

# Reconsidering Public Engagement

Kristopher Larson, AICP

President & CEO

Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.



**DOWNTOWN**  
GRAND RAPIDS INC.

# Historical Basis



Robert Moses

- “Master Builder” of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- Created numerous authorities that enabled autonomy
- Favored highways over public transit
- Renowned for circumventing public involvement



Jane Jacobs

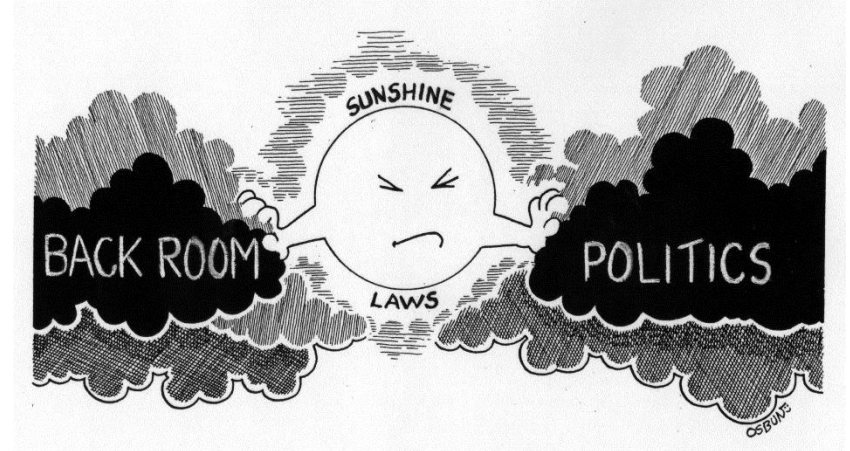
- Steadfast, published critic of urban renewal
- Considered the antithesis of Robert Moses and top-down urban planning
- Defender of neighborhood and walkable scale
- Instigator of grassroots defense efforts against Moses’ projects

# Historical Basis



## Paul Davidoff

- Father of advocacy planning
- Planners are too fixated on physical form rather than social and economic well being.
- Citizens shouldn't solely reacting, but also involved in proposing
- Planning processes should be managed in a pluralistic manner, particularly with minority groups



## Sunshine Laws

- Established in 1976
- Public meetings should be open for viewing by people
- "Government is and should be the servant of the people, and it should be fully accountable to them for the actions which it supposedly takes on their behalf."

# Historical Basis

Middle Class flight motivated by  
school desegregation laws

+

Federal programs incentivize  
suburbanization

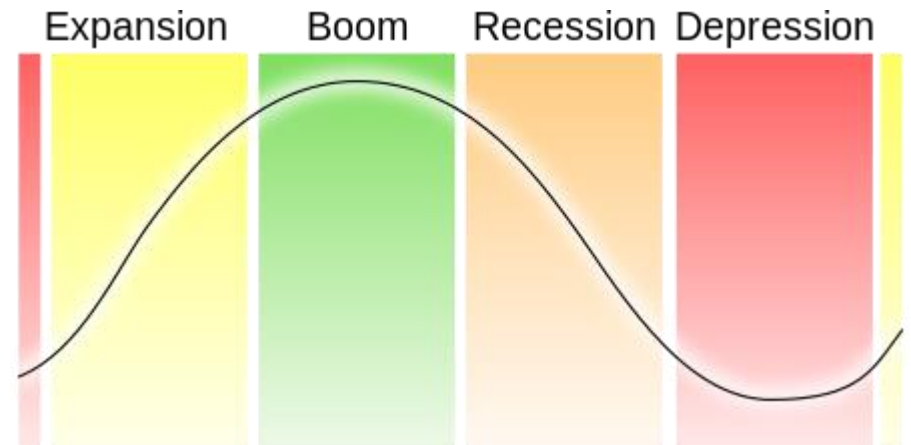
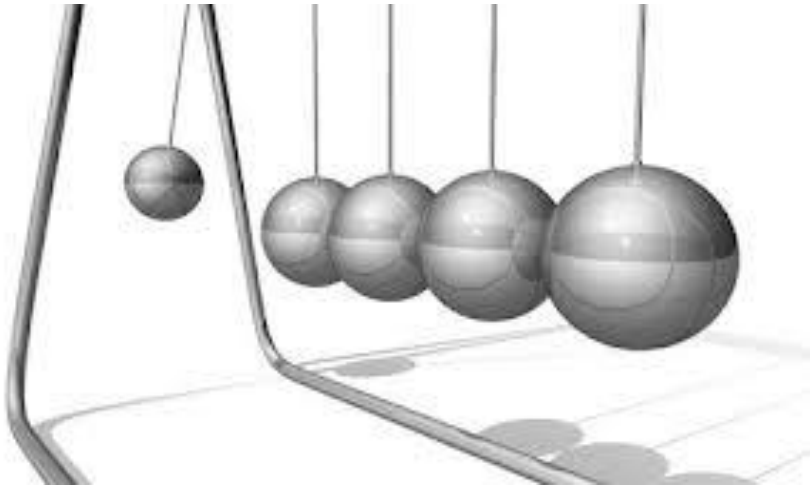
=

