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Citizen Power Ladder: A Practical Tool to Make Museums More Accessible

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Abstract

The hierarchical structures in which museums and galleries currently operate prohibit these cultural institutions from creating equitable and sustainable relationships with local residents. As a result, museums remain inaccessible civic spaces for many citizens in the United Kingdom and internationally. Reflecting on a case study based at the Whitworth Art Gallery, this article tests a practical tool that may be used to reimagine these hierarchies using asset-based community development (ABCD). It proposes the value of the ABCD technique, the Citizen Power Ladder, in supporting museums and galleries to become more citizen-led spaces that can be owned and used by all.

Keywords: citizen ownership of cultural institutions

While flicking through the television channels on the sofa with my grandfather, we settled on the news. A story was on showcasing a new art gallery that would be opening in Manchester City Centre, close to where we live. My grandad promptly switched channels, declaring, “Those sorts of places aren’t for us.” For a minute, I panicked and wondered if I had remembered to mention what I had done for work over the last seven years. On many occasions, I had; yet the sentiment remained that art galleries are not for us.

I have worked in arts engagement across the country, from Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, to Brent, London, collaborating with community groups and individuals to create local arts projects. One of my responsibilities has been to increase arts access in neighbourhoods and ensure that museums, galleries, and arts organisations reach citizens across local communities. In England, less than half of all adults visited a gallery or museum at least once last year, with only 6% visiting once a month.¹ Various types of barriers may contribute to this lack of regular engagement, including physical factors such as the cost of tickets to exhibitions or the travel to and from a museum, as well as more subtle barriers such as feeling unwelcome or anxious around entering a museum or gallery for the first time.² Through my work, I have often asked citizens and community groups: what prevents you

¹ Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2024.

² Bishop 2006.

from visiting local museums and galleries? The most common answers have reflected my grandad's view and are along the lines of "They are not really for me."

Alistair Hudson, the Director of Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, states that galleries and museums are rarely a part of the public's everyday; instead, people engage with culture and creativity through video games, digital screens, or concerts, which are easier to access.³ To embed cultural civic spaces in local citizens' lives, these institutions must enable their public to have a greater say in the work they produce so that these civic spaces may be more relevant to the people they serve. Through distributing ownership of museums and galleries from creative professionals to local citizens, cultural institutions can root themselves more firmly in their local neighbourhoods as an asset for a greater number of people. By increasing the power citizens hold in their local cultural spaces, the narrative may shift from "They are not really for me" to "They are for me because they are by me." This desire for greater public agency in museums and galleries is being evidenced across UK local authorities and arts institutions, with professionals committing to distributing authority over decision-making in cultural institutions to local communities.⁴ However, the practicalities of how to achieve this remain frustratingly underexplored, and I have witnessed (and felt) hesitancy and uncertainty around how to make this aspirational vision of a democratic arts institution a reality.⁵

When distributing agency within the museum to citizens, creative professionals must recognise and prioritise the expertise, knowledge, and skills that are housed beyond the museum walls in their local neighbourhoods. The asset-based community development (ABCD) approach offers practical techniques that cultural spaces, as well as institutions across sectors, may use to become more community-led.⁶ The ABCD approach centres community development techniques on the assets that are held within communities, including local knowledge, trust-filled relationships, practical skills, or passions.⁷ ABCD can provide useful, practical tools, more commonly used in public health and local authority settings, through which museums and galleries can develop more democratic ways of working collaboratively with local communities.⁸ The community development techniques developed within the ABCD approach are designed to enable everybody to be an active citizen in their neighbourhood and hold ownership and agency within their communities.⁹

The Citizen Power Ladder (also referred to as Citizen Power Progression) is a technique used within ABCD, informed by Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.¹⁰ The ABCD Institute, part of the DePaul University, Chicago, recommends the ladder as a tool that institutions and communities can use together to consider the hierarchies that exist in community partnerships.¹¹ The purpose of the Power Ladder is to illustrate power imbalances that exist between the roles and duties carried out by professionals and those of community partners when working together on a project in an institutional setting.¹² The

³ Hudson 2022.

⁴ Culture Commons 2024.

⁵ Culture Commons 2024.

⁶ Nurture Development 2021.

⁷ Birmingham Voluntary Service Council 2021.

⁸ Russell 2020.

⁹ Russell and McKnight 2022.

¹⁰ Arnstein 1969; Gaber 2019.

¹¹ ABCD Institute 2020.

¹² ABCD Institute 2020.

