

Paths of Participation:

A Stepwise Framework for Better Planning Conversations

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This project was conducted under the direction of Professor Mildred Warner, as a part of CRP 5074 Economic Development Workshop in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University.

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Foundational Lens

“Planners shape public learning as well as public action.” — John Forester, *The Deliberative Practitioner* (1999)

Forester’s insight sets the tone for this report. Planning is not only about producing plans—it is about shaping how people learn, interpret, and engage with their environment and with each other. Planners influence public understanding just as much as public outcomes.

Why This Matters for Our Workshop

With this responsibility in mind, our team aimed to produce a set of engagement strategies that support planners in facilitating learning—both among colleagues and within communities.

These strategies are designed for contexts where:

- Open dialogue may be limited or politically sensitive
- Some voices are routinely overlooked
- Planners still need to surface diverse perspectives
- Collaborative problem-solving must happen despite constraints.

What the Framework Helps Planners Do

The approach introduced here is built around three core practices:

- **Identify** who is missing or unheard within planning processes
- **Invoke** overlooked perspectives through guided, reflective activities
- **Involve** participants meaningfully, even when systems or politics restrict open engagement

Our Aim

By utilizing a theoretical lens, this report encourages planners to approach engagement not as a procedural requirement but as an active practice of care and visibility—an essential skill for navigating today’s complex planning environments.



Meet The Team

Mehr-un-nisa Amin

MRP'26, Cornell University

Mehr-un-nisa Imran Amin is a Master of City and Regional Planning candidate at Cornell University, specializing in transportation, infrastructure, and urban equity. With a background in Economics and Political Science, she brings experience in data analysis, policy evaluation, and mobility-focused research. Her work includes GIS-based transit equity studies, environmental health analysis, and transport energy research. She is interested in how inclusive planning and sustainable mobility can create healthier, more equitable cities.



Franklin Berry

URS'26, Cornell University

Franklin Berry is an Urban and Regional Studies student with an interest in urban revitalization and how policy shapes everyday community life. His work focuses on neighborhood development of public spaces and the social impacts of the built environment. He has experience with site analysis and visualization. He approaches planning with a straightforward, people-oriented perspective.



Mandira Pai

MRP'26, Cornell University

Mandira Pai is a Master of Regional Planning candidate at Cornell University with a minor in Real Estate. Her work spans housing revitalization, urban design, and community-centered redevelopment. She has contributed to major planning and visioning initiatives—including the Shaker Square revitalization effort in Cleveland—and previously practiced as an architect on large-scale cultural, hospitality, and adaptive reuse projects in India. She brings a blended expertise in planning, design, real estate feasibility, and storytelling that bridges technical rigor with community priorities.



Mentors



Dr. Mildred Warner

Professor, City and Regional Planning, AAP Cornell

Dr. Mildred E. Warner is a Professor of City and Regional Planning and Global Development at Cornell University whose work examines local government service delivery, privatization, economic development, and planning across generations. She shows how human services function as essential social infrastructure and how market-based approaches can create both opportunities and inequities. With over 200 publications and major federal and foundation grants, she bridges research and practice to support more equitable and sustainable communities.



Brittany Griffin

Planner, Vice Chair APA Women & Planning Division

Brittany Griffin is a Georgia-based municipal planner with over a decade of experience in land use, zoning, transportation, and historic preservation. At BlitzPermits.AI, she helps integrate AI tools that streamline site plan review and modernize planning workflows. Known for her data-driven, impact-focused approach, she also advocates for more equitable planning practices and works to address racial and economic disparities through policy and community engagement.



Ethan Shafer

Planner, Secretary/Treasurer APA LGBTQ & Planning Division

Ethan Shafer is a planner with the City of Colorado Springs, where they bring a people-centered approach to land use, long-range planning, and development review. A University of Oregon graduate, they focus on grounding planning decisions in community experience. Ethan also serves as Secretary and Treasurer for APA's LGBTQ and Planning Division, advocating for greater inclusion in the field. They look forward to sharing insights on Denver and the Front Range and how planners can help strengthen the region's communities.



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Introduction

Shifting political climates shape every profession, and planning is no exception.

As societies become more polarized, planners must navigate a growing tension between what communities need and what is prioritized (Forester, 1999) raising a fundamental question:

Who are planners ultimately planning for?

