

People and Place-making: participation in urban design processes

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Introduction

The term *urban design* was coined in the mid-1950s (Lang 2005) almost coincidentally with its first appearance in academic curricula in the United States. The first academic program in urban design in the United States was the University of Pennsylvania's Civic Design Program, started in 1956 (Barnett 1982; Strong 1990), followed by Harvard's Urban Design Program in 1960. Thereafter, the term was imported into the United Kingdom, even though it was in Great Britain where the first course and the first department of "Civic Design" began in 1909, at Liverpool University. The Liverpool University course was intended to train planners (Cullingworth and Nadin 2006), with a "close connotation to municipal government and functions such as 'Civic Centre'" (Cuthbert 2007, 180) and town planning (The Builder 1908), and thus it cannot claim the progenitorship of today's urban design curriculum.

Some authors and urban designers interpreted urban Design since its first appearance as a way to connect people and place or, better, to make places for people. Francis Tibbalds, proposed perspectives on urban design such as: "the three dimensional design of places for people" or "the physical design of public realm" (Tibbalds 1988, quoted in Madanipour 1996, 93). Matthew Carmona and Steve Tiesdell (2007, 1) define urban design "as *the process of making better places for people than would otherwise be produced*" (emphasis in original).

Ali Madanipour, an urban design theorist and scholar at the University of Newcastle in England, proposes to define urban design: "as the multidisciplinary activity of shaping and managing urban environments, interested in both the process of this shaping and the space it helps shape. [...] Urban design is part of the process of the production of space" (1996, 117).

Processes in Urban Design

I have co-authored with Frederick Steiner (Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin) a book titled *Urban Ecological Design* (Palazzo, Steiner 2011, Palazzo 2008). The book advocates for including urban ecology as a basic component of urban design and provides an urban design process called *Not-Only-One-Solution* (NOOS). The name of the process supports that urban design, like other design and planning activities, not only permits but also demands that different answers and different solutions are considered for a given problem. The process employs a structure, a route strategy, which helps the designer to move toward the final target. The 10 phases of the process reflect the progression of thought in the different fields of planning and design. The process is systematic, precisely linear, and highly

optimistic. It assumes, for the sake of descriptive convenience and the necessary simplification, a relative lack of conflict among the participants involved, a high level of honesty, and competence by every party involved in the process and its application to situations with a “moderate” complexity

The NOOS process consists of ten phases, which have been graphically reproduced in a scheme that consists of two parts. A central column with progressively darker shades of gray from top to bottom highlights the different phases. At the left of the scheme, five thin columns, also in graduated colors, offer an interpretation of the phases in clusters of actions: analysis-preproject-project-execution-involvement, bringing together and even overlapping some of the nine stages. Of these five columns, the one on the far left shows the involvement of the population or of the client, or both, that permeates the whole process.

Dialogue is located in the center of process but actually permeates the entire process since the very beginning to the very end. In the process of urban design, the term *dialogue* refers to the opportunities for a rapport between the designer and the client as well as between the designer and the public. The term is inspired by Edmund Bacon, who, in *Design of Cities* (1974), described how Market Street in Philadelphia was transformed. As a participant in the process, Bacon used the word dialogue to describe the complex ways planners and designers present ideas, communicate, receive feedback, and restructure their proposals.

Such dialogue may occur throughout the design process and could involve either the client or the public (even if sometimes the two overlap). In this paper I refer to the relationship between the designer (planner, architect, urban designer, engineer) and the public. Two main motivations stimulate a dialogue between designers and public: to inform and to involve. The resulting activities can be called “public information” and “public participation.” According to James Creighton (1981, 4):

“The difference is that the purpose of public information is to inform the public while the purpose of public involvement is not only to inform the public but also to solicit public response regarding the public’s needs, values, and evaluations of proposed solutions.” Participation implies an especially deep form of involvement, through which citizens become engaged in directing the outcome. The level of information, involvement, and participation depends on the circumstances.

Michael Dobbins (2009, x) emphasized the role of the public in urban design as a public service no matter if his client ranged “from single patron to the city’s 7.5 million citizens.” According to Dobbins:

“Urban design came to describe the design and functionality of all urbanized places—how they look and how they performed. Furthermore, the emphasis in urban design is on public places—the streets, parks, plazas, the open spaces that everyone shares. . . .

Urban design is the design of the public environment, the space owned by all, as it connects to, frames, and is framed by the private environment—that space owned by individuals or corporate entities. Urban design is the public face and public base of human settlements. People proud of their places are the mark of good urban design.”

