

# Perspectives on Participation: Facilitating Community Involvement in the Design Process

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## Participation: Some Definitions

In this study of participation in the design process it is valuable to look at definitions that have been put forward on the topic. Mary Comerio defines participatory design as a “process of involving a full spectrum of community members, in a meaningful way, in decisions about the form and management of their physical surroundings.”<sup>1</sup> In the book *Microplanning*, Reinhard Goethert and Nabeel Hamdi define community participation as a “process by which professionals, families, communities, groups, government officials, and others get together to work something out, preferably in a formal or informal partnership.”<sup>2</sup> There are subtle differences between these two definitions. Comerio writes about community design. Goethert and Hamdi write about planning. But both are advocates for user participation. Furthermore, Fredrik Wulz breaks the concept of participation into seven different forms, ranging from the least amount of user involvement to the most.<sup>3</sup>

1. Representation: the most passive form of participation where the client’s needs are represented by the knowledge of the architect, not by the input of the client.
2. Questionary: a rational method based on scientific inquiry into finding objective knowledge, using surveys, questionnaires and the like, and subjecting these to rigid statistical analysis.
3. Regionalism: while including some elements of the previous two categories, regionalism adds to the fabric a focus on the culture within a geographical area.
4. Dialogue: this occurs when there is unstructured conversation between user and designer that may or may not influence the final outcome.
5. Alternative: when users are given a range of alternatives to select from. This can be considered a form of participation, especially when the choices emerge from the previous four categories.
6. Co-decision: this happens when decision-making is balanced between designer and users and requires that the latter be involved in decision-making from the outset.
7. Self-decision: in this mode, the designer’s role is minimal and may be limited to simply providing technical support to self-help or self-build operations.

This seven-point structure, like a scale is flexible enough that it can be applied in the planning phase, where project goals and concepts are generated, and in the design phase, where solutions are created. In every project, designers place themselves, in effect, on this sliding scale of participation. In most cases, I believe that the majority of designers allow for only minimal

user involvement, and they then work within the first five categories described above. This may occur when a client already has a program developed and just wants the architect to carry it out. Or it may occur when the designer is only interested in the raw data required to make a program, and, consequently perfunctory interviews will be conducted. These approaches are not what I consider very participatory. On the other end are practitioners like Christopher Alexander who, in his Mexicali project, had the users plan, design, and build their own homes.<sup>4</sup>

For this paper, I am interested in looking at issues related to projects placed near the center of this scale of participation. In terms of degree of involvement, I am most interested in the co-decision category where planning and design decisions are made in an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation.

## Participation Pros and Cons

As designers utilize participation during the design process, they are rightly weighing the benefits against the limitations of this approach. Given its thirty-plus year history, this design method does have a record to evaluate and in some cases the results are not all positive. The criticisms of user involvement fall into three broad categories: increased time commitments, inferior aesthetic results, and flawed methodologies. First of all, many have found the process to be slow. The reasoning is straightforward in that the more people involved in decision-making the longer making decisions will take—even if it is only because everyone must be heard. Moreover, some believe that users in general do not know what they need, and even when they do, they are not properly equipped to get it.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, some practitioners believe that the resulting built form is inferior to what a good architect could have produced. To these practitioners the architecture “is banal when it conforms to familiar models and chaotic when it expresses the choices of participants.”<sup>6</sup> In advocating user participation in design, John Habrakan has frequently been a target of criticism of this nature. He responds to these critiques best in a paper given in 1985:

In school we are told to find our own voices and to do our own thing. In architectural criticism the worst you can say of an architect’s work is not that (the architect) is inept or has bad judgment but that (the architect) did what someone else already did before. Indeed, in the course of time, it seems, the idea that architecture is the special within the ordinary is the prerequisite of good architecture. The idea of the special has evolved into the cult of the new and unheard of.<sup>7</sup>

Since peer acceptance is a natural desire for many designers, the possibility that one's work may be rejected because it lacks originality is a legitimate concern for those contemplating extensive user involvement. The broadest category of liabilities, and perhaps most poignant, deal with concerns over flawed methodologies. Hamdi points out that an obvious example occurs when practitioners fabricate user surveys and questionnaires to justify design goals rather than to generate them.<sup>8</sup> Also, William PeOa notes that designers who begin designs before the problem is defined can only generate partial or premature solutions.<sup>9</sup> This is especially relevant as the time it takes to define the problem or develop the program is extended due to the increased number of people involved in decision-making. Additionally, without the proper representation of users and without an open political process, the results of any participatory approach could be flawed.

