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Citizen Participation in Architecture and Urban Planning Confronted with Arnstein's Ladder: Four Experiments into Popular Neighbourhoods of Hainaut Demonstrate Another Hierarchy

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Abstract: Widely used and disseminated, Arnstein's ladder is considered a reference for citizen participation. It, nevertheless, involves a recurrent bias and a certain confusion when confronted with projects in the Belgian and French working-class districts of cross-border Hainaut. Characterised by fundamentally opposed management systems (one bureaucratic and hierarchical, the other democratic or even delegative), these worksites challenge Arnstein's concepts and allow us to understand that information is not a level in the participation ladder, but the condition for the functioning of the whole system. Likewise, they also teach us that manipulation and delegation are not opposite extremes but can percolate in any level of participation. Finally, they reveal that the interlocking of powers and the interplay of stakeholders can easily turn the established participation mechanism from exemplary to revolting and vice versa.

Keywords: participation; popular neighbourhood; urban planning; architecture



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1. Introduction

Architecture and urban planning have historically been what we call in French “*un fait du Prince*”, in the sense of a strong and centralised power [1]. The mechanisms of participation have essentially developed in both fields since the 1960s, attempting to give users a place to adapt architecture to their expectations. The (non-explanatory) concept of need is then questioned. This principle of need is formalised by the constructional norms developed by modernist standardisation, which still has an impact on architecture and urban planning today.

It is still necessary to know what is meant by participation. In the USA, based on their own experience in urban planning, as well as their involvement in an NGO, Sherry Arnstein [2], has published a ladder that should help to distinguish between what is participation and what is not. Their highly rich and comprehensive work will be a breakthrough and will also be widely used, regularly adapted, and sometimes criticized. The ladder proposed by this committed American includes eight levels of participation, from bottom to top: manipulation, therapy, information, consultation, placation, partnership, and citizen delegation (see Figure 1).

Different interpretations of Arnstein's approach have been made, such as that of the association “*Habitat et Participation*” which is based on the work of the “Platform Participation” which brought together Belgian Non-Governmental Organisation stakeholders [3]. The latter form the basis of an approach, parallel to Arnstein's, that is based on six gradients. These allow us to better understand the level of participation: the level of decision (from information to co-management), the size, the theme, the audience, the form, and the duration. However, Arnstein's ladder is not criticised here.

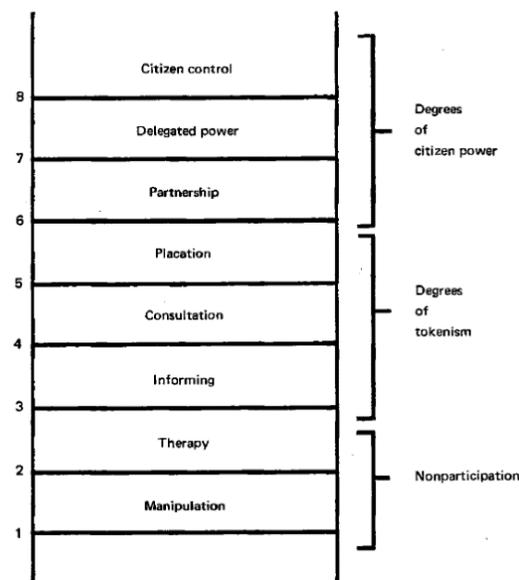


Figure 1. American ladder (Source: Arnstein, 1969, pp. 216–224).

In 2014, drawing on the work of Waheduzzaman and Mphande (2012), Kasymova suggests a new ladder [4], assuming that the participatory process is essentially influenced by different models of governance: authoritarian, political, bureaucratic and democratic. They contrast bureaucratic and democratic systems, echoing the model of John Turner (1972) [5], a leading figure in citizen participation in architecture. The latter contrasts a centrally administered system ('heteronomous': the inhabitants depend on external elements) with a self-administered system ('autonomous': people act freely). They develop very enlightening models for housing that will inspire the United Nations. This touches on the two types of participation put forward by Pierre Montal [6]: that which comes spontaneously from below (informal: autonomous from a power, rather democratic), and that which is structured by the power (formalised: heteronomous, therefore, dependent on a centralised and often bureaucratic power). Turner insists on the systemic link (in the sense of Geddes) between all the elements that come into play during the participatory process. We will see that these centrally administered and self-administered models are quite relevant to our fieldwork.

Kasymova's analysis can be compared with that of Guaraldo Choguill [7], who refers to Turner. In the 1990s, the author proposed the adaptation of Arnstein's ladder to the reality of developing countries by defining eight levels organised in four categories: neglect, rejection, manipulation, and support. The core variable of their system, as recalled by Schinkel et al. [8], is governments' attitudes towards low-income communities, as responses to their basic needs (access to drinking water, sanitation, mobility). This attitude can vary from active support aimed at empowering citizen groups to total neglect of the community, which can generate sometimes successful, often precarious experiences of self-management. We will see that Guaraldo Choguill's entry key is quite relevant for the analysis of the participation situations proposed in this article, given the fragility of the publics involved and the necessary improvements in living conditions targeted by the participation mechanisms. However, we will see that this analysis also reveals that the limitations of their system are relatively comparable to those of Arnstein.

Desmond Connor (1988) [9], points out that a given level of participation does not necessarily concern all publics. They distinguish between information and consultation (lower levels which concern the general public more) and joint planning, mediation, and litigation (higher levels which concern the 'leaders' more). This difference is also observed in our fields.

Pierre Montal also points out that two types of participation are developing: that which comes spontaneously from below (informal), and that which is structured by the authorities (formalised).

The major criticism of Arnstein's ladder that we will develop in this paper overlaps with the reading of Lane [10]. They point out that the ladder tends to support a certain complacency in both complaining about the powerlessness of citizens in the face of decision-makers and the opposition of those who have power by those who do not. This approach seems to ignore the fact that there is not one power, but several powers, which can turn a complex process upside down. Following on from the work on the Belgian associative experience, which has been developed since the 1970s [11], we propose a more operational model consisting of five levels: information, consultation, "concertation",¹ co-creation and co-management (see Figure 2). We will show that the differences between the names of the levels are far from being merely semantic games, but that they offer a possibility of better fitting the reality on the ground.



Figure 2. Ladder observed in Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB) (based on Pouleur et al., 2008 (pp. 115–140) and in 2018).

More specifically, we will develop our hypotheses on the evolution of this ladder of participation from the difference between the methods applied in social neighbourhoods on both the Belgian and French sides. To this end, we will compare an approach based on an associative culture (close to the democratic model presented by Kasymova or self-administered according to Turner) with another administrative one (bureaucratic or centrally administered model).

2. Materials and Methods

In this paper, pre-existing materials from the Belgian associative world will be compared with new materials from the Interreg project "*Réseau Hainaut Solidaire*".

This new data allow us to compare a system of participation based on administrative management (Belgian) with another based on popular education (French).

2.1. Materials from NGO Fields Have Been Inspiring since the 60s

The associative sector dealing with participation in the living environment of Wallonia includes several associations: *Habitat & Participation*, *Periferia*, *Inter-Environnement Wallonie*, *Espace Environnement*, etc. The latter, an independent non-profit association, has collected know-how that operationalises the questions of the ladder of participation), while relying on lifelong education (as inspired by Marcel Hicter). The struggle led by the inhabitants of the Marolles district and the North of the Belgian capital was a source of inspiration.

