

Citizens Are Customers Too!



“...bringing together public and private sector stakeholders through instructive and constructive community events can indeed bring about good urbanism and environmental preservation...”

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“The problem with planning is we don’t always get what we want!”

As planning professionals, how many times have we heard this? Maybe we haven’t heard it so directly, but we’ve certainly felt that sentiment ourselves, and sometimes from the people we serve. It’s an odd feeling.

I thought I’d take this opportunity to say its O. K. You are not alone. And, believe it or not, there are ways to get closer to unanimity, diversity and market success, all at the same time.

A few years ago I wrote a series for Planning Minnesota that talked about traditional neighborhood development (TND). *A New Urbanist Lexicon* provided nomenclature and design techniques for healthy, marketable neighborhoods. Although the significance of public participation was addressed, more fundamental questions about planning as a valuable community endeavor were not. Questions such as:

- Exactly who we are planning for?
- If citizens want more sensible community development, how do we make it happen?
- Who will see to it that a plan’s aspirations carried out, even if its physical components evolve over time?
- What are the benefits to be achieved by really listening?

This is the first of a four part series about how bringing together public and private sector stakeholders through instructive and constructive community events can indeed bring about good urbanism and environmental preservation. Interactive public participation can get us beyond the frustration of lengthy and uninspiring public processes. In addition, true listening and responding can also enlighten a community, motivate it spiritually, and drive marketable design solutions.

This series will address shortcomings in conventional public participation practices, but it will not dwell upon them. Instead, nomenclature and communication techniques are suggested to better demonstrate the civic value of planning to our many audiences. Throughout all four essays is a

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consistent theme of collaboration among all stakeholders. If we are to build truly sustainable communities, we have to tap the best technical resources within every planning discipline. But perhaps more importantly, we have to get end users involved. Their stewardship of the land, identity as citizens and prosperity as customers are at stake.

Citizens and customers are us.

Installments

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I. Beyond the Diagram

Increasingly these days we hear the public has little recourse to “bad” development. This is of special concern because people think there is a lot more of it. More and more, we hear a cry from our audiences; “We just don’t like that stuff over there. Please don’t put it here.” Or, “Can’t we do better than that?”

We also hear that “regular folk” have increasingly less input towards places they really DO want. Time and time again, surveys and visual comparisons reveal a strong desire for real places. While attractive, desirable and sustainable new neighborhoods have a strong market demand, people are frustrated that it is so difficult to achieve them.

Where is this coming from?

A lot of the answer has to do with how well we are listening, at what point in the design process we are prepared to listen, and how well are we adapting conventional planning tools to new opportunities, new economies, and new ways of thinking.

Conventional planning processes typically chose a path of least resistance. This means that real decision-making did not engage the public in real choices, or even review the consequences of bad choices made previously. Particularly on the private sector side, there was a kind of *under the radar* approach to planning that tried to avoid the opposition of neighbors and citizens before the obligatory public hearing. This was certainly the path of least resistance.

Once proposed development was past the requisite public hearing, it could be built. Therefore, a lot of dollars and time were spent structuring offensive and defensive positions for that moment of public adversity. Sometimes, the opposite approach was used. Endless, uninspiring meetings, held with the good intentions of engaging the public, would often diffuse a crowd of interested citizens so much that few well-versed opponents appeared at the hearing. This is also a path of least resistance.

The fact is, ordinary citizens find it difficult to be well informed, or to inform, if planning and design choices that affect them cannot be resolved concisely, legibly, fairly and quickly.

Most of what is built in America today is done with a lot of private money and a minimum of public engagement. A great developer and design team being clairvoyant about community preferences is dangerously wishful thinking. Their dreams are typically bigger, more regional. Well-funded personal

agendas that do not squarely engage the public rarely appreciate local diversity of activity and aspiration, and certainly not all the local economic potential it may offer. In this case, we have to ask, for whom are they planning? Who are the beneficiaries of this kind of city-building?

Perhaps the most ubiquitous path of least resistance is dogmatic attachment to zoning regulations. Dogmatic attachment to any one ordering system is not healthy. Such behavior diminishes opportunities to render human individuality or ecological diversity. But it *is* easy to just follow the rules.

The real potential for zoning is its planar foundation for more deliberate placemaking. From that framework, decisions about building and open space arrangement, as well as three-dimensional character, can be executed in a variety of ways. However, zoning language cannot clearly demonstrate to ordinary citizens how multi-dimensional urban places may be fashioned - the kind they consistently choose in visual preference surveys. Nor does its language describe to potential builders what quality of life local consumers value.