Planners have long planned for the “**androgynous worker**,” a false neutral that excludes most people. In truth, working-age adults make up only about half the population, and many of them are women or caregivers. The rest are children and older adults whose needs fall outside this narrow model. Designing for all ages exposes the limits of this model and demands a more inclusive, realistic approach to planning. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; et al, 2025)

Beyond Neutrality Towards Universality

Xu et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2025) argue that the supposedly **neutral language** of planning often legitimizes the **invisibility of women**; this critique similarly extends to other intersecting demographics, including age, income, and other marginalized or unseen groups.

Following Innes and Booher’s (2018) argument that **collaboratively rational dialogue builds from areas of reciprocal or intersecting interests** we argue that using topics of **converging interest with wide applicability**, such as livability and aging, as a vehicle to introduce discourse on more contested issues is an effective way to counter this invisibility.

How are Livability and Aging widely applicable?

AARP defines Livability as a condition where there is ‘a high quality of life for a diverse population across many ages’ (AARP, 2024). As AARP’s cross-generational findings show, aging is a **universally relevant, life-course concern** rather than a seniors-only issue (Houghton, 2025).

We all ride the “aging train”

Recognizing aging as universal allows planners to extend the “aging train” metaphor beyond older adults—to children who rely on caregivers, to caregivers themselves, to aging adults, and to those who support them—showing that aging is a shared life-course trajectory rather than a discrete stage. This shared path creates opportunities for **mutual gain** and supports more meaningful, relevant, and politically workable universal design.



We conducted a literature review spanning several works of which the following three guided our approach—**Scholarship of Engagement (Boyer, 1990)**, and **Deliberative Planning (Forester, 1999)**, **Collaborative Rationality (Innes & Booher, 2018)** & **Invisible women in comprehensive plans (Xu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025)**. Together, these works provide the conceptual foundation for the **Identify → Invoke → Involve** framework that guides every activity we created.



Collaborative Rationality

Collaborative Rationality offers a foundation for engagement that embraces diversity, interdependence, and mutual learning. It helps planners identify:

- Who holds different forms of knowledge and experience?
- Which perspectives are present, and which are missing?
- What community needs emerge through shared inquiry?
- The iterative nature of understanding community needs



Co-Production of Knowledge

Boyer’s Scholarship of Engagement reinforces planning as a mutual learning process rather than a one-directional transfer of expertise. It informed our approach by:

- Positioning planners as both learners and contributors
- Foregrounding shared inquiry and reflective practice
- Emphasizing the iterative nature of understanding community needs



Deliberative Planning

Forester’s conception of deliberative practice highlights the political and ethical dimensions of listening, the need to recognize invisible voices, and the influence of planners in shaping the outlook of civil society. This lens informed activities that:

- Highlight the micropolitics of participation
- Model ethical decision-making in constrained environments
- Encourage planners to attend to emotion, conflict, and power dynamics