The experience of fighting against *Bruxellisation*² served as an international reference in architecture, as evidenced by its dissemination by Jencks [13]. "Bruxellisation" is a neologism used to describe the urban massacre carried out without the consent of the inhabitants in the name of modern property development. Brussels was a figurehead for

citizen participation characteristic of postmodernity: the first city to force consultation on building projects. The ladder of participation that emerges from these influences, and that is shown below, differs from Arnstein's.

The comparative table shows a series of parallels that reflect three major criticisms of Arnstein's ladder:

1. On the left (for Arnstein), information is symbolic participation. On the right (for Pouleur et al. [14]), correct information is the basis for participation.
2. On the right, the notion of concertation replaces that of placation, a term that gave this level a symbolic, even manipulative, connotation.
3. Arnstein assumes that higher levels of power delegation are ideal. Nevertheless, the co-management level can be as manipulative as a simple consultation. The scheme on the right seems to fit better with the reality on the ground, as the higher delegation levels tend to affect leaders (as Connor points out), while the other processes affect a wider audience.

The worksites of the "Réseau Hainaut Solidaire" project will make it possible to confirm or refute these hypotheses.

2.2. New Materials Coming from the Cross-Border "Hainaut" Concerning Participation with a Bureaucratic Background and Popular Education ("Éducation Populaire")

The inclusion of socially disadvantaged people is the main objective of the Interreg project "Réseau Hainaut Solidaire". Since 2018, a Belgian-French partnership has been active in social neighbourhoods around two themes: coeducation and territorial identity. The research-action is, in theory, underpinned by the mobilisation of local social stakeholders (inhabitants and professionals), under the coordination of social intervention structures in charge of neighbourhood houses (the "Centre Public d'Action Sociale" in Belgium) and socio-cultural centres (the "Association des Centres Sociaux de la Région de Valenciennes" in France).

The partnership³ consider participation as a guarantee for the sustainability of the actions undertaken. The process undertaken is the following: to get the inhabitants to express themselves on their collective spatial experience (shared diagnosis), to pool skills in order to co-construct innovative tools that respond to the issues identified, and, finally, to disseminate these practices and methodologies experimented by the inhabitants and social workers to similar audiences which we qualify as "peers". Communities of Practice (CoPs) are initiated, from which an objectified experiential knowledge, in other words, a certain experience based on life expertise, emerges.

The methodology used here encourages stakeholders to participate in social life in their immediate environment first, then in other places, and to create a virtuous circle for social cohesion through peer support. In the context of a mandate defined in advance by the structures on site, this methodology focuses on providing spaces for shared listening, support and consideration of the views of the target groups. To ensure the development of the experience, the process requires support for empowerment. Moreover, the partnership of the RHS project has created a digital space that collects the productions while detailing the practices; it is intended to be taken up by the social intervention structures [15].

2.3. Inductive Method Based on Neighbourhoods in Hainaut Compared with the Arnstein Model

The research we present in this paper is based on an inductive-abductive approach: "la Méthodologie de la Théorisation Enracinée (MTE)" [16], which is based on the "Grounded Theory" initiated by Glaser and Strauss [17]. Here we confront our field of work with a fairly well-known thesis, that of the gradation of the participation process defended by Arnstein. After anchoring the academic production in an experimentation as close as possible to the realities experienced by the actors in the field (consisting of the accompaniment of hundreds of actions in the field from 2017 to 2021)⁴, we were confronted with an institutional approach to social work on the Belgian side, which often entails a highly hierarchical administrative functioning, characteristic of bureaucratic models that make the actors heteronomous. On

the French side, we discovered an association whose origins go back to the dynamics of popular education. Inspired by the democratic model, it targets the autonomy of the staff and the people affected.

3. Results: Bureaucratic and Democratic Approaches That Are Difficult to Categorise in View of the Complexity of the Situations, Illustrated by the Comparison of Two Urban Renovations and Two Self-Build Experiences in Onnaing (France) and Épinlieu (Belgium)

Our qualitative approach meets the quantitative data established by the European Interreg programme for the RHS project. The latter shows the difficulty of mobilisation on the Belgian side (407 Belgian inhabitants involved in the territorial aspect of the project compared to 1124 French.⁵ The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on the mobilisation of audiences on both sides of the border, but the Belgian inhabitants are much harder to reach (see result indicators of the project [18]—see Table 1). The lack of shared and relevant information within the institution impacts communication with the public and, therefore, their involvement. The indicators collected in terms of communication designed for the public (flyers, posters, etc.) are quite appealing⁶ and show the difficulties of the municipal services in constructing and sharing information worthy of involving the public in a citizen participation process.

Table 1. Number of people who had access to a social service on both sides of the border. Data extracted from the Interreg RHS activity 7 h activity report (until 30 June 2021), gathering the “Interreg programme result indicators” measuring the efficiency of this project.

Interreg Programme Result Indicators (Territorial Aspect)	French Inhabitants Involved	Belgian Inhabitants Involved
Action 1—Opening children to a territorial approach	49	2
Action 2—Collecting the collective memory of the neighbourhood	219	73
Action 3—Shared observation and awareness of the territory	218	94
Action 4—Enlargement of the identifying territory (the territory we identify with) and blurring of psycho-social boundaries	216	123
Action 5—Enhancing social and territorial identity	103	50
Action 6—Developing empowerment	31	2
Action 7—Taking over public space	247	49
Action 8—Getting ready for territorial action	41	14
TOTAL	1124	407

We go into more detail below with four field actions that cover information, consultation, concertation, co-design–co-construction, and self-management. Arnstein’s ladder (see Figure 1) would lead to an overly simplistic classification of approaches: the bureaucratic (centrally administered) approach would be therapeutic, and the associative (self-administered) democratic approach would be delegative.

However, as stakeholders’ interaction is particularly complex and the technical issues are intrinsically linked to social issues, the results are difficult to categorise according to the 1969 grid, without stereotyping the situation. The following two urban renovations and two collaborative self-build experiences illustrate the complexity of the stakeholders’ interaction.

3.1. Urban Renovation in Mons and Onnaing

The inhabitants of Cuvinot (Onnaing, France) and Épinlieu (Mons, Belgium) did not experience the urban renewal of their neighbourhood in the same way. The support and consideration given to their voices were approached differently on both sides of the border.

3.1.1. Épinlieu—A Technically Imposed Demolition-Reconstruction

The Épinlieu district was originally a prefabricated building for SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe). In view of the quality of the accommodation, the buildings were soon abandoned by the military and handed over to the social housing company (Social Housing Company “*Toit et Moi*”, Mons, Belgium). Decades later, the decision was taken to demolish some of the buildings that were in particularly poor condition. These are blocks of flats, referred to as US blocks, since Americans were to occupy them (Figure 3). At the same time, a regional appeal was made to ensure the transition to a sustainable neighbourhood. Multiple meetings with the inhabitants supported a diagnosis produced by the social landlord (the public housing company of Mons, Belgium). The resulting Master Plan, which provides for major changes to the neighbourhood’s infrastructure and living conditions, was submitted to the Walloon authorities in 2014, without any real follow-up. The collective consultation process was felt by the interviewed inhabitants to have been suddenly interrupted, following a decision motivated by technical issues justifying the demolition-reconstruction of all US-block-type housing. For their part, the social workers perceived some loss impetus in the collective process, which led them to adopt another method. The tenants directly impacted were all informed about the demolition, and an intensive individual consultation was carried out by the social unit in order to specify the needs (in terms of number of rooms, dwelling type and size) and to rehouse the inhabitants in the neighbourhood or elsewhere. The possibilities of rehousing on site were reduced and the work of the social workers was impacted by psychologically difficult dilemmas: how to make the elderly understand that they have to get rid of their family furniture since the legislation obliges them to move to a smaller dwelling? A total of 194 houses and flats were demolished in 2017, and none have yet been rebuilt.



