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That Same Old Participation?

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As an observer of the EDRA/*Places* awards jury this year, I heard the jurors lament the use of the “same old participation” that they had seen for years. Several submissions, however, suggested new and useful directions to which future community participation projects should aspire. In these submissions, I discerned four themes that we should address when considering the role of community participation in making places. Changes in the demographics of the U.S. and advances in computer and communications technology are affecting the choice of techniques that might be used in a given situation. The increasing complexity of government and a shift from reactionary to visionary participation are changing the general landscape of participation.

Demographic Changes

The U.S. population, particularly the balance of ethnic groups and the distribution of ages, is likely to change dramatically in the coming decades.¹ The Census Bureau estimates that black, Asian and Hispanic populations will increase at a faster rate than the non-Hispanic white population. In addition, elderly and youth populations will increase much faster than the middle-aged population. Many of the groups whose size is growing have traditionally been underrepresented in community participation efforts, yet the need to involve them will be increasingly urgent. More views must be gathered, and the methods for obtaining them must be responsive to the new participants.

Two submissions to the EDRA/*Places* awards frame some of the issues related to involving differing population groups. The West Main Street Urban Infill project in Charlottesville, Va.,² was faced with developing a collaborative vision with the predominately African-American residents and the predominantly white property owners. The important aspect of this project is that the two groups developed the vision collectively, rather than through a process that brought together independently formed visions or advocated one group’s viewpoint over the other.

A second project, the Santa Ursula Public Lavandaria,

exemplifies some of the dynamics of working with specific user groups. One shortcoming of many participatory efforts is that all participants are treated the same, although not all participants are comfortable with the same means of participation. The Santa Ursula project team, a class of landscape architecture students from the University of Washington, recognized the need for actively engaging the women of this rural Mexico community in their design efforts. They developed special strategies for approaching and involving women, who benefitted most from the project and were crucial to its timely completion and long-term success.

A Role for Computer Technology

Technological advances continue to change what information people receive and how they receive it. As Internet access becomes commonplace, government agencies, local officials and planners will have a readily available mechanism for reaching their constituencies. Moreover, the use of technology to model and test ideas has great potential for altering how citizens evaluate and, possibly, generate designs.

Technology can provide citizens with more information about projects in their communities, but it also poses dangers. For example, most people do not have ready Internet access; depending on it as the primary means for conveying information keeps the information out of the hands of many citizens. There is also the potential for misleading citizens: Design simulations, like beautifully hand-rendered drawings, can create false impressions (intentionally or unintentionally) about the impact a project may have. When public expectations are built upon these simulations, subsequent citizen satisfaction can be impacted when the real project does not match the computer-generated version.

If the entries to the 1999 EDRA/*Places* awards are indicative of how technology is used as a design and communication tool, there is much work to be done. Few submissions effectively relied on or used technologically based approaches. One notable exception was the “Community Vision Survey” for the Township of Hillsborough, N.J.³ This project integrated both the capacity of reaching a wide audience through the

Internet and the power of computer-generated visual simulations to obtain citizen opinions.

The “Community Vision Survey” focused on possible changes to the main highway corridor through the community. Respondents were able to select their preferred design alternatives. To ensure that all citizens had access to the information, five computer kiosks were located throughout the community (two at the library, and one at the library, firehouse and local cafe).

Three-fourths of those responding said they would be willing to pay additional taxes to implement the improvements they had selected. This overwhelming public support has prompted the township to move forward with burying overhead utility wires. Key properties along the corridor have been assembled and property owners have expressed unified support. The strong support of the plan by the community members, property owners and township officials is due in large part to the computer simulations, which enabled them to visualize and understand the proposed changes.

Working with The Complexity of Government

Randy Hester, in “A Refrain with a View,” argues for what he calls “cross-linked” participation.⁴ This type of participation brings together the efforts of various local groups who would otherwise work independently. Government agencies could benefit from cross-linking as well: Today most projects today lie within the jurisdictions of multiple agencies, each of which has guidelines and regulations that control projects.

The Thames Landscape Strategy identified such a need for integrated policies for a segment of the Thames River. The resulting vision plan goes beyond

Santa Ursula Public Lavandara

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Santa Ursula Public Lavandara and Water Collection System

Santa Ursula is a small, rural village of ninety families in Morelos, Mexico. It lacks electricity, water and sewers, and the local ecology is increasingly threatened by the growth of the city of Cuernavaca, forty miles away.

Currently residents travel four miles on foot to the *barranca* to wash and to collect potable water. The trip is arduous and dangerous, especially for older and pregnant women; arthritis and nerve damage caused by prolonged exposure to the cold water are common. Along the path to the *barranca*, the soil is compacted and streamside vegetation is disappearing.

