

# Towards Community-Driven Renovation of Modernist Areas

Lessons from a neighbourhood-based renovation project in Tallinn



EUROPEAN URBAN INITIATIVE

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Project: SOFT Academy Tallinn, Estonia - [visit our website](#)

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## 1 Introduction

Tallinn needs to renovate 5000 old apartment buildings in the coming years, but the current renovation speed is too slow to meet this goal in time. To speed up renovation across Tallinn, a new approach must be adopted whereby the renovation process is not set up building-by-building but rather neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood. The SOFT Academy project, led by the City of Tallinn, aims at setting neighbourhood-scale renovation in motion, where two or more buildings (and, when possible, the space between them) are renovated according to the New European Bauhaus principles. This approach not only helps to make buildings more sustainable but also to build a more cohesive community. One of the innovative approaches forming the backbone of the SOFT Academy project is 'Participation and Inclusion' (read the previous article on the innovative building blocks on Portico [here](#)).

As the name of the project itself implies, SOFT Academy is not only looking at technical and design solutions needed to increase the energy efficiency of the modernist areas. The focus also lies on the 'softer' component of renovation and renewal interventions, looking to activate communities, use local knowledge to produce the best-fitting solutions and empower residents to take an active role, contributing to a lasting change in their behaviour and approach.