Figure 3. Demolished US flat blocks in the Épinlieu district. Copyright GoogleStreetMap.

In June 2018, during individual interviews with local residents, we noted several questions regarding the insecure future of the district from inhabitants of the white blocks in Figure 4. Isolated and uninformed, they only see the rubble left after the demolition work, and are concerned not only about the future of the infrastructure planned for the district but also about the conditions for integrating future new residents into the life of the district, including owners of a different social status. How can we think about and build social cohesion without those who build it every day?



Figure 4. Extract from XMU’s masterplan in 2014, in collaboration with *Espace Environnement*, for consultation—Source: <https://www.xm-u.eu/projets.html>, accessed on 23 February 2022). The grey squares show the new housing. The people affected by the project are not only those in the grey housing area (people involved) but also those of the dwellings represented by the white squares.

This situation was very badly received by the inhabitants of Épinlieu, who, on discovering the experience of concerted and shared renovation of a French district they had been put in touch with, were surprised at the weakness of the social landlord’s supervision and learned that their experience of living in the district was, in fact, a real and valuable expertise. For its part, the Belgian social landlord deplored the low level of citizen participation in the process. The fact remains that individual consultation does not replace collective consultation and that information is the basis of any participatory process.

3.1.2. Onnaing—Concertation-Driven Renovation of the Cuvinot District

In 2019, the renovation process of the Cuvinot district of the French city of Onnaing started. The beginnings of an open consultation on the configuration and home automation of the future housing, which was not well understood by the inhabitants who wanted a broader debate on the future of the neighbourhood (including its collective spaces), soon became a reality. In conjunction with the Agglomeration community (Valenciennes Métropole, France) and the socio-cultural centre (ACSRV), the social landlord (Regional Landlord “Maisons & Cités”) made available consultation and dialogue spaces that included representation from the citizen council and neighbourhood associations (see Figure 5). The residents, who are accustomed to co-management responsibilities in the community, particularly through their involvement in the decision-making structures of the socio-cultural centres, quickly understood the value of these spaces for dialogue and made the debates their own. In Cuvinot, even if some pitfalls⁷ have been identified, the collective spaces for debate have made it possible not only to rehouse the residents while waiting for the new buildings (“drawer” operations) but also to provide a supportive framework for the expression and involvement of those affected by the new housing.

The complexity of stakeholders’ interactions is likely to be addressed better in the French context by the self-management mechanism implied by the citizen council, as this case study shows.



Figure 5. Workshop and urban walk—time for discussion about the Cuvinot neighbourhood—Source: RHS Project.

3.2. Self-Build Workshops in Mons and Onnaing

3.2.1. Épinlieu—“Pallets” Projects That Federate

The experience of the “pallets” project in Épinlieu, which was initiated by the Social Cohesion Plan department of the City of Mons in collaboration with architecture and urban planning students from the University of Mons, raises other questions.⁸ The housing company carried out a survey among the inhabitants that highlighted cleanliness as the number one problem in the neighbourhood’s living environment.⁹ The participants in the project agreed on the priority of solving the problem of storing rubbish bags faced by the inhabitants of blocks of flats. Indeed, they did not have anywhere to put them, instead leaving them on the street and exposing them to being torn up by the numerous stray cats, with the unpleasant spreading of waste as a consequence. The only place left for them to store their rubbish bags was their already cluttered terrace, which gave a bad image. With the advice of the students and the support of their know-how, the group of residents co-designed a solution (Figure 6). The intermunicipal waste management authority was not consulted beforehand and, subsequently, did not support the concept for practical reasons. They requested the relocation of the self-build project, as its original location interfered with waste collection.



Figure 6. Co-designing the project—Source: Bricourt K., Antignac, S. et al. “Rapport d’un processus participatif” (cours *Ville et Société* et cours *Développement local et durable*, UMONS, 2016–2017).

On this basis, a group of involved residents co-built a pallet box for waste bins (Figure 7), which they placed at the foot of the common housing, thereby making it possible to clear the terraces of piled-up rubbish bags.



Figure 7. Co-building the project—Source: Bricourt K., Antignac, S. et al. “Rapport d’un processus participatif” (cours *Ville et Société* et cours *Développement local et durable*, UMONS, 2016–2017).

Although invited to participate in the reflection from the beginning, some residents of the building did not attend. However, they did express complaints about the co-construction of the rubbish bin. The initiative sparked a debate about the lack of a bin liner, which was mainly fuelled by a neighbourhood dispute. In addition, the intermunicipal company presented new practical objections. The constructions were finally dismantled. This small-scale example demonstrates the difficulty of consultation in view of the complexity of the relations between the stakeholders and the difficulty of mobilising them upstream.

Despite the difficulties, and proud of the techniques passed on by the students, the inhabitants undertook to repeat the self-construction of pallet furniture to support the setting up of a rooftop¹⁰ to finish off a “graffiti” project carried out by a group of young people from the neighbourhood. The furniture produced is regularly displayed and used at meetings held at Épinlieu. The inhabitants testify to the solidarity that was created in this intergenerational activity, at the heart of which was the sharing of knowledge. The know-how passed on by the students was adopted by the inhabitants who, in turn, got involved in supervising and supporting the young people in their initiatives.

3.2.2. Onnaing—A Resilient ‘Palette’ Workshop

A cross-border workshop conducted in Onnaing¹¹ particularly enthused the residents of the Nimy district of Mons. Supervised by the local stakeholders of the French district who initiated this promising and unifying action, the Belgian residents were able to experiment with pallet construction techniques (Figure 8). In addition to the production of furniture intended to embellish their immediate environment, the overall history of the pallet project was retraced by the people who keep it alive. It should be noted that, despite several setbacks (the productions having been burnt down on several occasions), it continues to mobilise audiences, with local actors determined not to let themselves be defeated. The participants in the pallet workshop are regularly invited to share the knowledge they have acquired with new audiences. In this way, they pass on not only their know-how, but also the conditions for carrying out and sustaining the initiative, while at the same time strengthening their commitment, with the feeling and demonstration that their actions are useful. The emulation around this inspiring activity, supported by the neighbourhood’s vital forces, has gone beyond the reception given by the socio-cultural centre and now mobilises people from all over the Valenciennes area. The resilience of the inhabitants in

the face of adversity helps to strengthen the dynamic of solidarity. The participants are supported by local structures that ensure a “rise in competence” [19]. Almost all levels of communication are experienced in this activity, from information to co-management. The challenge now is to modify the scale of intervention and to ensure that this virtuous action has a lasting impact on the urban renewal project currently under discussion in Onnaing (Section 3.1.2). As with the pallet workshop, will the inhabitants succeed in going beyond the concertation stage to really co-design and co-manage the new public spaces in the district?



Figure 8. Transmitting know-how in street furniture construction between neighbourhoods—Source: RHS Project.

3.3. Complex Participation Processes with Multiple Variables

The case studies show that participation patterns are difficult to categorise according to Arnstein’s model. They are, in fact, conditioned by a series of variables linked not only to the governance system in place (as explained by Turner) but also, as our examples show, to the maturity of the people involved in the process.