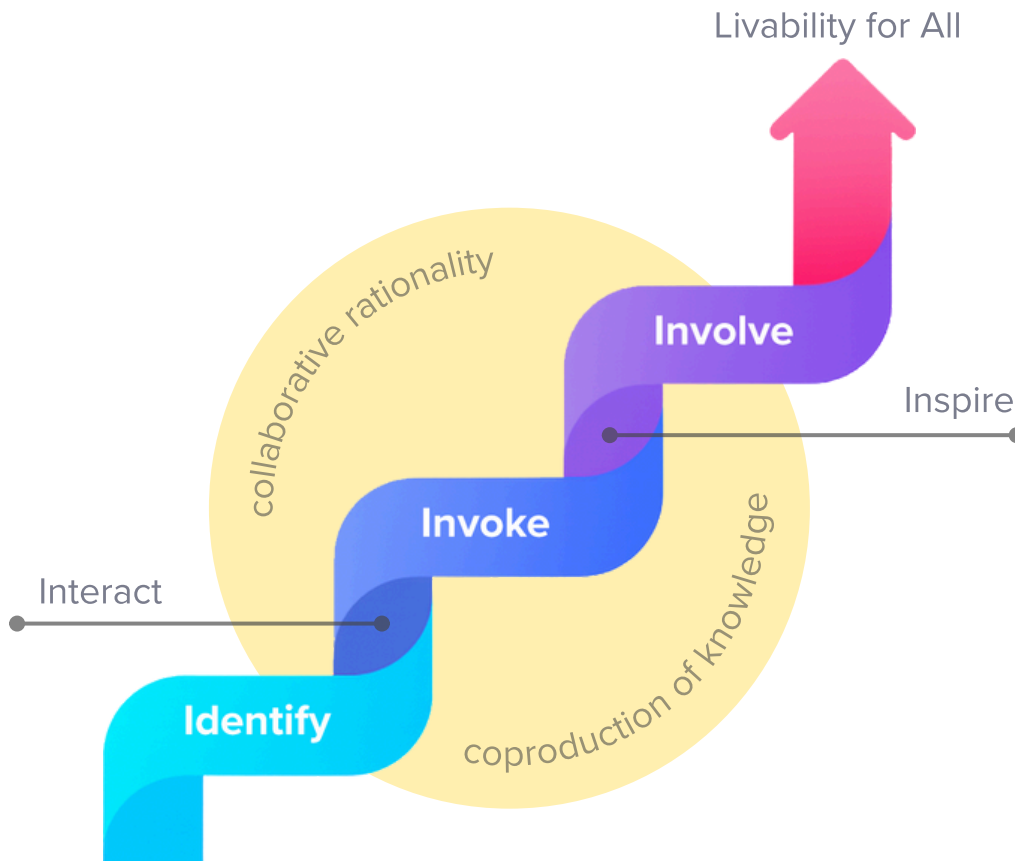
Extending Beyond the Neutral

Xu et al (2022). & Zhang et al (2025). show that “neutral” planning language often erases gendered experiences, defaulting to norms that overlook the safety, mobility and caregiving needs of those who do not fit the androgynous worker. Using proxy terms like “family” or “children” rarely captures these realities. This lens informed activities that:

- Identify whose needs disappear under neutral categories
- Highlight gaps created by relying on oversimplified identities

Framework

Using the literature, we created a framework designed to support planners in *navigating sensitive topics and environments through shared interests*. We do this using three steps: Identify → Invoke → Involve.



Applying the Identify–Invoke–Involve Model

- We start by **identifying areas of intersecting interests** i.e. livability and aging, using them as our vehicle of discourse (See our interactive activities: *Aging Train*, *Invisible User* and *Third table*).
- Once we set up the scenario, the participants **interact with each other in semi-controlled interactive conversations** where they experience the dynamics of co-production and collaborative rationality.
- The participants practice **invoking missing perspectives**, drawing upon contextual knowledge, lived experiences, ethical reflection, and deliberative listening to reinterpret planning scenarios.
- We intend our methodologies to **inspire empathy** within the participants – moving them from simple awareness to **collaborative, inclusive involvement** that results in **deliberative planning** that leads to **livability** for all .





Ripple Effect

As Warner (2017) notes, WHO's Age-Friendly Cities framework and UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities initiative **target different age groups** but **share** many **core elements** in physical design, services, and social inclusion. AARP follows these same principles in its Livability Index, arguing that **planning for aging generates a broader "ripple effect"** that enhances **livability for all** (AARP, 2024). This allows all to ride the aging train.

Identify

In the Ripple Effect Activity, participants identify simple interventions for aging that benefit multiple groups simultaneously, revealing common interests and shared urban needs.

Example:
Benches + shade → better walkability → safer streets → livelier public life

Invoke

Participants are then asked to discuss 'ripple effects' they have observed, not initially considered or proposed.

They draw on:

- lived experiences
- contextual and cultural knowledge
- creative thinking
- deliberative listening

Involve

In the last step, participants bounce off of different 'ripple effects' that benefit everyone, practicing the "mutual gains" logic of collaborative rationality.



Invisible User

Planning attempts to be "**neutral**" however, this stance inadvertently makes women and other **intersectional identities invisible** in the process (et al., 2025). Through this activity, participants will be able to **recognize** those who might be **overlooked** through **neutrality**—caregivers, late-hour workers, renters, queer youth— and encourages planners to **account for these realities** and **make planning truly neutral**

In this exercise, participants will be thoroughly primed on the process of a paradigm shift prior to the activity. After providing this context, participants will be asked to identify common examples of neutral language they have experienced or practiced that could lead to the creation of an invisible user

Participants will be grouped by table to discuss who might be made invisible through neutral language.