Zoning approval mechanisms were historically established and, over the years, toughened to defend the health, safety and welfare of the community. In this capacity, zoning has achieved its goal with meticulous precision. But, by defining well what should not be built, its language never intended to promote inspirational urban form. Instead, it provides a diagram, a foundation that leaves a lot of room for individual and community expression. The real challenge now is to move beyond the diagram, shape an evolution of zoning tools, weave planning disciplines together, and address squarely all dimensions of community building.

Things *are* changing. Planning professionals are moving towards more constructive relationships with ordinary citizens and achieving better results.

But, real results, the kind that make local citizens stand up and say "We got what we asked for, and we like it!" requires real listening and real teaching. We all require viable choices based on real opportunities and real constraints in order to take comfort in real decisions. Choices change by locality, experience, interest, community composition and time. And, real decisions result from valuable choices. If you really think about it, aren't the people who live and work in the places we plan, design and redevelop the ones who will ultimately determine value, not some dogma or flamboyant advertising pitch?

So the real question we need to ask ourselves is, "Exactly who are we planning for?"

Just how effectively are we communicating with the end user? Do real stakeholders, local citizens and business customers, really feel they are contributing to their own neighborhood's prosperity? Do they understand the consequences of available choices? Can they identify their priorities? Can they imagine our cities as three-dimensional, textured quilts, as patchy and rhythmical as human nature itself? Can they visualize local catalyst projects, the kind that inspire higher quality construction right there in their own neighborhood? Do they know where to begin?

And finally, as planning professionals we have to ask ourselves a very important question as well. "Do we have room in our planning processes by which ordinary citizens can become valuable customers of good urbanism?"

I think we do.

II. Real Charrettes, Real Results

The fundamental purpose of a public charrette is to engage public and private decision-makers in informed choices about new construction and redevelopment opportunities. Because real results require informed decisions, a real charrette becomes more of an interactive learning event than a platform for any one planning idea or solution.

A public charrette must consist of three functional components, three procedural stages, and cover four community landscapes in order to be a success. Although a charrette should be tailored to fit specific needs, real results are based on having an well-organized approach to these components, stages and community landscapes. It is also important to understand a public charrette as only one component of a planning process that may include more conventional procedures either before or after. In addition, more than one charrette may be required to achieve real results for a more complex problem or a larger geographic area. But the magic of a charrette event remains in its ability to engage a community in identifying opportunities, something of which conventional processes by themselves have proven incapable.

Community Landscapes

We should begin by remembering everyday citizens and customers do not necessarily understand the world the way professional planners and designers do. This is to be expected. After all, we planners and designers do not necessarily understand the world of dentistry, boat repair or rubber hose manufacturing either.

Community building has always been a complex undertaking. It is even more complex if planners try to read the minds of those who are expected to benefit from it. The charrette process reduces this complexity only because it allows citizens to visualize ways of improving the quality of life in their local community.

Such visualization is not just what a bunch of pretty pictures might communicate. A public charrette includes the way local citizens view their immediate environment, and the problem-solving techniques necessary to improve it. All four landscapes – **physical, social, economic and political** – are part of that community framework. As was described in Part 6 of *A New Urbanist Lexicon*, when viewing a landscape, literally or metaphorically, our individual perspective may be somewhat different than that of someone standing ten feet away, even though we see the same things.

- Physical – Tangible components of a geographically defined area that by their composition, quantity and quality generate desirable or undesirable places.
- Social – Casual and organized relationships that promote or inhibit ideas and knowledge about the community.
- Political – Formal relationships that generate a plan for action or inaction, such that a community's culture evolves according to the collective will of its citizens.
- Economic – Relationships that add or diminish value of individual resources, including environmental preservation and the exchange of goods, services and property.

In order to improve individual perception of community, a planning process not only is required to evaluate existing community conditions, but also to instruct individuals about how the composition and layering of landscapes influence one another. To achieve this kind of consensus within all four landscapes successfully, a public charrette must include professionals of diverse discipline and experience.

In a public charrette, planners solidify a community's aspirations through visual descriptions, and at the same time purge unsupported perceptions that hold a community back from advancement. For example, renderings of new buildings in a familiar neighborhood context have much more power for consensus than individual perceptions of what zoning diagrams might deliver. In addition, unsubstantiated positions are nullified with credible evidence in a public audience, and often the position's underlying values can be translated into community-supporting results.