In the case of the urban renewal of Épinlieu, the participation model has varied over time, moving from collective consultation to individual consultation (see top left in Figure 9) and, most likely, reflecting a certain discomfort on the part of the authorities, with power sharing.¹² The distrustful attitude of the local authority (bottom right of the figure) regarded the inhabitants’ capacity to take part in discussions on the transformation of the district (“It won’t work here! Most people can’t read or write...”),¹³ as well as the efficiency of the participation process itself (“We mustn’t arouse any desires”).¹⁴ This attitude, which is sometimes legitimately justified by the fear of disappointing residents if decisions taken at other levels of power go against their wishes, has positioned the debate at a technical level (on the right of the figure), distancing it from the expertise of residents, which is nevertheless very valuable for understanding the desirable improvements for the neighbourhood. These mechanisms of mistrust, difficulty in sharing power, and dominance of the technical argument are found in the literature. This is explained, according to Kasymova and Turner, by the characteristics of bureaucratic models (as shown in the lower left-hand corner of the figure), which naturally position residents as heteronomous. They depend on external factors when faced with addressing their housing issues.

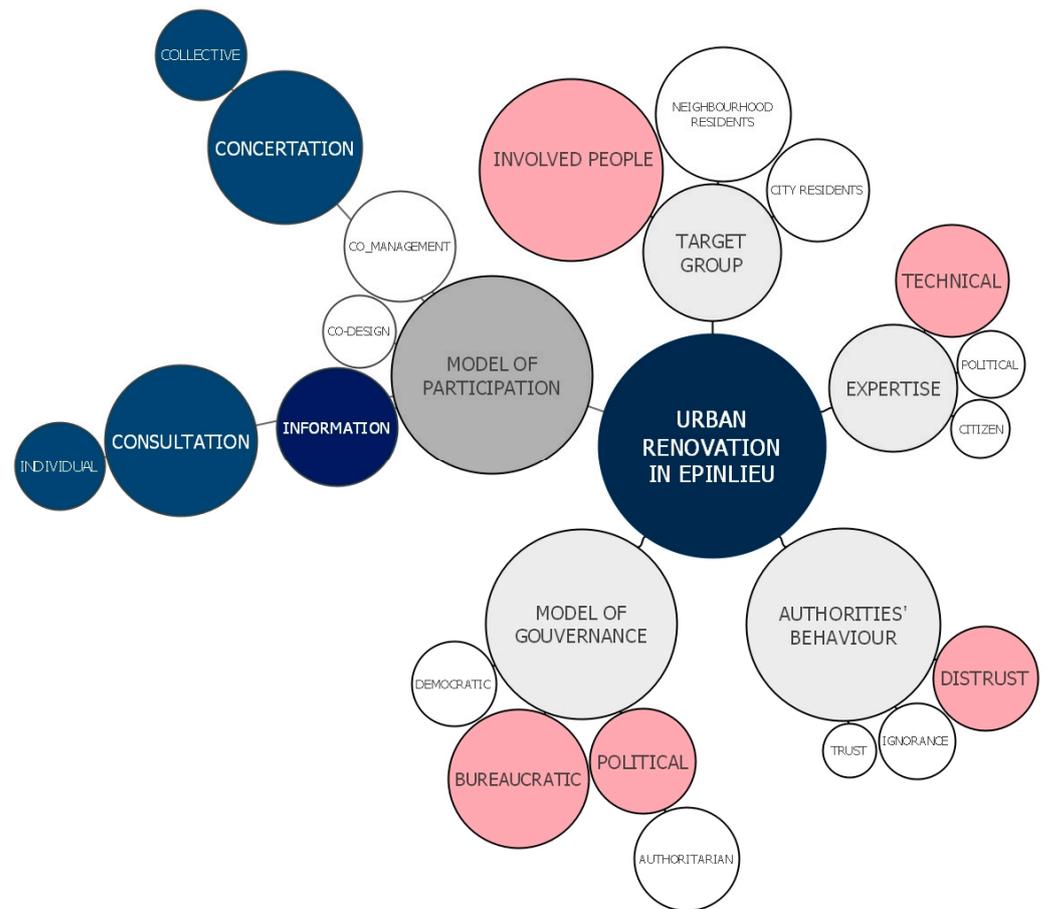


Figure 9. Characteristics of the hybrid participation model set up for the rehabilitation of the Épinlieu district in Mons.

In Cuvinot, the district renovation process that has been initiated (and is still ongoing), including representatives of the inhabitants in a project monitoring committee, is likely to open up the debate beyond the inhabitants directly concerned by the demolition/renovation of the dwellings (top of Figure 10). People from the district have actively contributed to the reflection on its memory and on the use of public spaces in view of their transformation. The more democratic the system of governance in place (bottom left of Figure 10), as well as the maturity of the inhabitants, who are used to contradictory debates, and the social support structure, allows the inhabitants' voice to be valued in the process. The hierarchy of expertise, which is usual in this type of project, and which overvalues the technical knowledge of the architects and engineers or the political knowledge of the authorities, has been somewhat disrupted, leaving room for the expertise of the inhabitants (on the right of the figure). Although the process does not reach the highest levels (co-design, co-management), it is not purely symbolic. A real participatory approach is observed.

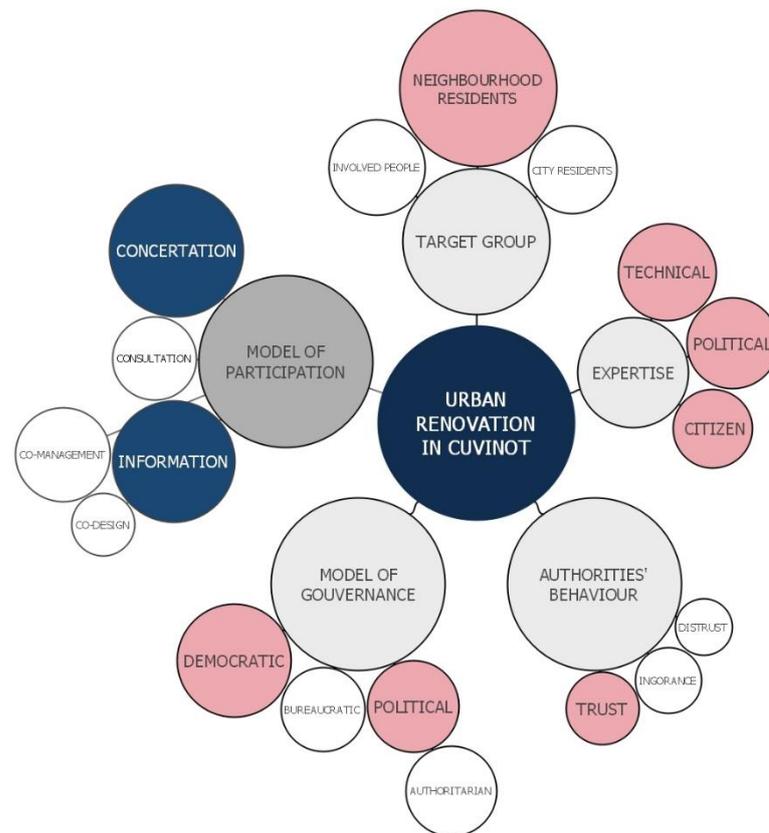


Figure 10. Analysis diagram of the model of participation implemented for the renovation of the Cuvinot district.

