

What Makes Participation Exemplary?

Randolph T. Hester, Jr.

The last few decades witnessed the unprecedented rise of two singular habitat-shaping forces: ecology and democracy. The political influence of ecological science spread into placemaking at a rate unimaginable at mid-century. Likewise democracy. There are twice as many democracies in the world today as there were only twenty-five years ago. It appears inevitable that ecological science and democratic desire will combine to shape the future.

In the ecological democracy upon which we are embarking, participatory design, New Urbanist design and sustainable design are intrinsically good, essential to the good functioning of society. In that sense, most of the submissions to the EDRA/*Places Awards* were good. But, often, entrants used “New Urbanism,” “sustainability” and “participation” as buzzwords while providing little evidence of inquiry, substance, outcome or advancement. This was particularly true in regard to participation, which is now required *de jure* or *de facto* across the U.S. and practiced with obligatory ritual.

With so much rote participation going on, how did the jury separate the standard or even the good from the exemplary? Reflecting on our discussions, I think there were several aspects of participation that were especially important to us. We sought participation that included the excluded, advanced the state of the art, influenced the outcome, dealt with difference, engaged the designer, integrated complex thinking or made place regional. The jury discussed projects that offered clear and specific evidence of one or more of these—not just “we did extensive public participation”—at length. This included all of the winning projects, as well as numerous others.

Include the Excluded

One of the most vexing problems for participatory planners is that the process often over-represents some people and excludes others, most notably the less affluent and less powerful, new immigrants, youth and, in many cultures, women. We applauded several projects for consciously overcoming this problem.

Each of the design and research winners involved extensive participatory research with groups frequently excluded from expressing their needs. But the most exemplary project in this regard was the master plan process for Forest Park, in St. Louis. In addition to the normal surveys of park users, the Forest Park planners surveyed 200 non-users who stated clearly that lack of safety, inadequate facilities and lack of information about the park kept them away. The master plan makes a serious effort to rectify these issues. This seems to be an obvious strategy for so many underused and unloved urban spaces. Then why is it so seldom done?

Advance the State of the Art

Participatory design has developed standard procedures and techniques. The jury found several small advancements and inventions in the technology. Two made me smile. The Portland Pedestrian Master Plan, a winner in the planning category, introduced a technique called “Pin the Tail on the Problem.” I imagine that it was fun, engaging and revealing. Another project, Hickory by Choice, a city visioning process, used a technique called “Planning Day at the Minor League Baseball Game.” This reached people who probably hadn’t thought much about the comprehensive plan before. Such place specific and culture-sensitive techniques, modest as they are, advance our ability to do participatory design well.

Influence the Outcome

Much participation remains isolated from design. Few projects showed a specific nexus between citizen input and the planning program; fewer still gave concrete examples of how the public helped give form to the place. But both of the place design winners did.

Consider just one of multiple examples from the Columbus School project. At one workshop, small teams of community members independently developed site plans for the new school. All of the groups changed the main entrance from that of the existing building to a similar location for the new school. The designers made that the main entry. Today, citizens see their ideas in the final plan and feel that they designed the school.

One byproduct: when an extra \$1.3 million had to be raised to avoid trimming the project, the local community, one of Berkeley's poorest, did so by appealing (with help from the Berkeley Public Education Foundation) to local businesses and philanthropists.

Deal With Difference

There is an alarming overemphasis in participation today on consensus without vision. Given the recent participatory gridlock from advocacy planning, consensus building often comes at the expense of important subculture differences and environmental justice.

Walter Hood's design for Lafayette Square in Oakland, a design award winner, is a welcome example of dealing forthrightly with social class differences. Rather than trying to create a public commons where everyone pretends to be one big happy family, he turned the traditional concept of a civic park inside out, with street-oriented activities and interior curvilinear spine creating small settings for different uses just in the place where the centering big open space would historically have been located.

Both Laurie Olin and I remarked upon how

this seemed counterintuitive to civic parks that we have created—Dana Park in Cambridge and Bryant Park in New York came to mind. Both use a large open space as the public center around which disparate activities are ringed, all in view of each other. In contrast, Lafayette Square allows for new residential users, downtown workers, parents with young children, old men, homeless and informal economy users to occupy separate territories without viewing each other's activities. In fact, a hillock blocks the view from one group to another. This likely explains how such a small place is able to accommodate so many different and, in some cases, incompatible, users. More attention of this sort needs to be paid to designing for social differences.

Engage the Designer

Too often, participation is misrepresented as requiring a designer to simply draw what citizens want. This is an excuse for laziness, a passive aggressiveness on the part of professionals who feel disempowered by citizens, and a retreat from civic responsibility.

Democratic design requires more from the designer, not less. The designer needs to structure the framework not only for public involvement but also for decisions about civic space. How do citizens need to look at the problem? How can citizens be aided in understanding spatial consequences? What alternatives do citizens need to consider? What is the full public cost? This process is transactive; the designer is responsible for providing the place language, the mechanisms to focus the dialogue and make difficult choices, and often the inspirational gestalt that breathes life into a place.