+

Urban Renewal demolish the  
character and appeal of civic  
identity



# Historical Basis





# Historical Basis



**NATIONAL TRUST**  
*for* HISTORIC PRESERVATION®



**DOWNTOWN**  
GRAND RAPIDS INC.

# Changing Populations

*Our Downtowns are mightily different than they were 15 years ago*

*Kris's overly generalized Downtown stakeholder psychographic typologies:*



R



**BR**

**AR**

Patriarchal  
property  
owners

Trustworthy  
public  
officials

Cozy, bidding  
their time  
bureaucrats

Free at  
Last

The Hip

The  
Converted

# Public Engagement Postulate

For too long, the ends – planning functions, processes, and policy making – dictated the means by which we have sought the engagement of our citizens.

These means were created via the mechanisms available to our Before–Revitalized past, by those whom they satisfied.



# Doing the Same Thing...Yet Expecting Different Results



# Doing the Same Thing...Yet Expecting Different Results



# Doing the Same Thing...Yet Expecting Different Results





# Doing the Same Thing...Yet Expecting Different Results



# Reframing Engagement

*We must re-frame our context for public engagement.*

Engagement isn't a series of boxes to check:

- Meetings
- Charrettes
- Public Comment
- Surveys



# Those Pesky Millennials...

- Many, if not most, communities include Gen X / Gen Y Recruitment & Retention initiatives as a part of their Econ. Dev. Strategies
- 77 % Prefer an Urban Environment
- 53% of Gen Y doesn't have a driver's license by the time they are 21
- They volunteer at very high rates when the activity has a purpose
- They eschew their parents' consumerism, and want choices
- Their engagement preferences are largely foreign to the "BR" demos
- They are changing the urban landscape without asking permission – we're playing catch up!



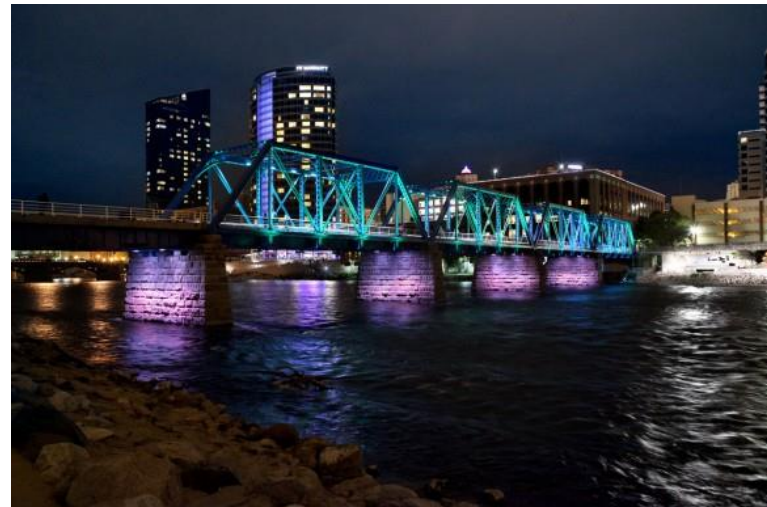
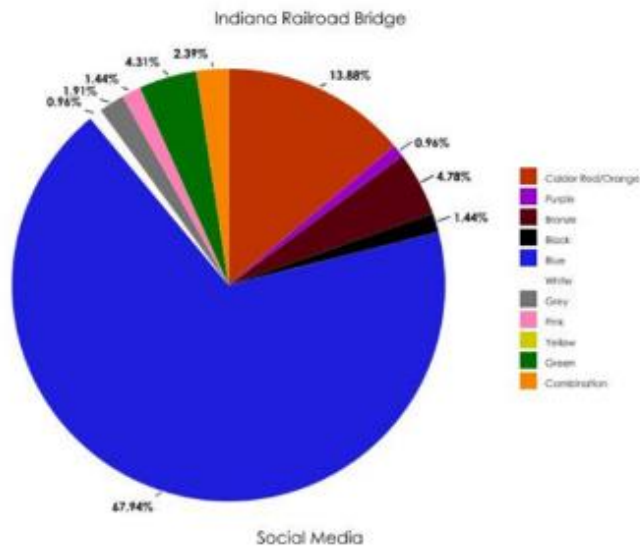
# Reframing Engagement

Engagement is:

- Sincerity
- Follow-through
- Commitment
- Trust
- Compromise
- Growth
- Communication