This equality of knowledge was tested on the reduced scale of the “pallets” project in Épinlieu. Despite the final failure of the operation (the street furniture was dismantled), the co-design process demonstrated that a relationship of trust between stakeholders is possible (bottom right of Figure 11), even in a system of bureaucratic governance (bottom left of the figure). However, this is restricted to a public directly involved in the process and is difficult to generalise. This example perfectly illustrates the multitude of factors that impact positively or negatively on a participatory process, which appears fragile both in terms of power games and relations of mistrust between actors.

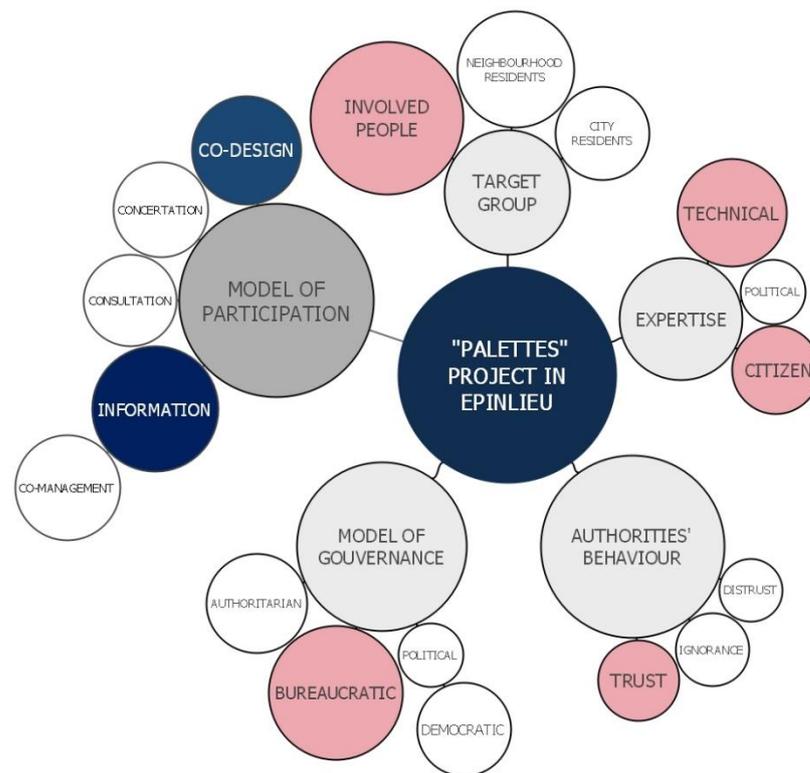


Figure 11. Analysis diagram of the “co-design” participatory process in the context of the “pallets” project in Épinlieu.

The experience of the “pallets” project in Cuvinot adds another dimension to the reflection. Here, based on broad information, several levels of participation (top left of Figure 12) are tested, leading to co-design and collective management, not only of the training of the apprentice builders, but also of the productions of the workshop itself. However, if the inhabitants of the district (and beyond) are validly informed of the actions carried out in the framework of this workshop, only a directly concerned public participates in the co-management of the tool (top of the figure). The equal treatment of technical, political, and citizen expertise (right-hand side of the figure) is possible thanks to a long-standing and well-established relationship of trust (bottom right-hand side of the figure), which ultimately reflects on the self-esteem of citizens.

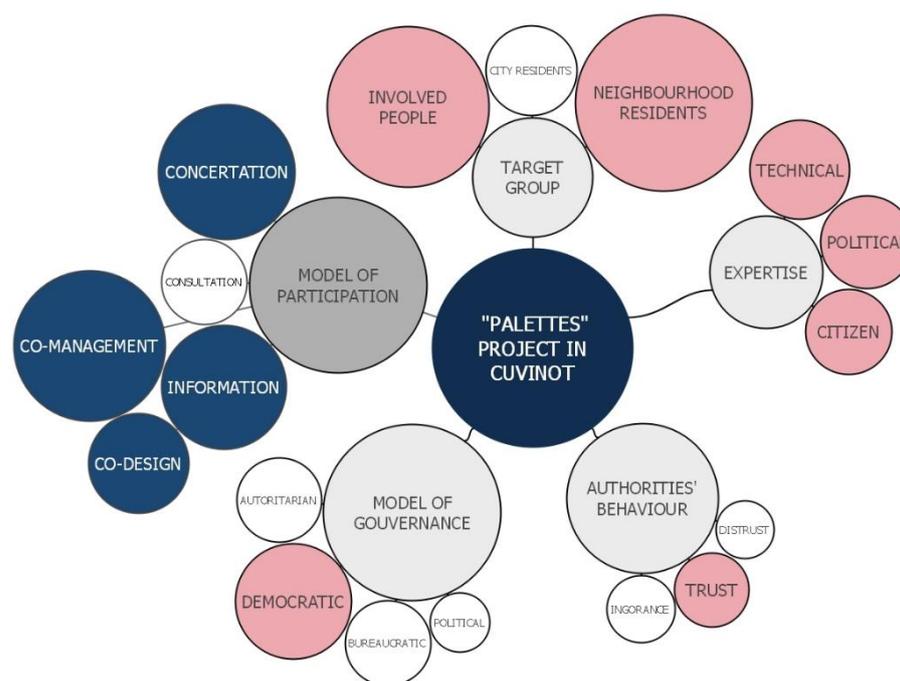


Figure 12. Analysis diagram of the “hybrid” participatory process in the context of the “pallets” project in Cuvinot.

4. Discussion: A Ladder Adapted to the Complexity of the Processes

Recent work allows us to clarify certain controversies around what is understood as participation on the two above mentioned ladders (Figures 1 and 2): the one produced in the American context, sometimes reflecting bloody urban struggles, in particular to defend civil rights (Arnstein, 1969), and the other emanating from associative circles of the FWB, inspired by lifelong learning (Pouleur, 2008), initially called into question in the light of the contributions of digital technology (Pouleur et al. 2018) and now by the action research conducted in the working-class districts of Franco-Belgian Hainaut. The debate focuses on the pejorative character that Arnstein attributes to elementary forms of participation by placing manipulation and therapy at the base of their ladder. Although they report them as non-participation, they place them at levels 1 and 2. We argue that this leads to a recurrent bias.

Furthermore, according to this author, the information, consultation, and placation that would correspond to levels 3, 4, and 5 of their ladder would only lead to tokenism, the purpose of which is to give an impression of fairness. This would imply that these levels of participation are necessarily manipulative, since they are advertised as such, when in fact they are not. Our hypothesis is that Arnstein’s ladder, by its linear character, including manipulation and therapy, and by its failure to consider the only symbolic and manipulative contribution of levels 3 to 5, creates confusion and does not reflect the real issues existing in our fields of work.

In this regard, comparing the five levels of the participation ladder (Figure 2) observed in the FWB, with the reading and use that technicians, social workers, inhabitants, and local residents made of it in two distinct cultural contexts,¹⁵ it seems to be much more explanatory and allows to better accompany the local project. Below we propose a ladder that integrates our latest findings.

Through the four examples proposed, we were able to address the five levels of participation (as shown on the left in Figure 13).