Each of the winning plans evidenced willingness on the part of the designer to truly engage. Another project, a series of charrettes sponsored by the University of Washington, struck me in the same way. There, through carefully conceived and

highly structured charrettes, citizens and designers engaged in spirited dialogue and debate about contentious and complex issues. The results provided visions that would never have emerged without designers who are willing to lead and risk failure.

Integrate Complex Thinking

An ecological democracy requires more complex thought from its citizens than the immediate gratification that both participatory planning and market research presently provide. They may well determine what sports coat I'll wear next year or even what exclusionary zoning I'll choose to improve my quality of life, but neither will serve to reduce our ecological footprints, enhance systemic long-term thinking or create meaningful and lasting places.

Instead, participatory processes should engage citizens in integrated, complex thought about their communities. Both the City of Hindman/ Knott County initiative in Kentucky (a planning award winner) and the design for Octavia Street in San Francisco did this. The Hindman plan provides a series of multipurpose and interconnected actions that, if followed, will provide much more than the sum of their incremental parts for a community whose problems are so difficult that it can ill afford superficial, Band-aid solutions.

The Octavia Street plan represents uncharacteristically “unknee jerk” thinking about how to move lots of vehicles through a city. Going against the simpleminded, single-purpose thinking that gave us high-speed freeways through most American cities as well as fragmented neighborhoods that suffered island effects, the designers produced a boulevard that handles traffic equal to the freeway and knits a neighborhood back together.

In a situation where years of adversarial planning and contentious legal actions had pitted neighborhood groups against each other and only

produced simplistic plans, the Octavia Street plan forced more thoughtful, holistic consideration from the public. Citizens will think about design complexly and produce splendid democratic places only when participatory designers help them to do so.

Make Place Regional

Most citizens become participants in planning because of a personal, local concern. Participatory techniques emphasize local concerns—home, neighborhood, school and park. Less attention has been paid to participation in citywide or regional concerns. This is an emerging frontier.

The Phoenix Desert Preserve was one of a few submissions this year that engaged citizens far beyond their neighborhood interests to create a plan that will provide an open space framework for the sprawling Phoenix region. This is more than a recreation and open space plan, more than a greenbelt to herd Phoenix growth. It is informed by principles of conservation biology, a level of scale and complexity that planners and citizens have come to embrace only recently.

Place is at once global, regional and local. Important regional advances can only be made with both meaningful participation and thorough ecological science. When regional science inculcates the participatory culture, participants will be better citizens of locality and region, and better-stewarded regional places should result.

Conclusion

These cases stood out. Based on the evidence presented to the jury, they are the exceptions, not the rule. High quality, inventive and purposeful participation is obviously needed. Few produce it. One wonders why, if participation is so critical, so little of it is exemplary.



Listening to Lost Voices: Forest Park, St. Louis

Interviews and surveys of park users found one group of people who liked to fish but were not permitted to do so along the stretches of riverfront they frequented, so fishing was extended to those areas

Photos: Forest Park Forever

The master plan for Forest Park in St. Louis, a masterwork conceived in 1876, involved ecological restoration, landscape preservation and a fresh look at weaving the park into the social and cultural life of the region's 2.5 million residents.

Park planners gathered public feedback from through conventional and unconventional means. They staged a "summit conference," held open meetings and organized a 67-member steering committee that heard from more than 1,000 individuals, groups and institutions. But they also conducted user observations and compiled nearly 1,000 surveys—telephoning park users and non-users alike, and interviewing people visiting the park. This revealed, for example, that schools did not see the role the park could play as an environmental laboratory (a newly created schools program is focussing on the re-established waterway and forested area).

Thus the participatory process not only helped forge a new public consensus on a vision for the park, but also inspired numerous adjustments to the plan that will help Forest Park better accommodate a diversity of activities and users.

Client: City of St. Louis Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry

Design: City of St. Louis/St. Louis Development Corp.

Consultants: AAI/Campbell, Inc., Hale Irwin Golf Services, Kwame Building Group, L.E. Haefner Enterprises, Inc., O'Donnell Communications, Dave Tylka & Associates, D.R. Felton & Associates and W.E. Seffens & Associates.



New educational programming helped schools recognize the park as a teaching resource



Covers of publications generated by the Seattle Charrettes, including Douglas Kelbaugh's book, *Common Place*, a retrospective that also considered broader questions of regional planning and design.

Cultivating a Civic Vision: The Seattle Charrettes

A series of eight design charrettes organized in the Seattle-Tacoma region by the University of Washington from 1990 to 1995, effectively linked citizen participation to urban design research, teaching and practice in a metropolitan area that was coming to grips with regional growth and design issues.

The charrettes considered topics such as public housing, transit-oriented development, reclaiming closed military

bases and infill development. The configuration of community involvement depended on the project; community members helped write the programs, acted as team leaders and made up the bulk of the audience.

The charrettes generally produced multiple visions, providing a healthy foundation for continued, spirited public debate and sometimes setting the stage for specific policy changes. Just as important, they provided a forum for academics, citizens and design professionals to take leadership on framing civic design issues and putting them on the public's agenda.