

THE TENSION BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND OPEN SPACE:  
INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Rachel Kaplan

University of Michigan

ABSTRACT

It is easily assumed that the urban visual landscape is a reasonable reflection of the public's preferences. By permitting the public to participate in local environmental decisions, however, it becomes possible to assess what is preferred and what is tolerated for lack of choice. A recent project offers some useful insights into these issues, both substantively and procedurally. The contract to propose a land use plan for a major segment of the city included the stipulation of extensive public participation. The results, derived from diverse elements of the population, suggest that the desire for development may not reflect the majority's views, while the sentiments about the desirability of natural areas are widely shared.

An obvious change in cities around the world has been in the scale of development. There are more buildings and more buildings of a height that was unknown in the last century. The changes have involved huge sums of money, thousands of individuals, and have often resulted from thoughtful planning processes.

Surely a process that is so prevalent, with numerous examples on each continent, must reflect some basic qualities of the human species. It certainly reflects technological prowess, economic motivations, and the pressures of burgeoning population. But can we assume that these urbanization trends also reflect human preferences? Is the urban environment a reflection of what people want, of what they need, or only of what they will tolerate?

There are indeed reasons to believe that humans do not prefer what has happened in the urban setting. One hears murmurs about small is beautiful, that villages and small towns are "coming back," about design at a human scale. Yet the urban-scape continues to be developed. The conflict between development and "leaving things as they were" is perhaps far greater than most communities realize. With opportunities for public input-often minimal and late in the planning process it is all too easy to assume that the environment is a reflection of people's preferences.

This paper describes a project which sought public input repeatedly and used a variety of mechanisms to obtain it. Discussion of the project serves two major purposes, one dealing with process and the other with content. Discussion of the different approaches that were taken provides useful imagery about public input. What was learned from the public participation process is also instructive. The input made the conflict between development and "open space" loud and clear. It also made it apparent how readily land

uses can change in ways that are contrary to human needs and preferences.

THE STUDY SITE: NORTH MAIN/HURON RIVER

The major entryway into the City of Ann Arbor, MI, from the north parallels railroad tracks as well as the Huron River. The river, however, is rarely visible from North Main. In fact, this major road provides a sufficiently unsightly entrance that the City decided to have a Land Use Plan prepared for the corridor. The project area includes numerous small businesses, some residential developments, major land holdings by public utilities, as well as opportunities for a variety of river-related recreational activities.

As is true with many cities, the river-front represents special opportunities. While access to the river is available in many portions of the city and adjacent areas, the North Main portion is an exception, interrupting the system of trails available along much of the Huron. Environmentalists were concerned that fragile habitats at the river's edge must not be disturbed, and warned also about the danger of toxics that had been deposited in the large junk yard as well as other areas. The many businesses along the corridor felt threatened by a Land Use Plan that could potentially affect their location. The developers had their sights set on new ventures that could capitalize on valuable parcels of land.

A Task Force representing many of these stakeholders was established by City Council. It held public interviews with each of the firms responding to the Request for Proposal to draw up the Land Use Plan. While the inclusion of five public meetings was specified in the RFP, Deardorff Design Resources, Inc., the firm that was awarded the contract, emphasized a variety of additional approaches for

gaining public input in its proposal. I served on the consultant's team as a public participation specialist. It is noteworthy that the City was so clearly committed to public input. The decision to hire a consultant who proposed to go beyond the specified public meeting further supported this commitment.

#### PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

There is a no lack of mechanisms for obtaining public involvement. While different procedures have their advocates, it is clear that no single format can accomplish everything. Furthermore, the requirements for presenting information to the public and for receiving reactions are not necessarily best met by the same format. Nor is the same format likely to be suited to the different phases of a project. The present project included a variety of procedures, some quite traditional and others that have received less attention.

Despite the well-documented drawbacks of such approaches, the project included the most frequently used formats -- public meetings and a task force. The use of a Task Force was determined right from the start, and the consultant held numerous meetings with the task force members during the current project. Virtually all of the task force and public meetings received newspaper coverage both before and after the scheduled events.