Keen understanding and patience by charrette leaders is required to achieve accountable results, but the advantages to simplifying community-building agendas and progressive action are well worth the charrette's public engagement.

Procedural Stages

The three stages of a public charrette are mobilization, the charrette event itself, and documentation.

During the charrette mobilization stage, prior to the charrette event, selection of a Steering Committee, background research and preparation for the charrette event occur. Mobilization activities include:

- Collecting, cataloging and reviewing background information, existing plans and programs for the project area.
- Preparation of base maps.
- Formation of a local Steering Committee comprised of local business owners, government officials, organization leaders and dedicated citizens.
- Coordination with the Steering Committee regarding:
- Orientation to the charrette process and its expectations.
- Roles of Steering Committee members and other participants.
- Scheduling of daily charrette event activities.
- Public relations, press releases, posters and invitations.
- Event preparation, including facilities, equipment, staging, food service.
- Preparation and production of an issues and goals framework handout.

The charrette event includes the following activities:

- Kickoff – As an introduction to the event's activities, a public social event allows the project sponsor and design team to be introduced to the public.
- Community Presentations – Local government and community organizations present to the Design Team and a public audience current initiatives and "wish lists" for the project area.
- Developer's Roundtable – Local real estate and development interests discuss with the Design Team current market demands, investment trends, as well as development opportunities and constraints of the project area.
- Citizen's Workshop – Local citizens in small groups discuss with Design Team members their community values and visions for community improvements.
- Design Sessions – Design Team members synthesize and prioritize planning concepts, as well as produce graphic representations of the community's vision for the project area.

- Design Review – At a mid-point of the design sessions, the Steering Committee is asked to review the work of the Design Team for consistency with background information and citizen workshop results.
- Design Team Presentation – At the conclusion of the event, the Design Team conducts a public presentation of the charrette's findings.

The final stage is to document, to the degree the project sponsors and Steering Committee require, the charrette's results. Documentation of the planning process is essential so that subsequent planning and development efforts have a substantiated framework from which to build. A visioning charrette with a minimal budget may require only a summary of charrette findings and any drawings, images or standards that may support subsequent work. In other cases, a more formal report of charrette findings may be required. These documents may be used as a strategic plan, a component of a comprehensive community plan, or even master development plan. In such cases, refinement of the charrette's findings and graphic materials may take a couple of months in order to ensure the plan clearly presents the community's vision and implementation steps to achieve it. Additional public presentations may be required to describe the plan's evolution and contents.

In all cases, the level of public input to and ownership of the results must be communicated.

Functional Components

The three functional components of a public charrette necessary to yield real results are input, synthesis and accountability. Although a charrette event may last a few days or a week, all three components are absolutely necessary for success.

In reviewing the three procedural stages, it is apparent that all three components are intertwined throughout the charrette process. Although there is more listening and research at the beginning, there is also a degree of accountability in setting up the charrette event. Although there is more accountability in later stages, it does not mean additional input is not required to finalize the charrette's results.

It is during the charrette event itself, however, that there is the greatest opportunity for learning on both sides of the table. For the Design Team, listening to the values of the community at large is perhaps their most important activity. For the citizens, listening to the Design Team translate those values into physical results that have social, political and economic benefits for the entire community is perhaps their most important activity. Synthesis occurs when Design Team members put on their creative hats to come up with attractive, economically sound and politically viable solutions to the community values expressed.

Whether the charrette event takes days, or weeks, or is interrupted by days of down time, the fact that all stakeholders and planners are at the same table, at the same time and focused on the same issues is what generates real results at real charrettes.

III. Constituency Building

Charrettes are a valuable way to build constituencies of support during the local vision, strategic, and comprehensive planning process. A number of communities are now using the charrette to determine the desired character of their community, whether it is in the city or the suburbs.

A public charrette process becomes a valuable planning tool for evaluating the compatibility of development proposals with a community's identity. A successful charrette will help build places local folk and all other stakeholders can understand and enjoy. Beyond its value to comprehensive planning, a well-executed public charrette helps stakeholders define appropriate standards for the development they will support, and contributes to the creation of appropriate regulatory tools (zoning, design guidelines, etc.) that implement the community's vision for the future.

There are two constituencies that become solidified in a public planning charrette.

