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Participation for Empowerment: The Greening of a Public Housing Development

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Participatory design and planning can help restore the balance of power in favor of people who typically have had the least power to effect environmental decision-making and exert control over the physical settings of their everyday lives. When misapplied, participation may become just another part of the status quo, and practitioners interested in social justice may unwittingly sabotage social change. Empowerment-oriented practices help avoid this trap.

social influence, economic resources, political power or legal rights.¹

To achieve empowerment goals, participation must do more than merely inform citizens of new policies and programs; it must create opportunities for citizen control of programs and designs to ensure that they meet peoples' needs and reflect their values. At the same time, professionals must understand that they cannot simply endow someone or a group with



Lathrop Homes, a Chicago Housing Authority development on Chicago's north side.
Photo: © 1994 Richard E. Carter.

These empowerment practices place participation in the context of grassroots activism to understand the assets that people bring to their efforts, how people are already handling their own problems, what activities and outside resources are necessary to further peoples' aims and how their current efforts extend their capabilities for future action.

Empowerment is developed through an ongoing, accumulative process: experiences build up through repetitive cycles of action and reflection, which help people cultivate individual and collective skills and resources that help them effect positive changes in their environments and lives. These skills and resources can include psychological sense of personal control or influence, knowledge and skills,

power. Rather, design and planning practices can support specific strategies that people can use to improve the conditions of their lives.²

In our work, we use several objectives to guide our empowerment-oriented practices. These objectives overlap somewhat, and meeting all of them in any given project, although desirable, has not been possible. Moreover, not all are required to achieve empowerment outcomes.

Exchange knowledge. Professionals bring different types of knowledge to projects. The most obvious is the technical information necessary to undertake design or planning work, another is the knowledge to create alternative designs or plans that may not be readily apparent to the lay person.

The ability to innovate alternative futures, however, invites the possibility of abuse. Obviously, using professional knowledge to exert power over clients is antithetical to empowerment-oriented practices and is a pitfall practitioners must assiduously avoid.

Client groups also have critical knowledge—about their needs, interests, community history and other issues critical to a successful project. Thus, the essence of a successful participatory collaboration is effective two-way communication and exchange of knowledge.

Contribute to the production of useful and satisfying material and spatial resources. Does citizen participation result in better design and planning products? While participation may complicate and slow down the process, it also increases the likelihood that users needs and interests will be recognized and incorporated into designs and plans. Even with a superb built project, if completed without participation, the opportunity for cultivating other individual and collective resources is truncated.

Attract other professional knowledge. Groups need to know where to turn to answer critical questions and get necessary information. Environmental designers offer not only knowledge about their fields but also access to other expertise through their connections with other professionals. Lawyers, city agencies, nonprofit groups and universities all have expertise that may be vital to community projects.

Support and build political resources. Supporting clients in finding a voice that can be heard in the courts, city hall and other arenas is also inherent to ongoing empowerment. Assisting clients to build networks with people or groups that already hold power can help assure their current and future successes.

Political strength is not solely dependent upon relationships with politicians and bureaucrats. Community groups can gain power from the bottom up, through protests and other everyday grassroots activism.³

Support skill development. "Knowledge is power" the adage goes, and so, too, are skills. New skills, whether in fundraising or tree planting, support empowerment. Participation itself is a learned skill—one that designers and planners can share with their clients.

Build organizational capacity. Power is often exercised through organizations, so the development of organizational capacity is critical to empowerment.



Lathrop residents take part in the greening project.

Photo: Ellen Glantz

Practitioners can support community organizing efforts either by acting as organizers or by being aware of how their actions support or hamper existing organizing efforts.

Garner economic resources. Empowerment includes gaining greater control of resources—from paint for a mural to empowerment zone funding. Designers and planners can assist communities garner economic resources like funds to complete a project, opportunities for employing community members in the project and donations of materials.

Cultivate a sense of efficacy and critical consciousness. Empowerment involves gaining a psychological sense of control and efficacy, as well as actually exerting control through political and legal action, economic strength and social influence. Practitioners can support this objective by identifying opportunities for modest victories that can bolster confidence or organizational capacity.⁴

The Lathrop Homes Beautification Project

Lathrop Homes, a Chicago Housing Authority development on Chicago's North Side, is home to approximately 3,000 people in twenty-nine low-rise buildings built in 1937. Its northern section is built around a large open area roughly the size of two football fields. Former residents report the area was park-like and used by residents for picnics and play decades ago.

But disinvestment has taken its toll. The buildings require substantial rehabilitation; chronically flooding basements and leaky roofs are just two major problems residents report. The central open space has also suffered; in particular, garbage trucks routinely drove across it, creating deep ruts and mud, ruining the area for resident use.

The Lathrop Beautification Project, begun in 1992 and completed in 1994, revitalized the central area and others in the development. The project grew from a partnership between two professionals, Ellen Glantz and Lynne Westphal. Glantz, who was a staff



Lathrop Homes, after the greening project.

Photo: Lynne Westphal

member at the Lathrop Boys and Girls Club, had completed several small greening projects with the children of Lathrop.

Westphal, a social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, learned of these projects when Glantz participated in one of her research studies. Soon after, Westphal brought Forest Service outreach funds to Lathrop for another small greening project. This, in turn, caught the attention of Chicago's Department of Environment (DOE), which had recently received Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds for environmental projects. Lathrop looked like a good candidate as DOE did not want to force projects on unwilling neighborhoods..