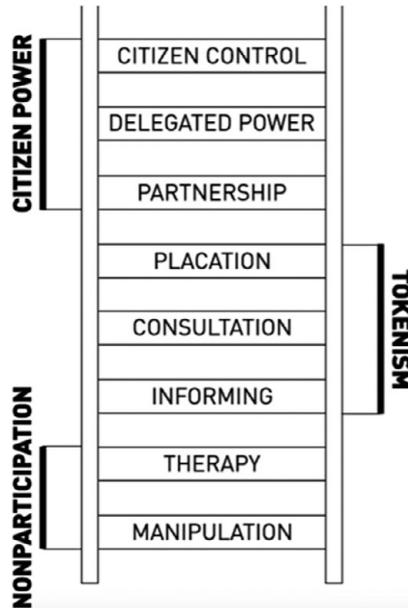


Figure 1. This illustration of Arnstein's Citizen Power Ladder, was produced by Theodora Vardouli and is used here to exemplify the Power Ladder model.¹⁴

Citizen Power Ladder is an interactive visualisation of the organisational structures within a partnership working project, through which the partners can scrutinise which roles in a project community partners hold and those which professionals hold. The aim is to question why certain roles are held by the respective partners, reflect on where power lies in a project, and consider how community partners can hold more power over the project.¹³

The ladder is created using a simple design that can be replicated by anyone to map the degree of control citizens have on a project, from tokenistic involvement to complete power and autonomy over decision-making. An example of a Citizen Power Ladder is Figure 1 in this article. Project roles are plotted onto the ladder template to highlight the level of agency citizen partners have in a particular task. The aim is that those roles further down the ladder should progress up the steps because of actions taken to support greater citizen control. In the context of the museum, the Citizen Power Ladder can be used in socially engaged creative projects or exhibitions, which include partnership working with local community groups to address the hierarchies present in such collaborations and prioritise accessible and inclusive museum practices. By ensuring community voices are key to decision-making in cultural institutions, museums and galleries can become more democratic spaces that more people may access. The ladder provides opportunities to tangibly alter who has a voice in decision-making in museums and, as a result, can diversify who museums operate by and for.

I have been working with the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, UK, to test the usefulness of the Citizen Power Ladder within an art gallery to reflect on and negotiate the power balance present during socially engaged project creation with communities. We have collaboratively tested the ladder to consider the roles of Whitworth employees and

¹³ DePaul University 2017.

¹⁴ Vardouli 2015

members of Portraits of Recovery, a charity supporting people in recovery from substance use with which The Whitworth is currently partnering. Portraits of Recovery is an arts charity based in Manchester that supports people in recovery and those affected by substance use. This partnership seeks to enable members of Portraits of Recovery to creatively examine, define, and present their understanding of recovery shaped by their own lived experiences. Through this collaboration, a co-curated exhibition will be presented at the Whitworth Art Gallery in July 2025, which reinterprets work from the gallery's collection through the lens of recovery.¹⁵ This exhibition will be titled "Recoverist Curators" and seeks to challenge the shame and stigmatisation of recovery within Whitworth's art collection and more widely in society. The collaboration between the gallery and Portraits of Recovery highlights the ability of cultural institutions to provide a space for connection, through which to learn from others. As such, members of Portraits of Recovery must hold power in the gallery and believe that this institution is a civic space for them to use and have agency within.

The use of the Power Ladder within this partnership enables The Whitworth staff and members of Portraits of Recovery to visualise the hierarchies that exist between them and form an ongoing device that can support Portraits of Recovery to uphold agency throughout the collaboration. Additionally, this continuing process aims to support transparent and trust-filled relationship building between the gallery and partner organisation by enabling critical reflection on the power and authorship of the ongoing project. To create the Power Ladder (Figure 2), the Whitworth and Portraits of Recovery worked together to identify the core roles and duties required to design and build the project. This will be added to as the project progresses and as new tasks arise. The roles and duties identified included budget management, risk assessment, and communication (language), among others. Following the identification of these responsibilities, the group collaboratively considered where each task would fit on the Power Ladder, from "informing," in which The Whitworth had complete control over the relevant task and would simply inform Portraits of Recovery of their decisions, to "citizen control" in which Portraits of Recovery would take ownership of the responsibilities. As evidenced below, most of the roles were placed high up on the Power Ladder, signifying that Portraits of Recovery had some/full control over aspects of the project. However, other key duties, including budget management and expectation-setting, were placed on the last step of the ladder, highlighting the need for the partners to consider how the control of important duties, such as these, could be distributed more equally to ensure a more equitable partnership.

The ladder's ability to highlight power imbalances within responsibilities, such as budget management and expectation-setting, has identified opportunities for Portraits of Recovery members to hold greater authority. The placement of budget management low down on the ladder emphasises the need for greater involvement from Portraits of Recovery members in managing project finances. This may necessitate training in areas such as budget management and wider project management tasks to enable members to confidently allocate budgets within the project. The creation of the ladder sparked an initial reflective conversation on how project budgets were currently being managed. This highlighted the need for the gallery staff to enable further transparency around the project budget, including how this has been allocated so far and by whom. Additionally, the ladder exposed the lack of power that Portraits of Recovery members held over expectation-setting in the partnership. The collaborators of the Whitworth Art Gallery must be able to define their ambitions for the Recoverist Curators partnership as well as to set boundaries and expectancies around their contributions to the project. The ladder proved valuable in addressing the need for Portraits

¹⁵ Whitworth Art Gallery 2025.