Since involving the users in the planning and design of a project can potentially create these liabilities, why would designers even be interested in contemplating the idea? I believe that the answer to this question lies in the realization that there are overriding practical and human development benefits to the method. From a practical standpoint, there are a number of benefits. Lynda Schneckloth and Robert Shibley write that there is a clear benefit to the open exchange of ideas in a public manner rather than in the privacy of each individual, and that this results in an opportunity to create new bodies of knowledge based on shared insights and open dialogue.<sup>10</sup> PeOa reports that participatory program creation can lead to an environment in which creativity is not inhibited because the limits of the problem are clearly established, and it is when the limits are known that creativity thrives.<sup>11</sup>

From a human development standpoint there are some clear benefits as well. For example, Richard Hatch believes that "participation is the arena in which people can relearn environmental competence, experience the pleasures of collective work and develop the ability to question the nature of the . . . world."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Rod Hackney asserts that the process helps build a team spirit and sense of belonging while tapping and allowing enthusiasm to prosper.<sup>13</sup> Another important benefit is that participation can help develop local leaders who provide for program continuity when the "experts" leave. According to Hamdi, this process of promoting community leadership, known as institutional development, should be one of the primary purposes of community participation.<sup>14</sup> PeOa summarizes the benefits when he states that "Good buildings don't just happen. They are planned to look good and perform well, and come about when good architects and good clients join in thoughtful, cooperative effort."<sup>15</sup>

## Principles of Participation

In my research and practice, I have found that there are four key principles of participation worth studying. While not exhaustive, they are necessarily complementary and each prin-

ciple can be applied to varying degrees.

*1. User involvement.* In most projects, the user is on the team in one form or another, but real involvement is more than just a few brief interviews. For participation to succeed, there must be a high level of cooperation among the design team and the other players in the process. But selecting and involving these actors is not an easy or apolitical task. By deciding whom to include and exclude in participatory sessions, either advertently or inadvertently through meeting timing, location, or invitation, the designer is already injecting some form of bias into the process and as a result is limiting in some way the knowledge that can be gleaned from such a session.<sup>16</sup> When deciding on an intervention and who will be involved in that intervention, the designer must be aware of these implications.

It is important to note that there are benefits to user involvement beyond only the technical assistance the users may provide in terms of program formulation and strategic planning. By bringing the users into the process, designers are implicitly recognizing the fact that, according to Alexander, "Every person is part of a society and requires bonds of association with other people."<sup>17</sup> Many people have an inborn need for being part of a productive community, and the participatory approach can be a small step towards meeting that need. It is through the act of involvement and soliciting input that designers demonstrate their commitment to developing relationships among people that can partially satisfy these psychological needs.

*2. User decision-making.* Another key principle is the reliance on decision-making by the user rather than the designer. The aim is to enable the users to make decisions early and often. This process of enabling gives responsibility and authority for decision-making to the users as much as possible. Hence, it is imperative that the team creates a political climate where the users have such powers and where the people with those powers are involved in the process. Alexander also stresses the importance of client decision-making by critiquing the prevalent system. He believes the system is fundamentally flawed when "Decisions are made remote from the consequences of the decisions."<sup>18</sup> In much of his work he has tried to empower the users to make as many decisions as possible, regarding not only the program but also the actual design. One clear practical benefit of this type of empowerment, according to PeOa, is that when the client makes decisions during the planning stage of a project it simplifies the design problem by eliminating the need for extensive design alternatives required to meet unclear requirements.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the act of setting overarching goals and developing community-based design principles also mitigates the requirement for design alternatives.