This dialogue encourages curiosity and deeper reflection on the broader impact of word choice

In the final phase, participants explore how neutrality can be strengthened to be genuinely inclusive. Through discussion, they examine how language shapes visibility and consider ways to expand neutrality so it more fully reflects the diversity of users it seeks to serve



The Third Table

The Third Table activity helps participants **practice collaboration** in politically contested planning environments where different actors hold **unequal power, priorities, and constraints**. By using **shared and widely resonant entry points, like aging**, participants explore how **planners can navigate complexity**, reframe disagreements, and advance broader livability goals without centering conflict.

Participants identify one real or plausible planning case in their own experiences, where topics like aging can serve as a strategic starting point for a broader livability challenge.

Participants discuss how framing the issue through this universal entry point, helps surface shared interests and shift conversations toward common ground.

They reflect on effective language, framing, and strategies that move discussions forward.

Each table shares a brief example describing the contested context, the entry point, and how this framing led to a beneficial outcome. They reflect on:

- Language of universality, care, and long-term benefit
- Strategies that align needs with community goals





Expected Outcomes



Ripple Effect

Participants will learn to trace how small planning interventions create multigenerational ripple effects — identifying shared needs, invoking missing perspectives, and collaboratively producing solutions that reveal the mutual-gains logic of livability for all, allowing everyone to ride the Aging Train.



Invisible User

Participants will learn to identify how “neutral” planning practices create invisible users and, through this paradigm shift, learn to actively surface and involve these overlooked groups so their needs meaningfully shape planning decisions.



The Third Table

Participants will learn how universal interests like aging can be used as an entry point to navigate contested planning contexts. Through collaboration, they practice inclusive language and framing to align differing interests and to translate political complexity into constructive, win-win outcomes.



01

Group dynamics may limit participation. Some participants may naturally speak more, which could overshadow quieter voices.

02

Activities may simplify complex issues. The scenarios help spark conversation but may not capture the full realities of planning or lived experience.

03

Limited time may restrict depth. Short activities may allow only surface-level reflection, especially for participants new to these concepts.

04

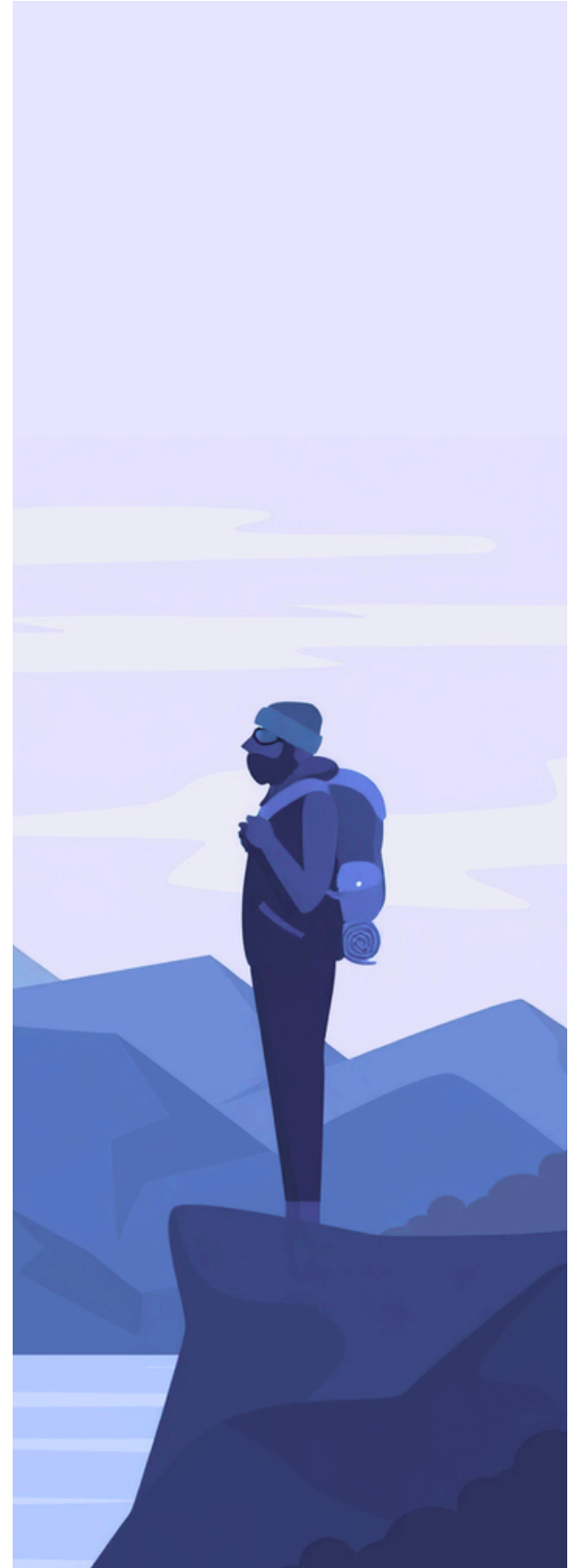
Logistical Limitations may arise. Facilitators may need to run the activity in multiple formats so that everyone—regardless of ability, comfort with technology, or available devices—may participate.