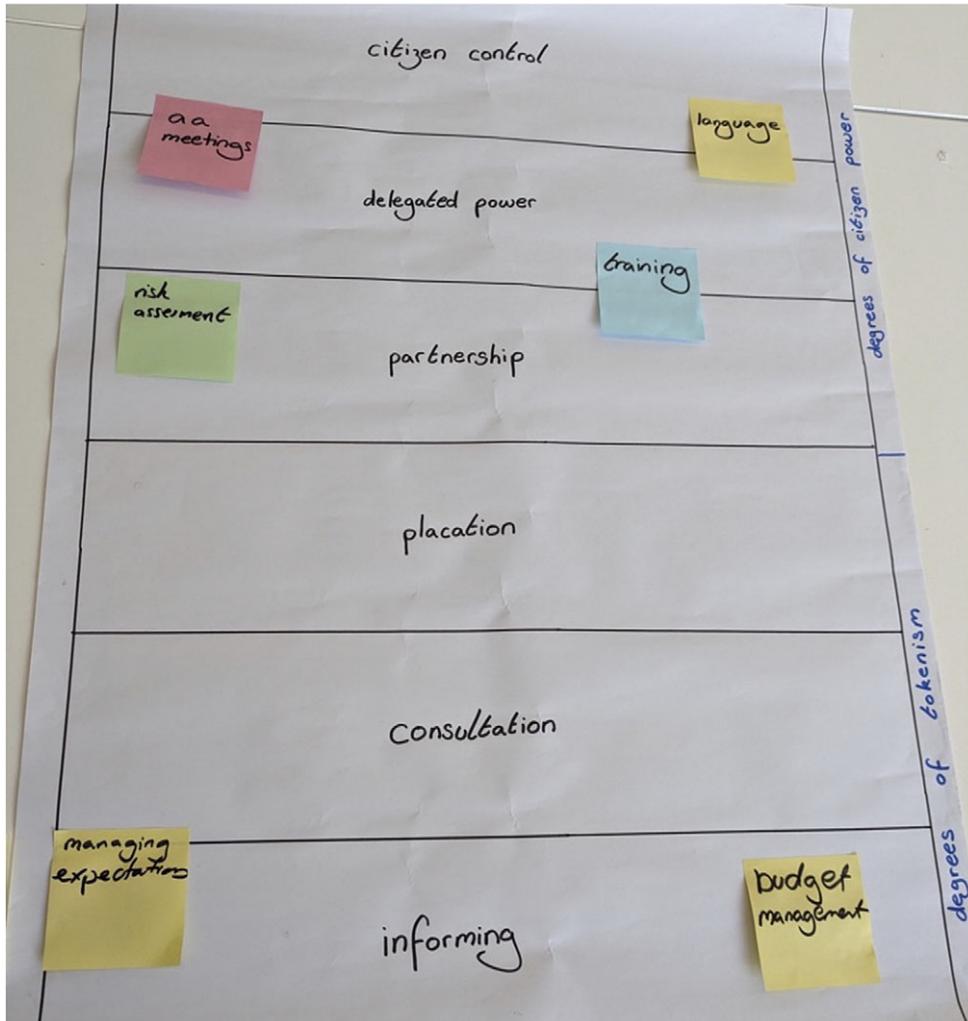


Figure 2. The Whitworth and Portraits of Recovery created this example of a Power Ladder at a workshop held at The Whitworth led by Anna Smith on 1 May 2024. This initial design will be added to and edited as the project progresses.¹⁶

of Recovery members to have the space to present their expectations for the exhibition to gallery staff members.

As the Power Ladder is a tool that can be useful to repeatedly come back to throughout a project, this initial ladder will continue to be added to and edited over the project duration to support the partners to work towards the Portraits of Recovery community having greater control over their work with The Whitworth. The ladder was recognised as a valuable prompt for the partners to reimagine how they work together and consider the practical steps now required for some roles to be moved further up the ladder. All members of the Whitworth and Portraits of Recovery included in the creation of the Citizen Power Ladder have committed to regularly utilising the ladder to track the evolution of their partnership

¹⁶ Smith 2024

and detect further opportunities for greater citizen control. Responses to the Citizen Power Ladder from Whitworth staff included the importance of the ladder in enabling gallery workers to tackle the gallery's existing hierarchical power structures with local citizens. Employees of the gallery also recognised the use of the ladder to increase citizen authority within the space and reflexively consider project design. Members of Portraits of Recovery identified the ladder's role in enabling greater transparency in their partnership with The Whitworth and the importance of knowing that their collaboration is being valued.

It will take time for museums and galleries to become more democratic civic spaces that serve a greater number of people in our society. The Citizen Power Ladder is one example of a practical tool that can be activated to work towards this ambition and diversify who holds power and can access cultural institutions. Through small techniques like this, we can collaboratively reimagine for whom museums produce work so that more people can say, "Museums are for us."

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