In general, public involvement “is not a single event, such as a public hearing, but a series of coordinated activities that provide different kinds of participation opportunities at different stages of a decision-making process” (Creighton 1981, 54). James Creighton, in a manual for public involvement (1981, 55–56), made four observations:

1. *Different publics will be involved at different stages of the decision-making process.* During the technical phases, participation is likely to be limited to leaders of groups, representatives of stakeholders, or staffs of agencies.
2. *There are appropriate levels of involvement at each step in the decision-making process.*
3. *Public participation will increase as the decision-making process progresses.* The over- all pattern in public involvement is that more and more people will participate as the process comes nearer to a decision.
4. *The public involvement program must be integrated with the decision-making process.*

Public participation is effective throughout the entire design process. In the early phases, participation plays the role of supporting the designer in defining project goals. Public participation in the initial phase can help identify values that a community wants to take into consideration in the final design.

Dialogues with the public need to positively affect the design and the next steps of the process. The most important aspect is the attitude with which the designer approaches the dialogue. Designers should feel comfortable expressing their own ideas but also be equally open to revising and even changing them.

Dialogue with the public provides a decisive moment and, in some cases, determinant, in a design process that enhances its democratic dimension. In a democratic dialogue, a proposal can be accepted, amended, modified, sent back, or refused. Designers must be ready to accept other ideas, proposals, and contributions, but they must also be ready to defend their own proposals with conviction and confidence. Designers should be open to change and not be arrogant.

Citizen participation is often a challenge and a difficult task because of resistance and suspicion from citizens. Michael Dobbins, in *Urban Design and People* (2009, 25), argues that

“Citizen empowerment has been difficult and halting from the beginning. Important advances have been made, yet it’s still, like democracy itself, a messy work in progress. The first line of resistance is predictable: People whose traditional powers were being impinged upon were unwilling to share. Then there are the internal challenges: How do

traditionally marginalized people rise to trust the opportunity to participate? Too often their efforts have been ignored or rebuffed, resulting in oppositional activism at best or apathetic resignation at worst.”

Michael Dobbins also highlighted three important issues in public participation in urban design. The first is that: “People are the core of successful urban places. [The second is:] if a place looks good, feels comfortable, and meets its functional expectations, it will attract people and engender their embrace, ongoing interaction, and stewardship. [The third is:] Such a happy outcome is more likely to occur if representatives of the people who are or will be in the place play an active role in guiding the design and development decisions and priorities that make places happen. (2009, x)

Public Participation in Different Design Contexts

In the following part will be presented three examples of participation in urban design activities in three different contexts: a workshop, an International competition, and a direct assignment. These three operational contexts for urban designers require different types of public.

In general in the context of workshops, public participation occurs in two ways: direct and consultative. Direct participation refers to the involvement of people (skilled or not in the fields of design or in topics considered in the project), representatives of associations, or groups of interested parties potentially affected by the design. In a workshop, public participation can also be consultative or informative. This approach is accomplished by informative meetings, focus groups, design workshops, and presentations at the beginning, during, or at the end of the process.

In a competition, public participation is usually limited to individual participants because of time constraints (usually very short), distance (national or international open competitions involve groups often located very far from the study area), language, and organizational difficulties (e.g., how to organize a public meeting for all teams participating in the competition). However, public participation in a competition can be planned before the brief is prepared. In this way, information about public expectations is available to all participants and known to the jury.

In direct assignments, public participation can be organized by the client together with the urban designer. If the client is a private company whose essential interest is the commercial potential of the project, public participation is unusual unless required by public entities. Public consultancies may be initiated to avoid the risks of extending the time of the project or the prospect of reducing profit, or in the worst case, to open conflicts with parties, which could stop the project.

In general, public participation can have a significant role in urban design. In describing several North American cases (plus that of Fortaleza in Brazil), Barbara Faga (2006, xxi) observes that in public participation processes there

are “moments of brilliance and leadership, good intentions gone wrong, common pitfalls to be expected, and roadblocks that seemingly arise out of nowhere.”

Three examples of public participation

The Transforming the Places of Production Workshops

In 1999 and 2000, the Regional Plan Association and Milan Polytechnic organized a gathering to examine American and Italian experiences with the redevelopment of underutilized sites and obsolete infrastructure in the metropolitan regions of New York City and Milan (Fossa et al. 2002). Rather than facilitate an exchange of information and case histories between American and Italian experts, the structure of colloquia enabled participants to explore issues through three concurrent site workshops in both the New York (October 16–22, 1999) and Milan (April 9–16, 2000) metropolitan regions. For each of the six workshops, an interdisciplinary team of approximately fifteen Italian and American architects, urban designers, and planners worked with a local client to develop specific re-use plans for a site or an industrial district. The plans were the product of an intensive four days of tours, meetings with local interested parties, and teamwork. The results were presented at public meetings at each site and at final plenary sessions. The three New York metropolitan workshop sites focused on Long Island City and Cohoes, New York, and on Raritan, New Jersey.