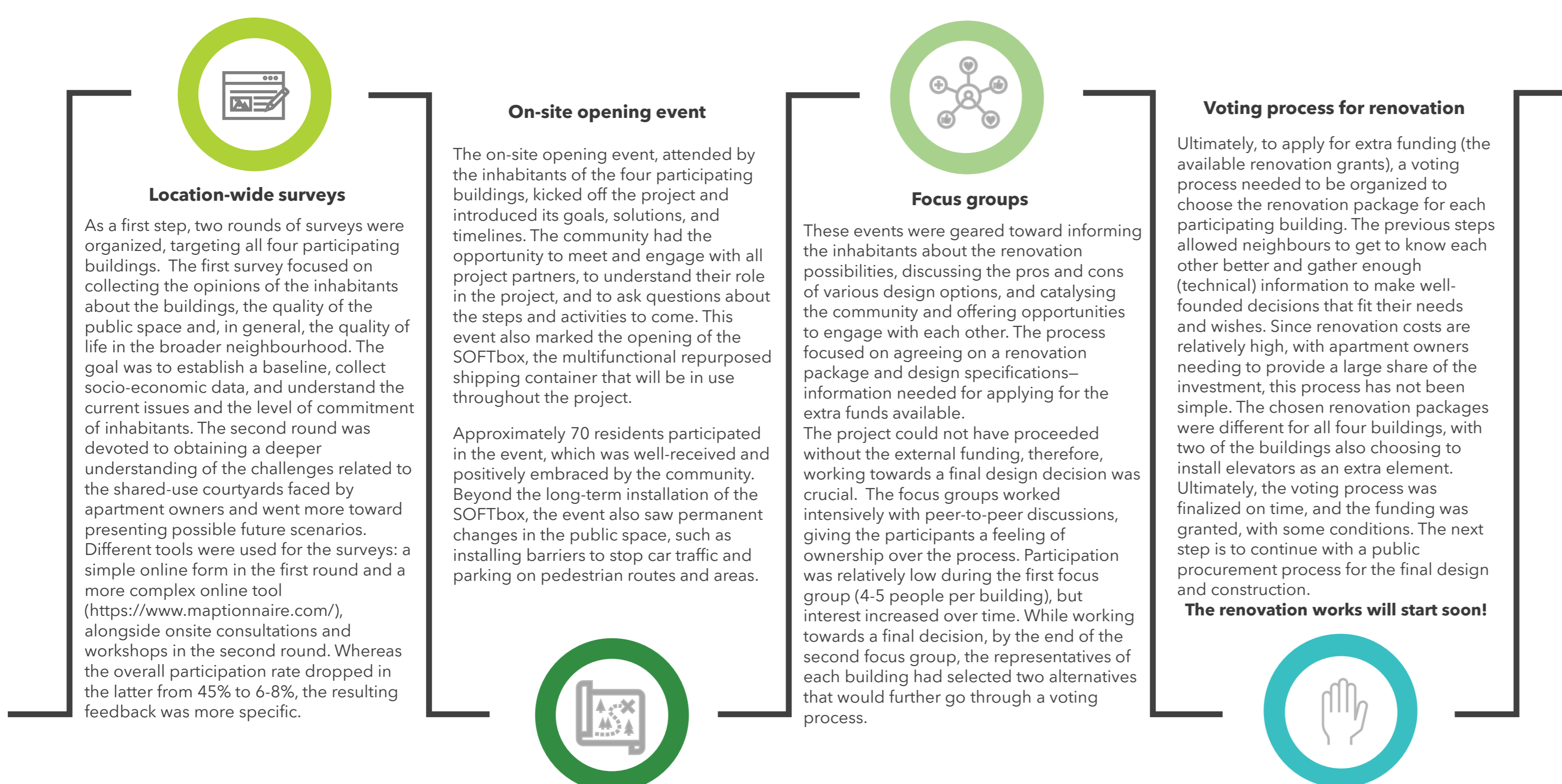


## 2 Context

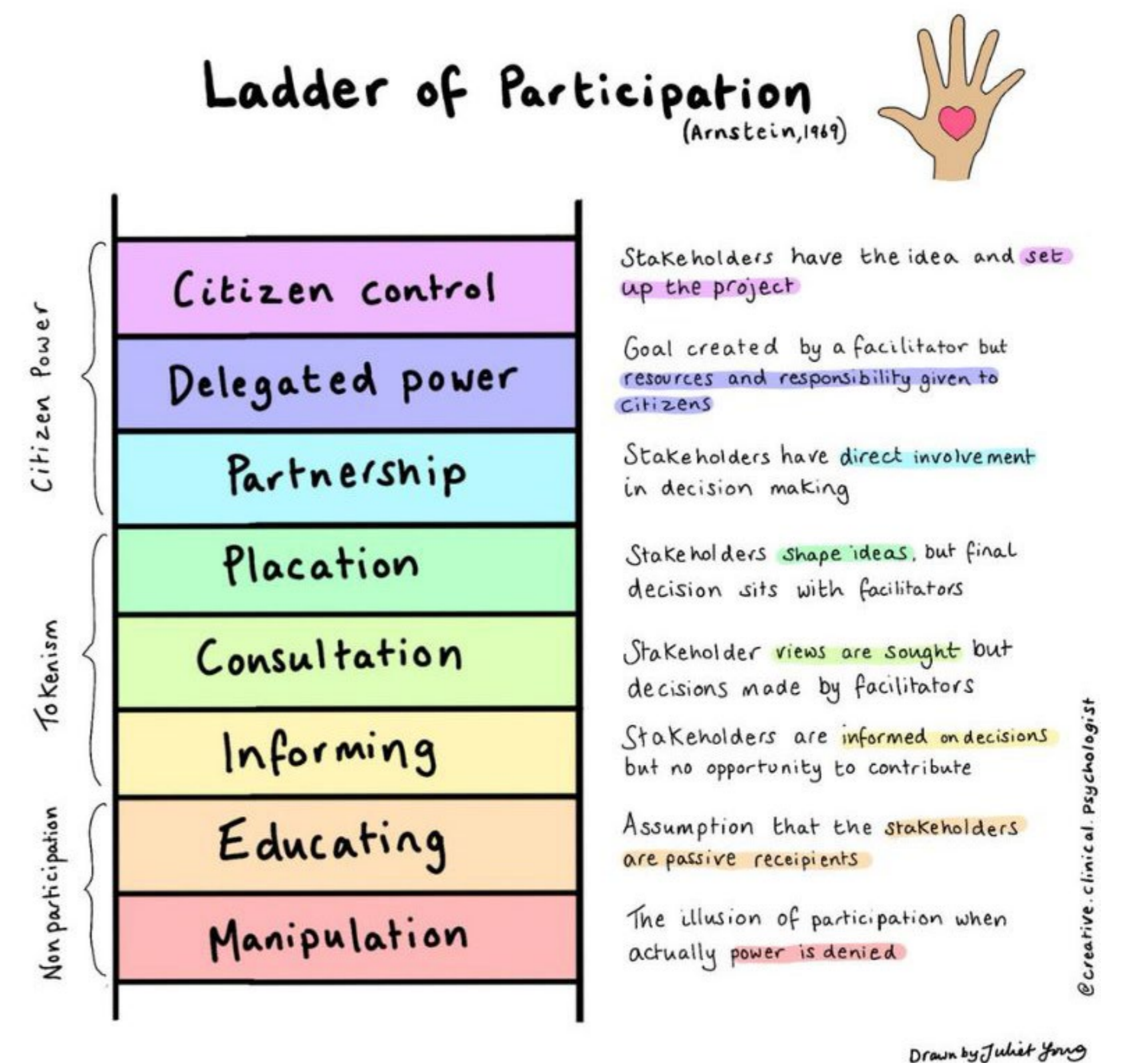
Public participation and inclusion in planning processes (especially for renovation projects) are gaining ground in Tallinn, although there is a reduced capacity at both the administrative and community level. In Estonia, in areas with a soviet modernist built-fabric, a common view of the residents is that home starts from the apartment door. That complicates co-creation and co-decision processes, and delegates participation to the margins of many urban projects. An essential part of the SOFT Academy innovative solution is developing a community engagement model that supports various stakeholders collaborating to achieve a high-quality spatial outcome. The project's participation and inclusion strategy is based on a four-helix model, incorporating the engagement of civil society alongside the participation of established stakeholders representing the public administration, businesses, and academia. The ultimate purpose of this approach is to spark a wave of renovation initiated by apartment owners (and housing associations) while providing all those involved with the knowledge and instruments to support broad community participation.

