

## An Introduction to Charrettes

Town Planning Terms – Part: 7



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The sixth installment of the Lexicon series introduced the concept of a charrette as a means by which the physical, social, political, and economic landscapes coalesce to form a new place. In this installment, the charrette’s dynamics and its value as a planning tool are described more precisely. Although it is used in a variety of disciplines to achieve action-oriented results, a charrette’s most notable use is to move a development or redevelopment project through decisive phases of design quickly and efficiently.

A charrette is a highly interactive learning experience. It is a design process in which stakeholders of a specific project participate. Within a scheduled time frame, a full range of urban issues and design alternatives is discussed to achieve an optimum development program. The charrette also yields a cohesive implementation agenda, as well as goals and objectives responsive to the needs of all stakeholders.

To understand how this process came to be, we should first consider its heritage. The term “charrette” is the French word for a little cart. At the turn of the century, the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris was the world’s premiere architecture school. Design projects were assigned with a specific time for completion. Although versions of the legend vary, the most common is that as proctors circulated to collect final drawings, students would jump on the “charrette” to put final touches on their presentation minutes before the deadline.

This practice of designing with a sense of urgency has been translated into current planning practice by scheduling the charrette’s public presentation before any design work begins. Under these conditions, critical development issues require swift analysis and design solutions.

A charrette offers five distinct advantages as a planning tool.

1. It is an interactive, participatory event in which all stakeholders have an opportunity to think and act creatively about a specific project.

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2. All participants focus on the project's history, constraints and opportunities at the same time.
3. The charrette provides a timely and cost effective forum for debate, clearly defines relevant design and development issues, structures alternative solutions, and concludes with a graphic presentation of project designs.
4. At its conclusion, stakeholders understand their role and the role of other stakeholders in the project's implementation.
5. The charrette's public presentation, graphic images, design standards, and implementation strategies provide substantial documentation for project approval, implementation and marketing.

To build community consensus and make informed decisions requires all the project's stakeholders to be invited to the charrette. Whether citizen, public official, developer, financier, marketer, botanist, environmentalist, teacher, engineer or design team member, these participants are valuable resources and stakeholders in the project's outcome. The more knowledge and experience they bring to the table and the more they learn about a project's dynamics, the more likely it is that the charrette will achieve desirable results.

Knowledge of a project's urban context is another exceptional resource for understanding how new construction may complement an existing community. For this reason, a charrette typically takes place on or near a site. There, participants readily experience the urban character and quality of life their designs will achieve. Designers especially find clues observing the area's physical heritage, which they can then translate into design vernacular.

The scheduled length of a charrette may be one day to one week, depending on the project's scope. A one-day charrette may produce design schematics for a single building. A series of charrettes, each several days in length, may produce sequentially finer-grained, more detailed plans for several interconnected building sites or, in a regional development strategy, several towns. Each project is different. Consequently, each charrette takes on a life of its own because of its unique circumstances. However, each charrette follows a consistent sequence.

1. An introductory social event allows charrette participants to become acquainted with one another and the project's parameters.
2. Charrette team leaders present principles that underpin the planning and design process.
3. Charrette sponsors present a description of the project site, local government initiatives, urban context, history, constraints, opportunities and design work performed to-date.
4. The work sessions comprise the longest and most intense phase of the charrette. Participants address design alternatives, identify priorities and produce graphics. On-going discussions resolve market, finance and social issues; the physical environment (including landscape, architecture and engineering); as well as an implementation program, project phasing and long-term incorporation of the project's organizing principles. At times the design team convenes for informal presentations to communicate the project's direction. As the presentation time approaches, more presentation graphics are produced.
5. At a scheduled public presentation, charrette findings and project designs are communicated graphically and verbally.

6. The charrette's conclusions are refined and published for public information. This document provides a cohesive foundation for the project's implementation and marketing.

In many ways, a charrette is a creative "tornado in reverse." The event begins with a multitude of information scattered about and, with a flurry of activity, concludes in a coherent vision for a real place. The intensity of this process can be disquieting to those in the habit of sequential meetings over a long period of time. And, in all fairness, the charrette process does not overcome the variety of unforeseen factors that can stall any project from achieving full realization.

However, once experienced, few doubt a charrette's capacity to be a more expeditious, cost-effective and spiritually rewarding means of civic engagement and community building than conventional processes.