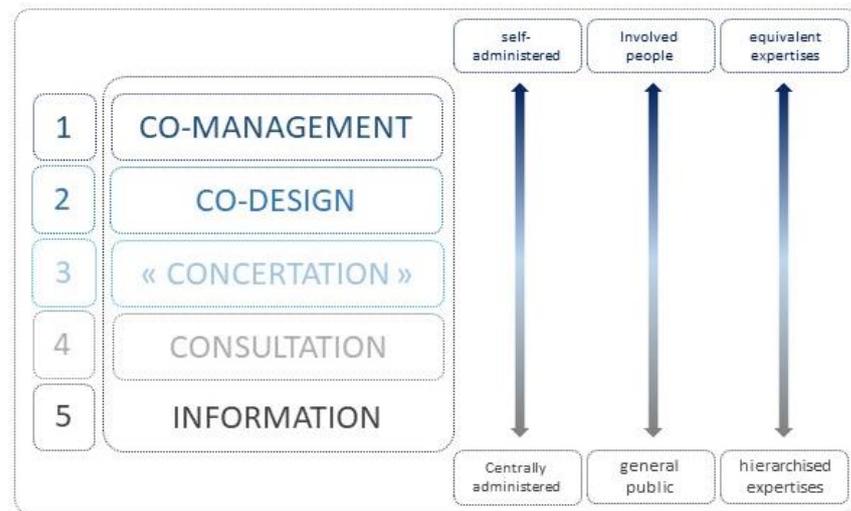


Figure 13. The five-level ladder tries to clarify the relevance of each of them and shows that the highest level is not necessarily the most suitable. The latter is more relevant for a public involved in a self-administered or democratic management model (on the right of the diagram). It nevertheless requires the deconstruction of the hierarchy of competences by valuing citizen expertise and rebalancing it with commonly recognised skills (technical or political). The lower levels are not necessarily more manipulative or therapeutic than the others.

In all examples, information has been an indispensable foundation for the process. The higher level of participation and co-management, is difficult to implement on the Belgian side involved, but co-design, a fairly high level of participation, was able to emerge through a small self-construction operation. On the French side, the social supporting structure, an associative actor with a more direct democratic (in the sense of Kazymova) or more autonomous (in the sense of Turner) management was able to set up a mechanism involving the inhabitants in the co-management of the project (Figure 14).

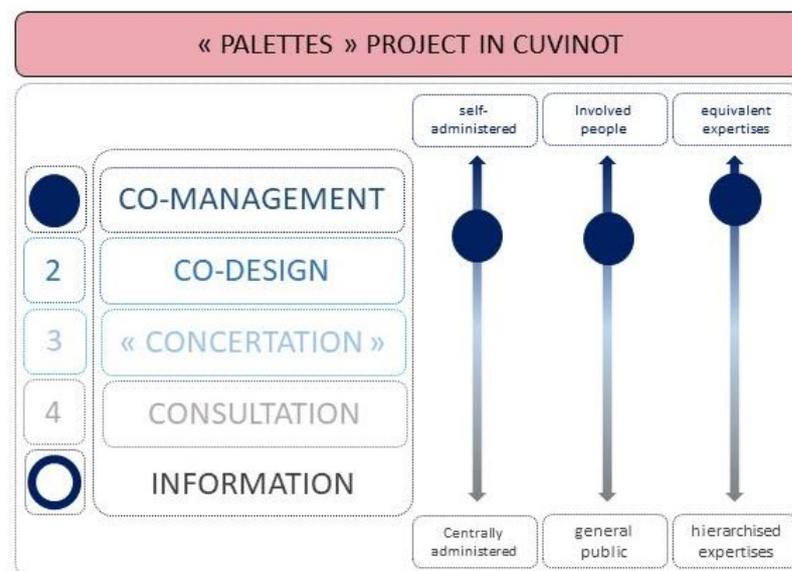


Figure 14. The five-level ladder applied to the participation model of the “pallettes” project in Cuvinot (left) expresses the highest level of participation that, in this case, also includes the other levels. It corresponds to a governance model close to self-management, but which can only concern a restricted public directly involved in the project. It dismantles the hierarchy of expertise and better balances the experience of the inhabitants with technical and political knowledge.

On our scheme, co-management and self-management are at the top of the ladder. In contrast, for Choguill, self-management is not seen as participation. It is true that their fields are characterised by extreme deprivation and require imperative assistance, which makes the absence of intervention from above look like neglect. Our fields of work are much better equipped, which facilitates a permissive attitude in favour of the inhabitants. The latter often have the resources to ensure that certain processes do not necessarily require the help of the authorities.

The difficulty of making full use of these resources within the administrative system does not mean that the system feels invested with a therapeutic mission, such as the modernist architects¹⁶ who hoped to educate the inhabitants on how to use hygienic housing. The public housing company in charge of the management of the buildings in Épinielieu is composed of technicians, but also of social workers. Through consultation, the latter bring the expectations of tenants to the attention of technical decision-makers. The decision is often imposed by technical¹⁷ standards (which are meant to be ‘therapeutic’: to force citizens to make the right choices) and do not come from the technicians involved in the public companies, but from the standardisation voted by the parliament.

The system is, therefore, much more complex than it appears and questions the standardisation of the architecture, a fact that sometimes complicates the response to real expectations. The energy performance standards for buildings (*Performance Énergétique des Bâtiments*—PEB) are a well-known example: imposing them on tenants leads to the creation of “thermos” dwellings because they have not been taught to use them properly, with significant underperformance as a result. On the French side, home automation was set to take hold, but the concertation process managed by a democratic or self-administered system helped to put the technical injunction into perspective. In this sense, the bureaucratic, rather centrally administered system has shown less performance than the democratic system, which is more responsive.

The formal participation illustrated by the accompanying mechanisms specific to participation in urban renewal (where the procedures are well established and standardised) (see Figures 15 and 16 below) is of a quite different nature from the informal participation illustrated by the two examples of self-build projects (see Figure 14 on page 20 and Figure 16 below).

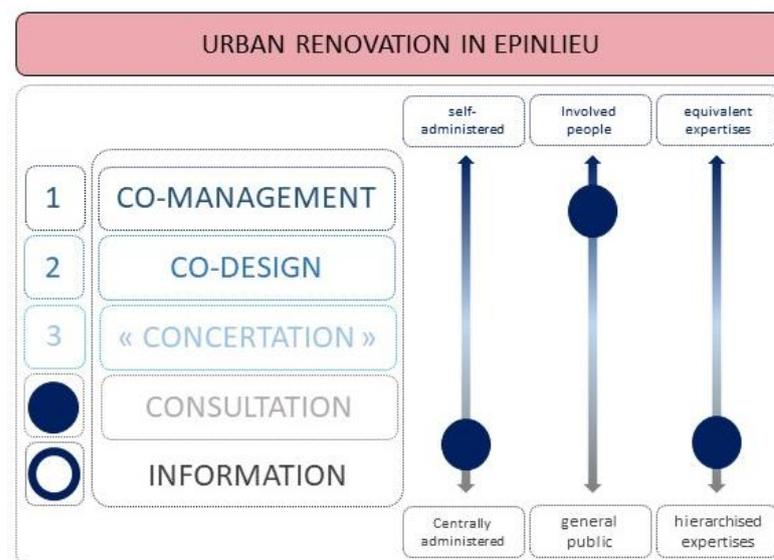


Figure 15. The level of co-design is reached in the Épinielieu self-build project, although the governance system is rather bureaucratic and centrally administered. This level mobilises only those directly involved in the project, but achieves a relative equality between technical, political and technical expertise.