The first phase of the participatory process resulted in achieving agreement regarding the renovation solution for the buildings, through active engagement. As the project enters its second year, the focus will shift to co-designing the solutions for the public space between the buildings.

### Community engagement steps and tools (focusing on solutions for renovating the buildings)



### Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969)



## 3 Activities and process

### The SOFTbox - social infrastructure from a repurposed shipping container

To create a common area where the inhabitants could meet, play and work together, a repurposed shipping container has been installed in one of the courtyards of the project area. The SOFTbox has been in use since the beginning of the project, serving as an adaptive community centre that is flexible and meets the changing needs of the project and the people. It works as a multipurpose area, being simultaneously a field office for the project's team, a workshop area, a stage, a storage, and a project information centre. The community contributes directly to the content and the functioning of the container.

The Ladder of Participation was used throughout the whole community engagement process as an instrument for reflecting on progress made. While the aim is not necessarily to reach the highest level on the ladder, the organized activities aimed to incorporate various levels of engagement, providing the inhabitants with enough information, tools, and knowledge to proactively contribute to their neighbourhood transformation and generate a long-lasting change.

## 4 Key take-aways

- Participation is a messy process, and it should be adaptable and flexible – it is NOT a straight line.
- When working with digital tools, adapt them to the level of digital literacy of the participants
- Provide training and information on the use (and usefulness) of digital tools
- Language can be a barrier in areas with mixed ethnical population; therefore, provide information in several languages
- People above 60 or under 16 are more challenging to reach, so develop a strategy (special activities) focusing on those target groups – games, small (drawing) competitions for the youngsters, or socialising activities for the elderly
- Identify potential ambassadors for your project within the community and provide them with the tools to 'spread the word' and catalyse the community further

- They will also be the people who will do the most within the project, so take care that they don't burn out and step out of the project
- Building a community and consensus takes time. Time was limited for this project (due to the application for funding deadlines), but the project gathered interest from inhabitants rather easily, given its pioneering character. For future similar neighbourhood-scale renovation interventions, allowing more time for co-creation activities is of the essence.
- Be critical about what you want to achieve – don't overwhelm the community with too many meetings and activities
- If there is a voting procedure necessary, give a voice to the people who are less extrovert and assertive as well – ensure that everybody gets a say by facilitating and moderating discussions
- Tell a compelling story and communicate the benefits for the community but also for individuals.



Photo credits: Aron Urb and Tallinn Municipality