The community wished to capture rainwater and build a village *lavandara*, a social gathering

place common to traditional villages of the region. Landscape architecture faculty and students from the University of Washington worked with the community and in nine weeks constructed a rainwater catchment system, 80,000 liter cistern, public wash facility, public plaza and a bio-filtration wastewater treatment and irrigation system for an adjacent orchard.

The project combines traditional and modern technologies to create sustainable solutions that improve the lives of villagers and preserve ecosystems. The project provides opportunities for increasing social cohesion through community washing, child’s play, and celebrations and civic events in the plaza.

To involve community women in this effort, the students needed to gain their trust. Women students contacted them; since women traditionally defer to men in this society, they were more comfortable talking with other women. At the initial focus groups and large public meeting, the men of the community did the majority of the talking. But as the project progressed, the women became the active participants and the men stepped back.

Ultimately, one-on-one meetings with the women directly influenced the design of the facility. The women selected the colors for the structures and organized the construction work day. The women had the most to gain from the construction of the *lavandara* and they were the ones to see it through.

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Santa Ursula public *lavandara*, detail of roof and water conveyance system. Photo: Daniel Winterbottom.

the typical statutory planning, articulating a link between central government, local authorities and grassroots efforts and providing a coordinated framework for river-related decisions. The strategy has been highlighted by the national government as a model for collaboration among agencies, and the process is being repeated along another stretch of river.

From Reaction to Vision

Participation strategies can range from problem solving to vision setting, from reactionary to proactive.⁵ Unfortunately, the National Environmental Protection Act and subsequent state environmental review regulations have promoted reactive participation. Instead of working toward community goals, community members are frequently responding to developer-proposed visions.

Several of the 1999 EDRA/*Places* entries went beyond this type of participation, growing from the desires of residents and visions of the planners. They embody a shift in the underlying purposes behind community participation. Instead advocating for certain populations or serving as a reactive response to previous proposals, they illustrate an approach toward longer-term, vision-oriented planning.

The Iraralai House – Museum – Classroom project⁶ sought to recapture the spirit of the community and the culture. In previous decades, government policy had supported the modernization and assimilation of the indigenous Tawo. Monotonous concrete public housing projects had replaced the traditional architecture. In 1994, evidence of severe structural defects in these buildings opened the doors to island-wide protests. Pent-up desires for integrating traditional architecture with contemporary values led to village planning efforts and resulted in the completion of the housemuseumclassroom building the first result of the ongoing grassroots effort to rebuild the local culture and to encourage the use of traditional architecture.

Participation by local residents in developing the design was critical. The design team lived in Iraralai for more than a year, getting to know and understand the daily patterns and activities of the villagers. They

conducted interviews and held participatory workshops were held with the villagers, including Tawo youth and elders. The team developed design patterns for rebuilding the dwellings and used them in the design of this new, multi-purpose building.

The complex promotes and embodies the vision of reclaiming the Tawo cultural heritage in three ways. It provides a place where visitors can come and learn about Tawo culture, history and ecology; it educates younger Tawo about their cultural heritage; and it establishes a model for housing construction that is more in tune with both present-day social patterns and traditional architecture.

A Research Agenda

These projects illustrate some of the changes occurring in community participation; they also suggest areas of future research. We need research that identifies and tests various community participation methods and their appropriateness for differing populations. Survey design and meeting design are two examples of techniques that can be tailored to specific populations, and research can direct and refine those strategies. As designers increase their use of computer simulations to convey ideas to citizens, the impact of these simulations on long- and short-term user satisfaction should be explored.

Lastly, researchers need to examine why many citizens choose not to participate in planning decisions in their communities. We need to explore more fully some of our key suppositions — such as many that citizens are overwhelmed with career, children, and personal interests, and many persons live in places with which they have no personal attachment or understanding — so that they can be adequately addressed. Do community members want to abdicate decisions to designers? Do they want special interest groups in their community to represent them in the decision making? Appropriate community participation efforts can best be developed after we understand the reasons citizens have for not getting involved.

Notes

1. See Patsy Eubanks Owens, “Community Participation in a New Cultural Context,” in *1997 Annual Meeting Proceedings of the American Society of Landscape Architects* (Washington, D.C.: American Society of Landscape Architects, 1997), 123-127.
2. This project was conducted by The Design Resources Center, an independent community resource engaged in urban design, community organization, and innovative models of participatory planning.
3. The submission, “The Electronic Town Hall: The Use of Computer Technology to Facilitate Community Participation in Place Design,” was conducted by Hillsboro Township.
4. Randy Hester, “A Refrain with a View,” *Places* 12:2 (1999), 12-25.
5. See also Mark Francis, “Proactive Practice: Visionary Thought and Participatory Action in Environmental Design,” *Places* 12:2 (1999), 60-68.
6. This project was conducted by a team based at National Taiwan University, Building and Planning Research Foundation (John C. K. Liu, Project Director).