. Indeed, we suggest that public engagement and project management theories has much to offer each other, so as long as the underlying assumptions for each are made explicit. The complex nature of public engagement supports the premise that these processes constitute complete ecosystems in their own right. The use of stakeholder theory necessitates placing external stakeholders, such as the public, on the periphery of a project. Conversely, focussing on the complications and idiosyncrasies of these ecosystems rather than on how public engagement influences project outcomes frees us from needing to constantly reference it in respect to the project. This in turn allows us to make better sense of the interfaces between public engagement and the project through time and through the eyes of different stakeholders. Accepting the uncertain nature of public engagement processes, and placing
emphasis instead on how events change and develop over time, allows us to understand public engagement as a phenomenon that is decoupled from project success.

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