05

Examples of “neutral language” are only partial. Short excerpts may show the issue, but they may not reflect the full range of invisibility in real plans.

06

Facilitation shapes outcomes. Guidance may support dialogue, but it may not remove the influence of power dynamics within groups.





01

The Identify–Invoke–Involve model is intuitive.
It will guide participation well and also show how easily missing perspectives can go unnoticed.

02

Priming Participants is Key.
It may be important to introduce related but diverse examples prior to the activity, as this may help prime participants towards better outcomes.

03

Micropolitics surfaces naturally.
Small interactions may expose power and emotion, but they also show how planning conversations often hinge on subtle cues.

04

Creative activities support learning.
They will make abstract concepts accessible, but they may also highlight how unfamiliar some ideas are for participants.

05

Participants build on one another's insights.
Collaboration will grow quickly, showing how co-production depends on shared trust.

06

Engagement feels active and reflective.
Participants will connect ideas across activities, but the session will also show how much more depth is possible with additional time.

Conclusion



Student presentations at the 'Promoting Age-Friendly Communities in Tompkins County and Beyond' community session hosted by Tompkins County Office for the Aging, December 2025

Aging is the one trajectory we all share

Universality is our **strongest entry point** into understanding what livability for all truly demands. By beginning the workshop with aging, participants quickly saw how simple interventions ripple outward across generations, revealing **overlapping needs in mobility, safety, comfort, and access**. Talking about aging made it clear that planning for one group can strengthen the everyday experience of many.

The **Identify–Invoke–Involve framework** transformed this insight into action. It pushed participants to **identify** “neutral” planning language, to deliberately **invoke** absent voices, and to **involve** them in more inclusive interpretations of planning scenarios. The model showed that livability for all requires **not just better solutions, but better visibility**.

Across the activities, we saw how **micropolitics, emotions, and group dynamics** subtly shape whose needs rise to the surface. Yet we also witnessed how quickly collaboration grows when participants connect through shared experiences rather than contested categories.

Our biggest takeaway is this: **livability for all becomes possible only when planners ground conversations in universal experiences like aging**—that reveal mutual gains and widen who gets to be included. Starting from shared trajectories creates the trust, awareness, and reflection needed to design places that work for everyone.

Aging simply opened the door; livability for all is the destination.



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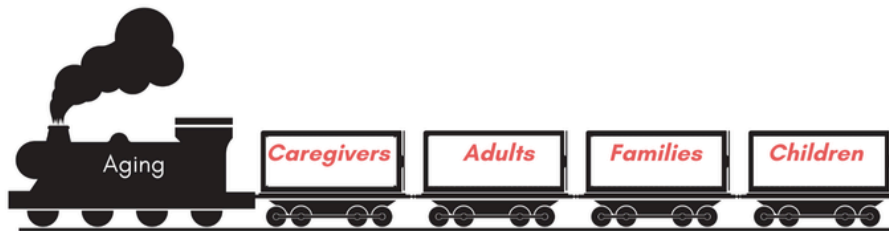
Appendices

Appendix 01: Aging & The Ripple Effect



Aging & The **RIPPLEEFFECT**

Aging creates the opportunity to make our communities more **livable for everyone**. The process of aging is a **shared, continuous journey** that includes children, caregivers, women, men and older adults. By investing in age-friendly services & infrastructure, a **ripple effect** is created that makes living easier, safer and more supportive for all passengers. All of us can ride the **aging train**.