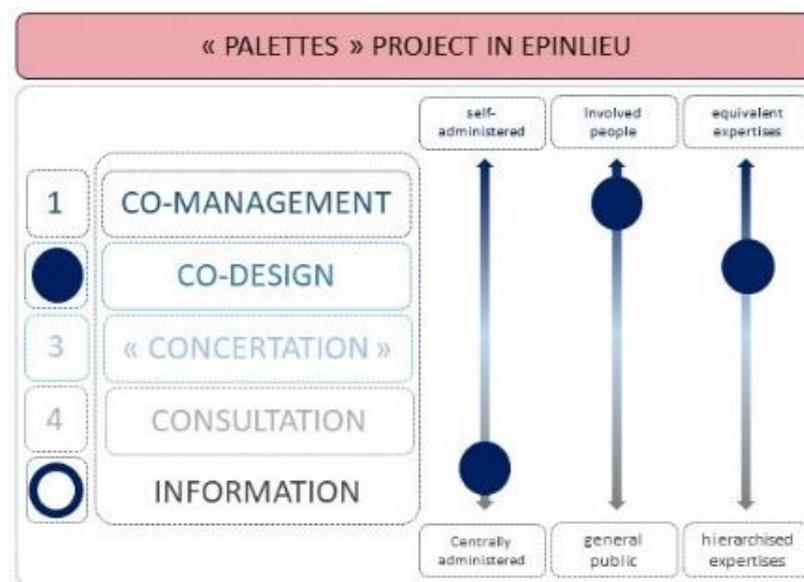


Figure 16. In Cuvinot, urban renovation does not go beyond the concertation stage. Nevertheless, it is much more efficient and tends towards a more self-administered management where the sharing of expertise is effective.

As Francis Hambye, head of the Cabinet of the State Minister Alfred Califice, who initiated participation policies of urban renovation in Belgium, explained, informal (or spontaneous) participation allows for more dynamic and meaningful participation. Once it is institutionalised, it tends to become rigid and have less impact (C. Greig Crysler recalled in 2015 that Barbara Cruikshank’s landmark study of citizen empowerment in the US highlights the apativeness of audiences and the flattening of participation as a frequent consequence of institutionalised participatory processes aimed at ‘empowering groups [20]); a case in point from a critic of their own work in implementing urban renewal in the 1970s. The two dynamics of self-build belong to the register of informality, while the two renovations are carried out within formalised legal frameworks.

All these issues are closely linked to the first cursor,¹⁸ which relates to management ranging from centrally administered to self-administered (in the centre of Figure 13). It is crucial to characterise the participation ladder.

The ladder of community participation by Guaraldo Choguill (pp. 431–444), addressing the conditions in “underdeveloped countries”, incorporates a notion that is verified in our fieldwork: the dependence of the level of participation on the attitude of the authorities towards communities. This makes it possible to pre-determine the cursor when it moves towards a centrally administered system. In a relationship of trust favourable to power sharing, more advanced processes including co-building and co-management, as in the case of the palette workshop in the Cuvinot district of Onnaing, can be implemented. These participatory processes are organised either by delegation or by partnerships between communities and authorities. Conversely, when distrust prevails, either through fear of dilution of power or through the inability of the authorities to manage citizen debates, only consultation or concertation levels are possible, as in the case of the individual consultations for the urban renewal of Épinlieu.

Although the system proposed by Choguill favourably integrates a certain amount of complexity in the interplay of actors and powers, it shows the same limitations as those observed by Arnstein, when confronted with the case studies treated here. Firstly, participation only concerns three of the eight levels of the ladder, the others being considered as non-participation. Secondly, the model incorporates what we consider to be drifts in participation and not levels of participation.

The cases studied show that manipulation, for example, can exist at any level of participation. The residents of Épinlieu do not hesitate to express their doubts about the concertation process that led to the demolition of their housing. Was it therapy? Would better information, in due time, not have facilitated the understanding that other solutions exist, which are less technical, more costly, but less socially impacting? The examples of the French districts we have observed¹⁹ seem to prove them right.

The second cursor is also striking in all four examples: it is difficult to involve the community in high levels of participation (right-hand side of Figure 13). The example of the self-build process in Épinlieu illustrates this fact. It is difficult to involve people in changing their environment when they do not respond to the call for participation. This is in line with the distinction that Connor makes between the ‘general public’ and ‘leaders’, whom we call ‘involved people’.

The analysis of the four examples brings to light a third cursor discussed by C. Greig Crysler in 2015 in the journal FIELD: that of the holder of ‘expertise’. Basing themselves on Hornst Rittel’s design theories (1972) and on analyses of American cases, this author observes the displacement of the expertise of the technician, for the architects of the CIAM²⁰ (technical rationality), towards that of the citizen, and this, in the participative approaches emerging during the 1960s (and which underlie Arnstein’s ladder).

More recently, in the practices design activism,²¹ expertise is shifting back to technicians, according to the author. In fact, although clothed in a communitarian accent, these often exhibit the drift of solutionism, applying a new form of technical rationality, this time from below. Quoted by Crysler, Rittel suggested that a ‘symmetry of ignorance’ should be sought, an equal position between citizen and technical expert, each contributing their own expertise, in contrast to Arnstein who excluded the expert from the highest spheres of participation. If an equality of power-treatment of expertise is attempted through the two self-construction experiments (Figures 14 and 15), in the other two the final decision on the renovation belongs to the one who holds the power, be it technical or political. In the proposed scheme (Figure 13), the more the cursor (from “hierarchised expertises” to “equivalent expertises”) moves upwards (co-design, co-management), the more a balance between technical, political, and citizens’ expertise is possible.

The new model below (see Figure 17, but also Figures 14–16 above-mentioned), which is based on the discussion of the findings in light of the literature, is applied to the four cases analysed.

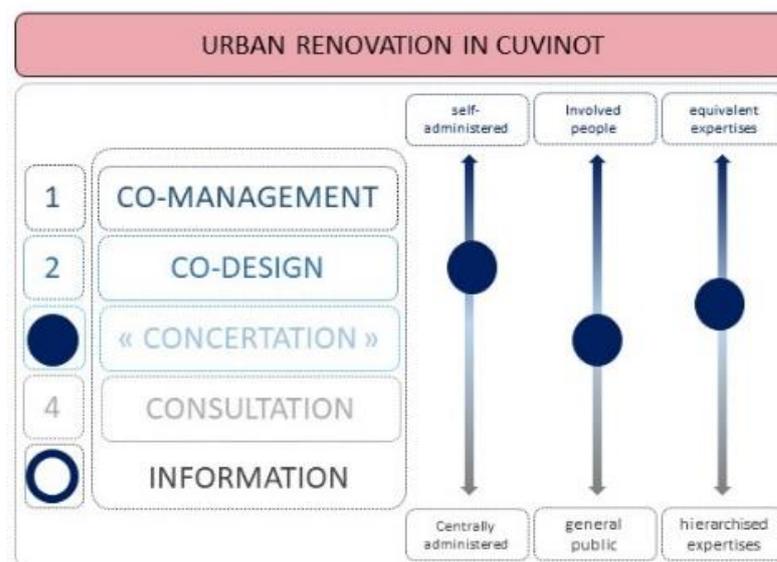


Figure 17. In the urban renovation of Épinlieu, technical and political knowledge remains dominant in this consultation process, which is characterised by centralised management.