First is a political constituency. A political constituency assures a desirable plan moves quickly through various governmental approval mechanisms. Community priorities are understood with regard to what they value. In addition, they come to understand the costs and benefits of new construction nearby. The question answered during a charrette is not always of cost, but value. Any new construction, whether it be in public realm enhancements or private sector development, costs money. Value is achieved when new construction costs are understood as an investment in appreciating real estate value and improved quality of life. When local citizens have an ownership stake in their community's prosperity, they will urge their political leaders to follow through with urban characteristics they have identified as valuable.

Second is a market constituency. A market constituency assures places the community wants to spend their time and money is built. Community priorities are understood with regard to what local customers will support with their own dollars. When charrette participants talk about more green, open spaces for their children to play, or they desire a hairdresser, inexpensive commercial lease space, and attractive rental housing, they are expressing market needs and desires around which an active constituency can be formed.

In the planning business, as in the development business, we have to think about the cost of things, just to be real. Sometimes the immediate cost of doing something challenging overshadows the long-term value of it. Local citizens and customers are looking for places valuable to them, and we should tell them how to get them.

Building these constituencies to direct development and redevelopment objectives takes a concerted effort of listening, reasoning and educating. Sometimes it is not comfortable to hear everything the public has to offer. People who show up at planning meetings are typically better prepared to tell you what they don't like than what they do. But it is much more practical to hear it all when something can be done, as opposed to hearing about it at a public hearing. A charrette planning process is the best forum for this to occur, because it draws people toward positive results. And at the end, there is real pride of everybody owning a piece of something good.

That is a virtue worth supporting in every community stakeholder.

IV. Community Building

The most valuable outcome is a platform for action because nothing happens overnight. Cities towns and neighborhoods have always evolved incrementally. Over time, each community's sense of place becomes memorable, bit by bit, and sometimes by leaps and bounds. More recently, urban development has moved progressively faster, and with less attention to the community's long-term integrity.

Using a charrette process, this evolution can be a little less haphazard and frustrating to lay citizens. Although the charrette process works with compressed time and focused energy, it allows individuals to understand that urban evolution can occur in comprehensible steps, by design, and can result in a physical form capable of sustaining their community culture.

Three Challenges

Recognizing that city-building and place-making are longer-term, evolutionary processes, there are three key challenges to ensuring that charrette results, determined through a time-compressed process, are sustainable over time. Design team leaders should always be well aware of these challenges to retain authenticity, not only during the public event itself, but during preparation, documentation and implementation phases as well.

1. Achieving Real Results

A public charrette process is suited to planning and design of a specific area or site than more conventional visioning processes. It is organized to resolve a demand for attractive, sustainable development within specific boundaries. Its objectives are typically short-term, and especially suited for stakeholders who are prepared to take action in the immediate future.

Therefore, a fundamental challenge of charrette leaders is to assure stakeholders value the results of this interactive process and build the constituencies essential to implementation. Showing more than a *vision* is important to the folks who not only sponsor a charrette, but also to those who accept the challenges of its subsequent results. This distinction helps planning professionals place the charrette process within a progression of broader planning processes that may contain other, less public participation elements in their scope.

2. Complexity of the Urban Condition.

A second challenge is addressing the complexity of urbanism itself within a planning process that is relatively brief.

The urban environment is a complex organism. Not only does it shape the activities of daily living, it also expresses our contemporary identity and evolving aspirations as a community of individuals.

Problem-solving in this ever-changing environment is less about final designs than it is about a set of cohesive design determinants that effectively inform incremental construction over time. The charrette meets this challenge by achieving consensus around criteria that will guide building and open space design. Successful design and development standards that support local community values can be realistically drawn up within the short charrette time frame. Design and construction of successive charrette plan components may not need to be as intensely scrutinized by the public or decision-makers as long as legible design and development standards for new construction have been accepted by the community.

At a charrette's conclusion, the local community should have an illustrated plan and a set of design and development standards. Such standards not only hold builders and decision-makers accountable, but also guide implementation, and ensure a reasonable level of predictability in achievable results.

3. *Scope and Duration of a Charrette.*

The final challenge is to make the charrette process relevant in the context of other planning processes. A public charrette has limitations in comparison to those processes because of its objectives. Therefore, for the charrette to be an effective planning tool, it cannot pretend to be a planning process it is not.

What a charrette does offer participants effectively is a sense of authenticity in planning and its results. Local citizens want to genuinely feel they are participating in a plan for their community's prosperity, and a charrette is an exceptional opportunity to engage those desires. At a minimum, local citizens are expecting to gain out of a charrette process:

- A comprehensive awareness of possibilities.
- A tempered understanding of costs, benefits and value among various public realm and private building choices.
- Visual representations of built form alternatives.
- Legible design and development standards that preserve the public realm as a principal civic amenity.
- Positive results that involve all community partners.