- *Long Island City, New York.* As with many urban manufacturers, the business of printing takes place in a complex environment where mutually dependent clients, graphic artists, brokers, press operators, and binders interact daily. Over time, this agglomeration economy has taken root in special districts in Lower Manhattan. Rising real estate prices are disrupting this social ecology. The workshop team investigated how a new center for printing could be created in Long Island City, an industrial neighborhood just across the East River in New York City.
- *Cohoes, New York.* In 1837, the largest cotton mill in the United States was built at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers and the Erie Canal. The 828,821-square-foot (77,000-square-meter) Harmony Mill complex and thousands of units of company-owned housing helped make Cohoes a classic company town and a cornerstone of America’s industrial revolution. While this rich history is now celebrated by a state urban cultural park designation, the mills themselves are only 50 percent occupied and are in disrepair. The goal of this workshop was to find new manufacturing uses that match the mill’s nineteenth-century architecture, the town’s tourism potential, and the needs of the residents for the still-occupied worker housing.
- *Raritan, New Jersey.* Like many of the small towns in the New York

metropolitan region, Raritan grew up around the railroad. At one time, the Raritan River and the woolen mills along it were the lifeblood of the town's economy. Later, the railroad supported not only commuters to New York City but also industry. Two of these industrial sites, adjacent but on opposite sides of the tracks, were the focus of this workshop. Both sites face increasing pressure for redevelopment. Together these sites represent a range of urban design and planning issues that affect the industrial properties along the rail lines.

The three Milan metropolitan region workshop sites were Porta Genova (Milan), Monza, and Valtellina (Sondrio).

- *Porta Genova, Milan.* Close to the historical and business center of Milan, this underutilized rail yard and station in a former industrial area is an important re-development opportunity for the entire city. The site is just outside Milan's historical center, close to the *Navigli* (canals) and a regional agricultural park. Old rail yards are common issues in many western European countries.
- *Monza.* Monza is a city of about 120,000 inhabitants located along the Lambro River, just northeast of Milan. Its rich history dates back to the sixth century BC when the Lombard queen Theodelinda established a residence and the still-standing cathedral. The workshop examined potential new uses for a former prison and a former abattoir. Both of these structures, located in a mixed-use area close to the historic city center, were largely abandoned, the only use being an animal fair that occupies part of the abattoir once a year.
- *Valtellina, Sondrio.* Located at the base of the Alps, Valtellina is an important river valley, well known for its hydroelectric plants and vineyards. It is a popular destination for tourists in winter and summer. Small and medium enterprises blossomed after the Second World War. Many of these businesses are located directly along a principal highway and the Adda River. However, this industrial and manufacturing system has suffered through recent economic transformations that led to the abandonment of industrial buildings. The design study examined how to integrate a new highway into the Valtellina landscape and economy.

The designs produced during the workshops have had concrete results and have also led to new exploratory plans. The workshop of Long Island City served, above all, to help the Borough of Queens develop urban design policies to encourage productive reuse. These policies reinforce the potential interrelations of public spaces on the waterfront with those reclaimed from the rundown part of the Sunnyside Yard and for the visual image of Queens in contrast to the urban landscape of Manhattan. At Raritan, the municipality adopted ideas emerging

from the workshop for the renewal of the industrial area along the railroad. At Cohoes, the property owner of the area accepted the advice of the workshop for reusing the former cotton mill as a high-tech productive complex. He presented the project to the municipality, and it was accepted, thereby solving the problem concerning a building that had been abandoned for many years.

The Porta Genova workshop outcomes have become the base for the Milan city planning department to elaborate on specific criteria for evaluating new urban programs in the area. In Monza, the city government has given the Milan Polytechnic the task of carrying out the results of the workshop, passing from an instant plan to a master plan for the area of the former abattoir. In Valtellina, the project of the Lombardia regional government for the new highway Ss36 in the two workshop areas (Bolgia and Sassella) was partially changed following the results of the workshop. This change respected the agricultural and environmental values and greenway potential for flood-prone areas along the river.