The ripple effect is when a **single planning intervention** creates **multiple benefits** for many **different groups**, far beyond its original purpose.

Think of an example where a single action could generate ripple effects.
Sample examples are listed for reference:

Senior Technology Training:

Tech lessons for older adults → Job creation through teaching staff → less caregiver strain → stronger older adults

Pop-up grocery bus:

Grocery bus in neighborhoods → fewer food deserts → more equitable access → increased dignity + choice → more inclusive cities

Health & Services:

Older adults renting out unused rooms in their homes → reduced loneliness → improved mental health → stronger community bonds



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Instructions: Ripple Effect

Appendix 02

Introduction

- Explain the idea: When we design for aging well, the benefits spread to many other people — this is the **ripple effect**.
- Show the examples to help people understand how one small intervention can create many positive outcomes.
- Tell participants they will work in small groups to imagine their own ripple effect.

Group Work

- Form groups.

Facilitator prompt:

“What existing or new interventions can you think of that produce this ripple effect?”

- Give them some time to discuss in their groups. Walk around and help groups by asking simple prompts like:
 - **“Who else benefits from this?”**
 - **“What happens next if this works well?”**

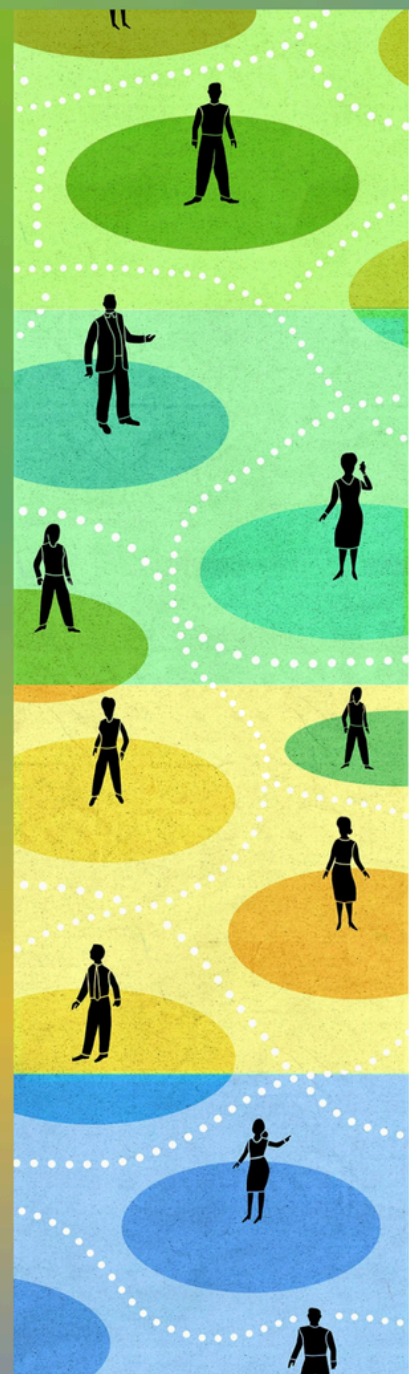
Sharing + Submitting

- Ask groups to share their ripple chain with the room.
- Ask the note-taker from each group to submit their idea on a data collection tool of their choice (Ex. Mentimeter, Google Forms, Polls Everywhere, Paper forms, Note taking etc.)
- Close by reinforcing the key message:


Designing for aging creates ripples that improve livability for all.



Appendix 03: Paradigm Shift



Paradigm SHIFT



The INVISIBLE USER

The Invisible User activity supports participants in developing a sharper awareness of how planning language shapes who is recognized in policy and practice. By examining commonly used “neutral” terms, participants learn how everyday wording can be refined to better reflect the diverse lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups.

After an initial discussion of the need for paradigm changes in planning, participants are asked to identify instances of neutral or generalized wording which may exclude some invisible users. The activity invites participants to draw on their own professional experiences to see how planning language and practice could become more inclusive.