DOE chose a project site at Lathrop from a map, picking a riverfront location where officials thought they could improve river access and create a mini-park. Glantz and Westphal were concerned because this site was unimportant to Lathrop residents, particularly considering the degradation of the central open space. They were successful in shifting the agency's attention, and DOE allocated \$100,000 to revitalize the central space and other areas.

Glantz contacted resident groups and area churches to ensure the project was one the community wanted to pursue. Residents were enthusiastic and formed a new group, the Lathrop Beautification Committee, to work on planning and implementing the project. Glantz hired two residents as community organizers and brought in other organizations, notably Openlands Project, an open-space preservation group experienced in grassroots projects. These actions laid the groundwork for active resident participation with greater control over the design and implementation of the project.

DOE and the landscape architecture firm it hired, Tesca and Associates, held participatory design workshops in which residents indicated what landscape features they wanted; for instance, they specified no "messy" fruit trees. With this information, Tesca created preliminary design drawings for the residents' review. Residents then suggested changes, such as moving play areas for small children further from the existing basketball courts to give each age group their own recreation space.

Before planting could begin in the central open space, the garbage trucks had to be rerouted. This was a painful, year-and-a-half long process that nearly doomed the project. Ultimately, a new access road and Dumpster pads were built; the new plantings would be safe from trucks, and garbage collection for this section of the development would be greatly improved, something else that was very important to Lathrop residents.

Outcomes

In summer, 1994, the greening of Lathrop finally took shape. Residents, other volunteers and staff from DOE and Openlands Project worked together to plant trees and shrubs in the rock-hard soil. The entire central open space was tilled and reseeded, berms were built to act as natural seating around a revamped ball field and play areas, and a spray pool was built. One hundred trees and two hundred shrubs were planted.

The Lathrop beautification project was particularly strong in achieving several of the empowerment objectives discussed above. Professional and technical expertise poured in, and residents developed new, strong relationships with several agencies and city departments, most notably DOE.⁵ Many of these

partnerships still thrive. The CDBG funds, significant new economic resources in their own right, were parlayed into funds that are still coming to the community. Not only was the central open space improved, but Glantz also recognized the tangible and symbolic value of a clearly visible physical change that reflects the residents' successful organizing skills and self-efficacy.

Several years after the planting, the trees and shrubs are doing very well. Residents, together with dedicated professionals, have changed and maintained a space in their neighborhood, once a neglected eyesore; now it is a safe and useful place, one where children play and adults socialize.

Ultimately, the beautification project has contributed to Lathrop residents' ongoing efforts to meet their need for safe and decent homes. The skills and resources they developed have helped them pursue new projects and in their quest for resident management. Residents and their partners in the beautification project have gone on to further environmental work, including projects along the river. One resident said "watching this development come back alive, it's really touched my heart."

Conclusion

The social justice goals of participatory decision-making echo the tenets of empowerment theory: citizens must have control over resources to effect their quality of life. Environmental designers have a significant role to play in contributing to social justice, particularly as they shape their practice to support empowerment. By focusing on empowerment objectives, rather than processes or products alone, designers and planners can help advance the social justice outcomes that first sparked interest in citizen participation, outcomes Hester and others feel we have lost.

Notes

1. See Julian Rappaport, "Terms of Empowerment/ Exemplars of Prevention: Toward a Theory for Community Psychology," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 15:2 (1987), 121-148; Sandra Morgen and Ann Bookman, "Rethinking Women and Politics: An Introductory Essay," in Morgen and Bookman, *Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 3-29.
2. Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35:4 (July 1969), 216-224; Judith Gruber and Edison J. Trickett, "Can We Empower Others? The

Paradox of Empowerment in the Governing of an Alternative Public School," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 15:3 (1987), 353-371.

3. People with few economic and conventional political resources (e.g. women, minorities, low income people) rely on protest to gain some measure of control over their lives. Participatory design and planning can bolster expressions of empowerment and help prepare groups for further acts of everyday resistance.
4. Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall, "The Politics of Space Appropriation: A Case Study of Women's Struggles for Homeplace in Chicago Public Housing," in Irwin Altman and Arza Churchman, eds., *Human Behavior and the Environment: Advances in Theory and Research 13, Women and the Environment* (New York: Plenum, 1994), 167-199.
5. The following outside groups, agencies and individuals contributed to the Lathrop Beautification project:

Nonprofits: the Boys and Girls Clubs of Chicago, Openlands Project and its corps of TreeKeepers, Chicago Community Trust's Urbs in Horto project.

Private firms and individuals: Tesca and Associates, Waste Management Corporation, Adidas/World Cup Soccer, Cornerstone Partners; David Cotter, Cotter and Company.

City agencies: Department of Environment and North Park Village Nature Center, Chicago Fire Department Engine 56, Department of Streets and Sanitation, Department of Cultural Affairs, Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago Park District, City of Chicago/Cooperative Extension Service Green Corps.

Public officials: Mayor Daley, Congressman Gutierrez, Alderman Occasio.

Other public agencies: USDA Forest Service North Central Forest Experiment Station, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Illinois Department of Transportation, USDA Americorps.

Local groups: Friends of the Chicago River, Lakeview Citizens Council; Lathrop Local Advisory Council, Lathrop United for Resident Management, Mary Crane Nursery, Church of Good News.