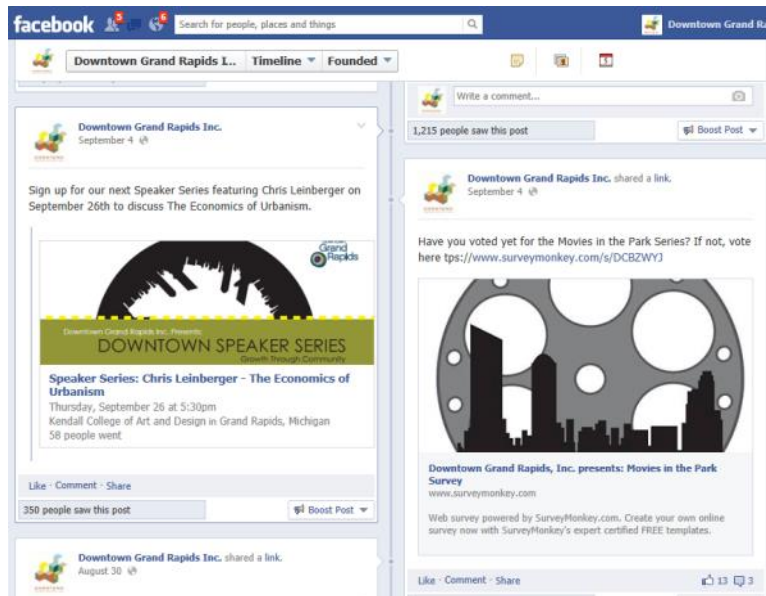
*Our communities are our families. Like families – we create the conditions to be trusted, embraced, beloved, estranged, or divorced.*

# Ex. 1: Compel a Conversation





# Ex. 2: Reward Participation



# Ex. 3: Go to Them





# Ex. 4: Engage Constantly

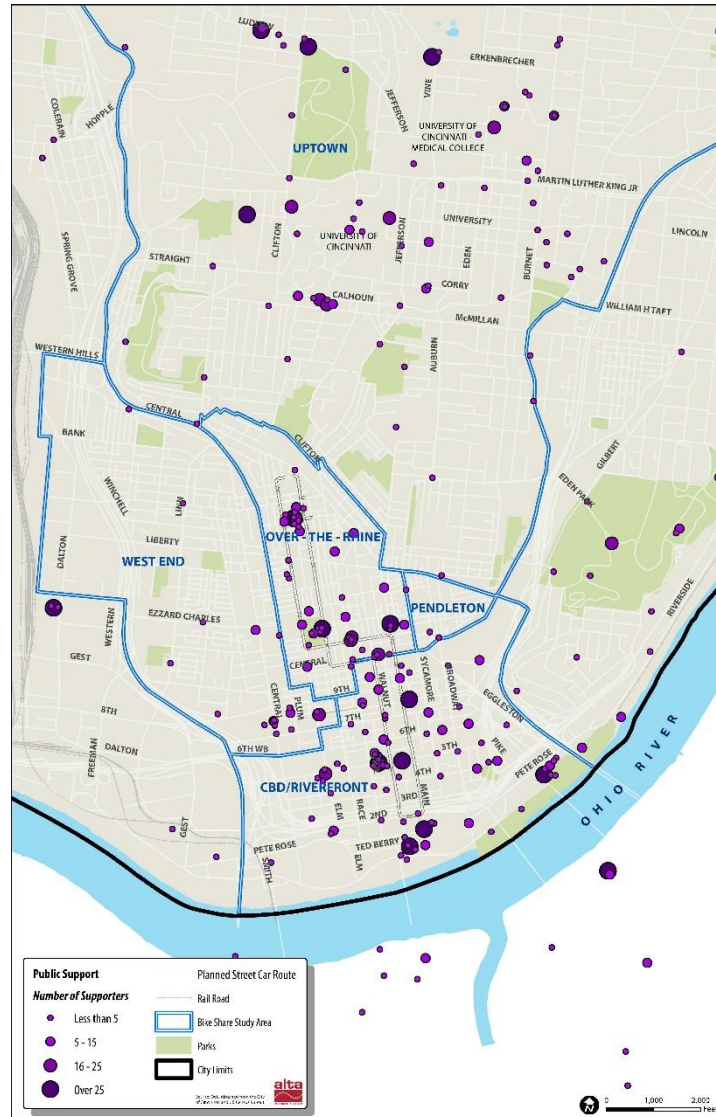


Valent ICE



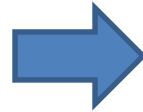
DOWNTOWN  
GRAND RAPIDS INC.

# Ex. 5: Technology is Your Friend





# Ex. 6: Defer Authority



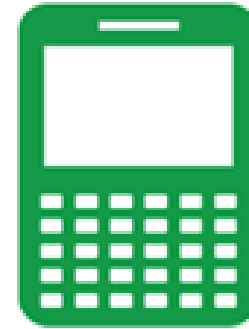
# Ex. 7: Empower through Education



Knowledge



People



Tools

# Summary

- Accommodate differing engagement medium preferences
- Enable progressive strata of engagement intensities
- Productive input follows empowerment and education
- Reach into the under-heard populations
- Embody your community's personality
- Rush to where they are
- Create avenues for progressive involvement
- Reward good behavior. Help people experience the fruits of their involvement.



# Thank you.

Kristopher Larson, AICP  
President & CEO  
Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.  
[klarson@downtowngr.org](mailto:klarson@downtowngr.org)