Public Participation in the Vatnsmyri, Reykjavík, Competition

A competition brief was issued in 2006 by the City of Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland. The organizers called for ideas for the airport area of Vatnsmyri, a large site (370 acres, or 150 hectares) south of Reykjavík. The competition goal was “to maximize the opportunity offered by Vatnsmyri to strengthen and consolidate the city for the twenty-first century, providing quality and a strong sense of community. By creating a contemporary and robust urban fabric with the flexibility required for research, technology, and knowledge based enterprises mixed with significant housing, services, and new residential forms, Reykjavík will strengthen its international role and competitive edge” (Reykjavíkurborg 2007, 2). The “Call for Ideas” document was considered to be the brief. It was included in the material distributed to the participants to inform them about the project requirements. The Call for Ideas contained the following:

- An explanation of the procedure and of the project proponent
- The project description with maps and written descriptions of Iceland, Reykjavík, the site, the adjoining areas, and the planning provisions
- Goals and assessment criteria
- Procedures, with participant registration rules, for accepting entries and for assessing the proposals
- Information on
 - history and archaeological remains
 - nature and ecology
 - weather and sunlight
 - transportation and traffic planning
 - Reykjavík’s economy and plans
 - consultations with the public and other affected parties

The material organized for the Vatnsmyri competition also included large maps at regional and municipal scales, projects already proposed for the adjoining areas to consider in the design process, and annotated photos of the site and of the surrounding areas. Also included was a document called “Consultation Days,” which contained a summary of the two-day participation process through which the City of Reykjavík promoted the project and prepared people for the transformation of the site. The document included suggestions from participants about forms, densities, and future development; the urban environment they envisaged; and the results of an experiment with wooden blocks that corresponded to single buildings and urban blocks. The participants arranged these blocks to visualize land use, shapes of urban patterns, recreational spaces, and connections with existing natural features. Another document, called “Stakeholder Meetings,” included the minutes from meetings with interested parties in preparation for the competition. Stakeholders’ expectations for the site were collected during consultations organized by the municipality in the months before announcing the competition.

An important aspect in the preparation of the Vatnsmyri competition was the early consultation with interested parties and the public. According to the City of Reykjavík organizers, it was important that the competitors received accurate information about the views of the public and interested parties about planning and possible utilization of the site: Vatnsmyri, a 371-acre (150-hectare) area near the center of Reykjavík. It was equally important that the competition judges had this information, so that they could consider and evaluate the proposals based on the same starting point. In this way, it was more likely that consensus could be achieved on making the winning proposal a reality.

The opinion of the public was solicited by providing an open forum in the Reykjavík Museum of Arts on 29 September and 1 October, 2005. During the month of September there was an exhibition in the museum on planning [*What Kind of City Do You Want?*] and Reykjavík planning history and this exhibition formed the backdrop for the open forum. The emphasis was on gauging the public’s preferences regarding the urban environment and how to allocate the land in Vatnsmyri. In addition, two walks were offered to inquire about attitudes toward natural and cultural heritage in the area. Participation was invited by conspicuous advertisements in newspapers and on the radio. (Reykjavíkurborg 2007, 28)

An estimated five hundred people visited the Reykjavík Museum of Art during the two consultation days. Some were active in their participation and gave suggestions and ideas, which were included in the documents attached to the brief (Reykjavíkurborg 2007, 28):

- Urban development in Vatnsmyri should be dense and mixed, akin to that in central Reykjavík or in European city centers. Generally, there was a preference among participants for modest building height while a few wanted

very tall buildings.

- Vatnsmyri should offer culture and education in addition to residences. Diversity in culture, services, and architecture is preferable.
- It is important for the development to include sheltered and attractive public spaces with good connections to the nearby outdoor recreation areas.
- There should be increased emphasis on walking, biking, and public transportation.
- The cultural and natural heritage should be respected.

For the competitors, the document included useful information about settlement patterns, density, relevant landmarks, urban environment visions, open and entertainment areas, and other planning ideas. Prior to the competition, there was also a series of meetings with companies and institutions located adjacent to the Vatnsmyri area. The purpose of these meetings (the minutes of which were included in the document “Stakeholder Meetings”) was to reveal local attitudes toward development and the opportunities that the project might offer, for the information of competition entrants. These suggestions were also included in the competition brief (Reykjavíkurborg 2007, 28–29):

- A dense development is preferable in Vatnsmyri as this would also accommodate services and an opportunity to live near the workplace or school.
- Businesses and institutions in Vatnsmyri should be focused on knowledge and innovation.
- It is important that internal links within the area are strong to encourage synergy between different parties and access to services. These links should at least be provided by public transportation, walking, and bicycling paths.
- A strong connection with the city center is important due to the services and culture provided there. This could be shaped by extending the Lake, a green sector or a boulevard southwards.
- The development in Vatnsmyri should be the venue for vibrant city life, characterized by quality and diversity. It should be interesting, bold and noteworthy. It should refer to local traits and consider the local climate.