5. Conclusions: Involvement and Delegation against an Administrative and Democratic Structure Sustain the Five Ladder Levels with Another Hierarchy

In view of the increasing complexity of the mechanisms, the ideal type of participation is not necessarily delegation advocated by Arnstein. Moreover, it is difficult to define in absolute terms, as each field has its own particularities. Even if we can only be in favour of pushing the system upwards, we have to be careful about the counter-effects: more delegation can limit the number of people who are really involved.

Moreover, as the previous examples have shown, concertation mechanisms, or even consultation mechanisms, such as those carried out in Épinlieu, are far from just being symbolic (contrary to what Arnstein implies): they are not there to hide manipulation. By allowing a wider group to be taken into account, concertation and consultation are, therefore, poorly suited to the label of tokenism. In this sense, the case of citizen participation in Épinlieu has affected all those involved, as well as some of the inhabitants of the district.

Let us note that in the case of the demolition of Épinlieu, two weaknesses appear in the process: on the one hand, the standards for the size of the dwelling did not make it possible to meet all the expectations, and, on the other hand, the local residents did not feel involved (a concertation with them would undoubtedly have avoided certain fears, or even certain errors). This is where the complexity of the system and of the interlocking of powers becomes apparent on two levels: that of the decision-makers, who do not have all the freedoms (especially in the centrally administered system) and, therefore, depend on other levels of power (those who set the standards), and that of the local residents who have not benefited from sufficient participatory support because the resources have been concentrated on one area of the district (the one of the grey blocks in Figure 4). This raises questions about the resources allocated to citizen participation and the scope on which it should be carried out.

A significant advantage of the ladder we are proposing (such as Choguill's) is that it can accommodate both top-down initiatives from the authorities and bottom-up initiatives from the inhabitants. The movement of the participatory initiative up or down the grid will depend not only on whether the authorities are able to dialogue and build with the communities, but also on the organisational capacity of the latter, which is largely influenced by the management culture to which they are accustomed (rather self-administered or centrally administered in the sense of Turner).

Pushing the system upwards does not only imply a sharing or delegation of power, as Arnstein suggests, but also a recognition of lived expertise as valuable knowledge in spatial planning processes.

Finally, the interest of the proposed ladder is to recognise the added value of a variety of participatory processes, thus allowing a greater social diversity to be reached. In the cases observed, the audiences reached by co-design and co-management are mostly older men (60 years and over), and those reached by concertation are generally women aged 50 years and over. Through consultation, a more varied and numerous public is reached, including young couples, who are usually less active at the highest levels of the ladder.

It is still true that, as shown by the indicators (Table 1) counting the number of people involved, the centrally administered (in Turner's sense) system is less successful in terms of citizen participation than the direct democratic system of lifelong learning. Indeed, the latter is based on delegation and, in this sense, confirms the theory of Arnstein and Turner, which targets the autonomy of communities. This system is more flexible, more responsive, and, therefore, better able to adapt to the field and to unexpected events such as the current health crisis, thus, better meeting citizens' expectations.

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Data Availability Statement: The data used are those collected as part of the Interreg Réseau Hainaut Solidaire project (2018–2022), which can be consulted on the project’s website, on Ricochet website, as well as the 7th activity report (August 2021). Some of the data used is the subject of a thesis being developed by Peixoto L. R. at University of Mons. Other data from the RHS research has been the subject of other publications, including an article intitled “Territoire, identité et inclusion sociale” in *Urbia and Sociologies* revue.

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Notes

- 1 The term “concertation” used in French cannot be translated into English. Negotiation implies a balance of power, which is generally unbalanced. Concertation, on the other hand, aims to bring all stakeholders together at the same level. The case of social consultation ‘à la belge’ is characteristic: it leads to decisions that are often based on a soft consensus, with all parties expected to win. René Schoonbrodt [12] testifies to the great victory of associations in Brussels in the 1970s, which led from the imposition of the promoters’ project (of which the inhabitants were not even informed) to public consultation of the parties (including the population). Since the associative milieu, a real change has been observed, particularly within Inter Environnement (Brussels having been in the front line), signifying a real upheaval in terms of participation, even if in Brussels, the decision is not a real consultation in the sense that people are heard, but not necessarily followed.
- 2 “Bruxellisation” is a neologism used to describe the urban massacre carried out without the consent of the inhabitants in the name of modern property development.
- 3 Composed of seven stakeholders, including two Belgian (Architecture and Society Unit and Family Sciences Unit of UMONS) and one French (Laboratoire DeVisu of the Université Polytechnique des Hauts-de-France) university research departments, a non-profit association set up in a context of promoting participatory culture in the FWB (Espace Environnement) and a French structure (Pop School) on the digital part of the project.
- 4 These numerous actions use a wide range of collaborative methodologies to approach inhabitants and meet them. To understand how this set of resources is managed, you can visit the online platform of cross-border resources called www.ricochets.eu (accessed on 17 December 2021).
- 5 1 year before project closure, i.e., 30 June 2021.
- 6 Apart from three publications concerning cross-border events relayed on the Belgian side, only four flyers were produced to reach the Belgian public in the pilot district, compared with 13 on the French side, aimed at the various districts involved.
- 7 Involving residents who are not used to the sociocultural centres in these debates remains a challenge.
- 8 Cours « Villes et Société » from Pr. J.-A. Pouleur, Master 2016–2017.
- 9 93 respondents out of 263 questionnaires submitted in May 2015. 60 respondents considered the neighbourhood to be unclean, while 26 considered it to be clean (seven with no answer for this question).
- 10 Event held on a roof.
- 11 Interreg RHS project, cross border event of 26 November 2019.
- 12 The social actors of the centrally administered district houses often took the place of the inhabitants during the collective workshops. The social operators also made sure that these meetings were never organised in their absence. Specific facilitation techniques had to be put in place by the researchers to avoid this pitfall and to really gather the inhabitants’ opinions. On the other hand, the social actors of the self-administered structure were more likely to take a back seat.
- 13 Comments from local centrally administered social actors about the organisation of a writing workshop on the memory of the district, July 2018.
- 14 Comments from centrally administered social actors during an urban walk with residents and architecture students, September 2019.
- 15 These are not specific to Belgian or French culture. The Belgian system is more self-administered and the French is historically more central-ly administered. This is linked to the actors involved. The Belgian NGO involved (Espace Environnement) is characteristic of the self-administered model.
- 16 Functionalist modernism is based on the notion of need. It sets standards that are independent of culture. It still believes in universal need. The resulting standards do not take into account a participatory process since needs are wrongly thought to be identifiable. It is associated with the standardisation of needs through standardisation. It is on this point in particular that the

International Congresses of Modern Architecture will stumble between the old and the new, notably Team X and Aldo Van Eyck leading an anthropological approach.

- 17 Technical standards are identified by Turner as a determining factor in the dependence of the inhabitants in the centrally administered system.
- 18 Inspired by Turner and incorporating issues related to levels of governance (Kasymova) combined with the attitude of authorities towards citizen groups (Guaraldo Choguill).
- 19 In Dutemple, another district involved in the RHS project, the renovation started with the construction of new housing, followed by the rehousing and finally the demolition of the previous buildings. In Épinlieu, the process adopted was the relocation of the population, followed by the demolition and then the construction, which has still not been completed.
- 20 International Congress of Modern Architecture, organized between 1928 and 1959.
- 21 Here understood as alternative practices of design and construction of spaces such as tactical urbanism, ephemeral urbanism or transitional urbanism, and which call upon the user's knowledge.

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