*3. Charrette Atmosphere.* Many of the practitioners using groups and participation structure their interventions in a workshop or charrette atmosphere. A charrette is no more than an intense workshop held at the users site. Architects like William PeOa and Bill Caudill of CRSS have used them extensively. For architectural students the charrette is not a new concept. In fact, the term originates from the Beaux Arts tradition when

student work was completed on the cart or charrette that instructors used to collect the projects – hence, the students were ‘on charrette.’ Charrettes can be structured in many ways. In one workshop, the group may be subdivided and asked to comment on particular issues and then share findings with the larger group. Or the whole group may deliberate on issues. In any case, the charrette allows for free discussion and recording of that discussion. Charrettes are highly educational endeavors. They are venues for the design team’s and the users’ education on a myriad of issues. To succeed, however, compromise is oftentimes in order. Henry Sanoff argues that successful workshops require personal commitment to developing and testing ideas in a focused atmosphere where participants are required to reconcile their difference in pursuit of a common goal.<sup>20</sup> Charrettes provide a space for this reconciliation to happen.

Working together in an atmosphere supportive of the group’s goals can have many other benefits. For instance this form of small group method can facilitate dialogue among many people and encourage the airing of previously unspoken ideas.<sup>21</sup> In many of my own projects, I have found that involving the users in a workshop helps develop local talent. Since the participants are actively engaged in the process, they can schedule and structure many of the meetings, respond to questions about the evolving design effort, and even participate in formal and informal presentations. This type of visible involvement gives the local leadership increased credibility within their own constituencies. Additionally, workshops that are held on-site and away from the designers’ office bring together the key players in the design process while eliminating the distractions found in the normal office. Despite the prevalence of email, pagers, and cell phones, I have found the on-site nature of charrettes essential. The design team can give the project nearly undivided attention and the users are typically quite motivated and willing to be actively involved during the short duration of these exercises. I have seen users building study models, rendering elevation sketches, and entering data into programming spreadsheets. Hamdi is an advocate of the on-site approach and describes two final advantages that result from basing the workshop at the user’s site. First, charrettes reinforce the bias towards community. Second, charrettes can support the involvement of other community members that may be excluded from a more formalized process.<sup>22</sup> Including marginalized members is clearly a very sensitive political and social proposition and must be handled with extreme care because what may be appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate in another culture.

*4. Improvisational Nature.* Predicting the outcome of events is difficult when just one person has control over a process; but when diverse groups of people are working together, predicting outcomes can be impossible. Hence, spontaneity is critical in participatory design. Every interaction is different and requires different approaches. The nature of the intervention may change as new information comes to light during the course of the design effort. In participatory workshops I have conducted where different user groups were brought together in one room for the

first time many outstanding issues were resolved quickly because of the enhanced communication afforded by the participatory method. In other cases, one group has had knowledge that other groups did not have and that changed the nature of these projects. On a logistical level, rooms may need to be vacated for other purposes, power may go out just when the final presentation drawings are underway, or team members may get lost in a new and unfamiliar local area. In the end, flexibility is the key to successful participatory efforts.

## The Role of the Professional

Given these prescriptions for active user involvement, participation as a design method may appear to leave little room for the design professional. This however, is far from true. The process demands the attentive involvement of professionals at every step. Rather than dominating the process with their knowledge, professionals should be skilled at extracting the particular knowledge of the participants. Nevertheless, since participation is collaborative in nature the designers have a responsibility to share their own expertise. Oftentimes, in the programming stage, the users request items that they cannot afford or that their site cannot accommodate. Responsible practitioners know these limitations and help the users understand them as well.

The primary challenge for the designer is to facilitate communication among the users and the design team. Yona Friedman asserts that effective communication between user and designer is the key to successful projects. If the communication process breaks down, by default the designers will introduce error into their plans and, in the end, the user will suffer the consequences of these errors.<sup>23</sup> Schneekloth and Shibley consider the first task of the professional to be the creation of an open environment for communication and they further believe that this can occur through the development of a trusting, caring relationship with the users. This environment is termed a dialogic space and it is the context in which hopes and dreams, fears and frustrations about a place can be discussed.<sup>24</sup> It is through open communication in which the participants join together in collaborative dialogue that courses of action begin to unfold. In such environments, all parties must be willing to listen to one another and be open to new ways of thinking and working.