Engaging in group-based discussions, based on their professional experience, opens up space to see what invisible users certain terms may unintentionally create and why.

Examples may include:

- Commuters prioritizing 9–5, while obscuring night-shift workers, caregivers traveling off-peak
- Households treating care as an internal, private matter, obscuring the spatial and time burdens placed on caregivers
- Families centering heteronormative, two-parent households

In the final step, participants discuss how language can remain professionally neutral while better encompassing more users.

The exercise aims to create a shared space where planners learn to identify invisible users, and practice language that more fully represents the range of people who live, work, and move through our communities.



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Instructions: Invisible User

Appendix 04

Prime the Audience

- This session situates participants within moments of paradigm change in planning, introducing the idea of the "**invisible user**" and opening space to consider how neutrality has historically aimed for inclusivity yet can **sometimes fall short**.
- Invite participants into a conversation about neutrality and where its limits become visible. Further explore using examples, such as:
 - Housing & Community design that fails to consider the unique needs of children or older adults
 - The invisible labor of care giving

Spot Neutral Language & Identify the Invisible

At their tables, participants examine their own experiences with neutral language and discuss what familiar planning terms are neutral and who are the invisible users in those scenarios.

Examples may include:

- **Commuters** prioritizing 9–5, while obscuring night-shift workers, caregivers traveling off-peak

Facilitator prompt:

“What examples of neutral language can you think of and who were made invisible by them?”

Neutral & Universal Discussion

After group discussion, participants explore how **planning language can be adjusted** to remain neutral while more **accurately reflecting** shared and **universal needs**.

Once finished, participants can submit their revisions using a **data collection method** of the facilitator's choice, such as oral reports or online tools. The revised language does not need to be a complete redraft—only small shifts are required, some of which may involve pairing neutral terms with more specific language such as:

- residents, including night-shift workers and caregivers

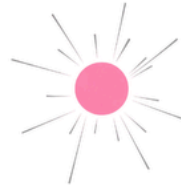


Appendix 05: Politically Contested Environments

Politically Contested ENVIRONMENTS



The Third TABLE



The Third Table helps participants practice collaboration in situations where different groups might hold differing priorities and unequal influence, mirroring real politically contested planning environments.

In this activity, each table will identify one real or plausible planning case where focusing on **a universal factor, such as aging**, could be used as a strategic entry point to advance broader livability goals in a politically contested environment.

The case could involve competing perspectives among:

- **Government:** policy, risk, political constraints
- **Developers/Private Actors:** costs, development interests
- **Community Members:** daily needs, equity, lived experience

Working together, each group will explore how universal entry points such as **aging** can become a shared **starting point for collaboration** across various stakeholders.

Rather than focusing on conflict, the discussion should center around the language, framing, and strategies that helped move conversations forward and build common ground.

At the end of the activity, each table will share a short 2–3 sentence example describing the contested context, the universal entry point, and how this framing led to a constructive, win-win outcome—demonstrating how planners can turn political complexity into opportunities for inclusive progress.



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Developed under the guidance of:
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Workshop: Age-Friendly Planning 2025

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Instructions: The Third Table

Appendix 06

Universal Entry Points:

In this activity participants are invited to reflect on how planning decisions are rarely neutral or linear, and how progress often depends on strategic framing rather than consensus.

The exercise focuses on **universal factors such as aging** as powerful entry points—widely relatable, politically legible, and capable of **unlocking broader livability goals**.

A Neutral Table to Discuss

At their tables, participants select one planning issue (e.g., mobility, housing, public space, services) and briefly identify where tensions exist amongst various stake holders

They discuss:

- What concerns government (risk, language, feasibility)
- What motivates private actors (costs, returns, timelines)
- What the community prioritizes (everyday needs, access, dignity)

Participants then explore how **universal factors** could be used to **reframe the issue** in a way that builds **common ground**.

Utilize the Third Table

Finally, participants reflect on how framing issues through universal factors creates a “**third table**”—a space where competing interests can move beyond stalemate toward shared livability goals.

Groups prepare a 2–3 sentence example that describes:

- the contested planning context,
- the universal entry point, and
- the resulting win-win outcome via creation of a third table