Three Benefits

If done well, a charrette can achieve a multitude of community-building benefits. Some are quite obvious, many are not. For the purposes of brevity, three less obvious benefits are described below.

1. *A New Economy*

Although we have quite recently seen the boom and bust of "irrational exuberance" with the dot.com industry, we cannot deny the influence the information revolution has on us. There are significant opportunities coming about because of new computer and communication technology. The dot.com bust simply told us that although we have more powerful *means* to improve our working capacity, *what* we are producing ultimately holds more value.

In the late 1980's, John Nesbit wrote in his book, Megatrends, about the impact of the information age on American culture. He stated in a chapter entitled "High Tech, High Touch" that humans long to be in environments where their increased attachment to more impersonal means of productivity generates stronger desires for more human activity and interaction.

A charrette process can help local communities prepare for a new economy by demonstrating how they can take advantage of information age technology without losing their traditional urban form. Charrette results can define places local citizens want to spend time and money comfortably, and yet be connected to the world at every moment.

2. *Place-Based Amenities*

The charrette process allows local citizens and customers to think about place-based amenities that could improve the quality of life locally. Such places add value to daily living, working, shopping and playing experiences, so local folks appreciate opportunities to help plan for them.

For example, there is increasing public discussion about what defines acceptable levels of traffic congestion, and the role of more reliable, comfortable public transit choices. Once again, public discussions often revolve more around the routes, the vehicles, and constructing costs, than about the benefits of this infrastructure to community-building and the quality of places around them.

Every place a transit vehicle stops is an opportunity to locate transit-supportive development. Whether it be a more comfortable bench, availability of frequently used-goods and services in close proximity, or a complete, mixed-use urban village, walking and transit use *can* become attractive alternatives to driving for local trips.

It is also important to remember every transit trip begins with a walk. Local communities have a hard time understanding proposed transit systems if they are not able to visualize themselves using it safely, conveniently and comfortably in their neighborhood. Perhaps they may desire neighborhood streets to be more multi-modal, and especially comfortable, safe and convenient for pedestrians. They may desire well-designed and well-maintained public open spaces that both improve the quality of neighborhood life and support transit use.

3. *Optimizing Opportunity*

A charrette process optimizes the potential within a community because it engages people in possibilities.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the charrette process is that it gets people to talk to one another about real opportunities, rather than solely about constraints. When neighbors get to know each other around positive ideals, real opportunities to improve their neighborhood begin to appear. When business owners explore new market opportunities with local citizens, real opportunities to improve the delivery of goods and services begin to appear.

A charrette translates community values into physical form by really listening to a breadth of ideas expressed by a wide variety of charrette participants. The charrette's short time frame and intensely interactive nature tend to enhance public participation. In addition, every participant is equal in stature around a charrette table. Whether it is the mayor or the woman living next door, everyone there is talking about or sketching community-building opportunities.

To be fair, the ideas coming out of citizen workshops are not exceptionally novel. Sometimes, just simple values are expressed. Increasing real estate value; locating lower-income families in a functional, upwardly mobile environment; making neighborhood streets more attractive; creating more human-scale signs; or any number of other somewhat common suggestions are clarified as community priorities. The charrette offers citizens the best chance for making these priorities their own, and translating them concisely and efficiently into a platform for action.

When local folk stand up and say at the charrette presentation, "Hey, *there* are *our* ideas!" the charrette team has really listened. When they stand up and say, "We got what we wanted!" the charrette has succeeded.

In Summary

This series was launched by four key questions about the way we should approach public participation in our planning processes. They are not questions any one planning or design discipline can answer comprehensively. Nor are they questions any one citizen can answer with authority.

Sometimes the strangest suggestions, when sifted from all the “noise,” can reveal most startling opportunities. In the right environment, these suggestions can become real, feasible platforms for action. Sometimes having local folk take ownership of some pretty common-sense initiatives is enough. Small moves, when defined and clearly communicated in a strategic plan and finally as built form, can give individuals real ownership in valuable results.

Interactive charrettes improve authentic urban form and community cohesion because they create solutions designed to benefit people. They allow citizens to become customers of the civic realm right in their own neighborhood, and that kind of community-building is worth preserving.

Citizens are customers too!