The Orsenigo Integrated Intervention Program

In Orsenigo, a hamlet located 6.2 miles (10 kilometers) from Como and its homonymous lake, a master plan for a former industrial area was designed during a workshop organized by the Milan Polytechnic. The 5-days workshop (April 2006) was held at Orsenigo with the participation of the City’s Mayor, the City’s chief architect, the Developer and owner of the area, and ten graduate Building Engineering/Architecture students of the Politecnico di Milano.

The goals of the workshop, as agreed with the Mayor of Orsenigo were the following:

- 1) Develop a Concept Plan of the urban system taking in consideration opportunities and constraints contained in the current Urban Plan and the community requirements. These can be briefly summarized as follows:
 - Relocation of some strategic public services (town hall, post office),
 - Improvement of some public services currently insufficient (parking, places for events),
 - Reorganization of the district mobility pattern
- 2) Present the developed Concept Plan to the community, in order to compare the expectations and gather ideas and indications able to devise a larger involvement
- 3) Design a Concept Plan able to be adequately communicated to people without technical knowledge.

A few months after the public presentation of the master plan, the municipality, together with the owner of the area, asked the team to convert it to a detailed plan to be implemented. The master plan provided an overall design, which had been communicated and shared with the public. It now needed to be transformed into a formal planning tool: the Integrated Intervention Program. In Italy, the Integrated Intervention Program is a binding agreement governed by a partnership between public and private entities for a site.

The Orsenigo municipality requested that the implementation plan reassert the guiding principles that emerged from the master plan, specifically to achieve the following:

1. Regeneration of an area very close to the historical center, perceived by the population as “abandoned” and “neglected,” with the creation of a multifunctional place that, while giving preference to housing (as required by the general plan), would host other uses and public spaces
2. Enhancement of the surrounding landscape views and the relation with the historical center and the current urban pattern, respecting the existing character
3. New construction needs to preserve alignments, volumetric relationships, building heights, and visual perspectives
4. Presence of public spaces, green areas, as well as pedestrian and bicycle paths, integrated into the existing network, thus representing an alternative to auto- mobile use
5. Consistency with the master plan, acknowledging that the implementation plan, as an operating tool to transform the area, would have to specify some details and relationship elements that were underestimated during the workshop.

The design of the implementation plan began by taking account of the surrounding landscape. Landscape features acted as an important element for organizing urban design choices. The distant view of the mountain ranges of Lecco and Bergamo, the open view on Brianza's small lakes, the terraced cultivation in closer view, and the church that emerges on the top of the hill on which rests the historical center of Orsenigo are all morphological characteristics that emerged.

Another aspect considered was the site's location in the city context. The derelict industrial area acts as a hinge between the historical center and the more recent settlement and is adjacent to the core of existing services. The final design of the Integrated Intervention Program respected the general plan forecasts about the volumetric concentration along the longest side of the area and the request for public facilities (a new city hall and public library, parking, and public spaces). In addition, access to the area and to the historical center was studied. As a result, an existing road was eliminated and replaced with a new one.

The implementation program divided the site into four distinct districts. The design rules for buildings and public spaces were described in a "Map of the Alignments and of the Regulating Lines," which is legally binding. The map specifies the following:

1. Building fronts
2. Alignments between distinct buildings
3. Building footprints
4. Building orientations
5. Maximum dimensions of the building bulk admitted, the maximum number of floors, and the types of building roofs
6. Limits of private areas that establish the borders with public spaces.

The "Map of the Alignments and of the Regulating Lines" becomes the translation tool of the master plan that leaves appropriate flexibility for specific building and landscape designs. The "Map of the Alignments" respects the general plan and prescribes some "fixed points," which allow future designers to make original interventions. Charles Eames observed that "design depends largely on constraints," which is certainly true in urban design (Neuhart, Neuhart, and Eames 1989, 15).

Conclusion

One way to ensure that people will react favorably to an urban design is to involve them in its creation. To do so, the designer must be willing to engage in dialogue, certainly with the client but often with a broader public as well. Dialogue informed by ecological understanding can do much to advance the sustainability of the planet by connecting local decisions to regional and global processes.

Such dialogue can contribute significantly to a successful master plan.

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