Another challenge for the designer who uses participatory methods is the management of the documentation effort. Effective documentation is important for two reasons. First, it helps facilitate understanding during the process. The act of taking minutes of meetings or graphically recording design inputs helps clarify issues. Minutes can be distributed shortly after a session and outstanding issues can be tagged, researched, and ideally resolved before or at the next session. According to PeOa, graphic analysis is required during the process if users and designers are expected to understand the implications of certain ideas and the magnitude of a project’s scope. PeOa believes the professional should collect, organize, and display information for dis-

cussion, review, and approval.<sup>25</sup> There are a number of strategies designers can take to structure this documentation. Detailed graphic logs can be developed prior to the design effort. These may include room data sheets used as both a checklist during discussions with users and as a form for recording the data gathered. Or these graphic logs may summarize essential site analysis information. Simple figure-ground drawings work exceptionally well in communicating the extent of built form features. For example, circulation routes can be shown in black against a white background. Another effective method is showing just the paving on a site. Also, a series of sketches can illustrate the extent of developable area by showing first the buildings on a site that must remain, followed by those that can be removed, then concluding with what the site will look like after demolition. Another series of drawings can be used to illustrate phasing and implementation strategies in master planning efforts. An effective way to compare the program with the site is to abstract the two into generalized spatial footprints and overlay the program area on the site area. This may show that the program does not fit the site. PeOa uses analysis cards to record data that needs to be displayed, discussed, and acted upon. The cards are conveniently sized for reproduction and are used to represent one idea, goal, or concept. Typically, the cards have some brief narrative and a graphic icon of the issue at hand.<sup>26</sup>

Documentation is also important as an aid to interpretation at the end of and after the planning phase. For the design team members, a well-documented process will help them make the countless minor decisions that are required throughout a project's design but were not relevant during the planning process. For instance, designers who can refer to the client's goals quickly and easily may better be able to keep those goals uppermost in their minds. Also, a well-documented process provides a corporate memory for both the design team and the user that can be used as a quick check during project reviews or used to educate new designers when team members permanently leave an office or organization. At the end of the planning stage, a carefully documented problem statement that summarizes key issues in clear terms can provide a sense of closure to the planning phase on the one hand and serve as the premise for design on the other.<sup>27</sup>

### Political Ramifications

There are clearly political, social, and economic implications to every intervention. Designers must be aware of these ramifications and structure their interventions accordingly. For Comerio, participatory processes are fraught with inequity and as such "political and economic empowerment is essential to make genuine participation a reality for many communities."<sup>28</sup> Schneekloth and Shibley reinforce this belief by adding that "Ethical action also requires knowing who has no access to power or influence but will be affected by an action nonetheless. This will only occur if designers empower formerly unheard and subjugated knowledge in framing an intervention."<sup>29</sup> As these two authors

have found, the task of selecting issues to study and the people to participate in that study is a political act that can be used to empower people or silence opposition. Typical questions that arise and that have serious political ramifications include: Who are the users? Can they be accessed? What can and cannot be discussed? What are the limits of the designer's scope? The political dimension is especially critical when dealing with cross-cultural design situations. Questions of control, leadership, empowerment, and access must be answered. Understanding the local culture is central to working through such issues. And applying that understanding is difficult but vital.

### Participation: A Model Worth Using

Participatory methods are far from conciliatory methods. Rather, inherent in the process is a subtle yet vital transformation of thought that occurs. Users and designers may start with preconceptions, untested ideas, and familiar thought patterns. In the act of developing a common vision, these initial notions are transformed through the development of a collective knowledge about the people and the place. Ideally, this new knowledge grows in a synergistic way and is recognized by the participants as a positive development.

To be used effectively, the participatory model requires a rethinking of the designer's role. No longer can the goal be the fulfillment of an individual's ego but rather the goal should become fulfilling a community's dreams. The role of the architect goes beyond mere design and enters into the realm of community building, facilitating growth, and leading groups towards common goals. As Sawsan Helmy notes, the participatory model "Öis directly responsible for creating forms that are responsive to the needs, potentials, and limitations of a given community."<sup>30</sup> However, the model is not a panacea. There are limitations. The sensitive practitioner understands these issues, acknowledges their power, and works through them in a manner supportive of the dreams and goals of the people who will be benefiting from the intervention. This is a key challenge for designers using participatory methods today. Finally, participation can serve as an excellent mode of practice for designers committed to a design process aligned with the diverse needs of our changing society.

#### NOTES

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