#### Task Force

Task forces are a convenient mechanism for input as they can draw a group of individuals with sufficient interest in the problem to maintain involvement. On the other hand, the number of participants is necessarily limited. Further, if the group is large problems are created of finding agreeable meeting times and poor attendance makes continuity of discussion difficult. A too small group, however, easily defeats the need to have diverse representation. In a project such as this one, the selection of task force members has direct political implications.

Attendance by task force members was variable with a core of individuals attending most meetings. These members represented businesses and property owners who would be directly affected by the proposal as well as members of interest groups including, for example, the Chamber of Commerce and the Ecology Center. The multitude of concerns and priorities was always evident at these meetings though there is no way to assess the degree to which these reflect the larger public that is affected by so large a project. As would be expected, there were numerous instances, however, when the public at

large felt the Task Force did not reflect the community's priorities. These were expressed through letters to the newspaper and in statements at the public meetings.

#### Public Meetings

The public meetings were scheduled at critical junctures in the planning process. Many of these were procedurally quite traditional with a variety of presentations followed by time for public comment. It is easy to assume that those who speak at such a meeting represent others. To counteract this potential problem response forms were used at two meetings to provide opportunities for individuals to indicate personal opinions in both a structured and open-ended fashion.

Furthermore, a meeting devoted to alternative solutions for the Land Use Plan was largely devoted to small-group participation, with Task Force members as facilitators. The meeting ended with reports from each of the groups to the larger group. Despite the strongly discrepant perspectives of the facilitators, the results of these small groups had many communalities. The desire for intense development was strongly absent. The call for river access and "open space" was persistent.

#### Group Interviews

The initial phase of the project involved intensive data gathering. The environmental issues that needed to be examined were extensive: historic structures, fragile habitats, toxic waste, railroad right of way and crossing, and the requirements of state highways. Analyses were also performed to assess feasibility of economic development. In addition, information needed to be collected about the preferences and concerns of the many interested individuals. Two formal mechanisms were used to gain such information: interviews and photoquestionnaires.

Ninety-one individuals participated in 25 interview sessions. Each session was held to one hour and followed a uniform format. A study model of the entire project area (1":100 ft.) served as the focus. Scale models made of foam core were used to reflect different building heights and densities. Three levels of development, ranging from all parks and open space to a density of building to 12 story height, were presented and participants' comments were recorded. A proposal to convert part of the North Main Street corridor to a boulevard was presented using models to show elevation. In addition, participants were asked about the uses and activities they thought should occur in the study area.

The use of low-detail models and a physical representation of the entire study area proved very useful. Though the model was constructed at minimal cost, using a map as the ground plane, participants could relate to the region and could respond to a variety of potential solutions. By having group interviews, many more individuals could be accommodated while still providing an opportunity for input.

As would be expected, neighborhood groups, developers, business representatives, and environmentalists differed in their responses to the material presented. Nonetheless, the process served to narrow the range of concerns and revealed several areas of agreement. Participants generally viewed the areas adjacent to the river as requiring different (and lower) height restriction and density than those more removed from the riverfront. Furthermore, there was agreement that the study area consisted of two major segments calling for different patterns of use.

#### Photoquestionnaire

Public input often includes only those citizens who have a personal stake and/or a willingness to be actively involved in the process. In addition, many forms of public participation require a substantial time commitment and attendance at events that conflict with other demands. In an effort to obtain input from many more individuals than would otherwise be involved, the data gathering phase included a photoquestionnaire. As its name implies, this is a questionnaire that includes photographs; in this case they included both views of areas along the study corridor and, more importantly, views from other places that suggest potential activities and development. In addition to photographs, the survey also included questions that would provide input on how the various segments of the public felt about possible future uses of the study area.

The photoquestionnaire is probably the least used format for public participation of the ones included in this project. Yet, it is a procedure that compliments the others and avoids some of the problems endemic to public participation. It requires relatively little time and can be completed at one's convenience. It is a useful device for providing imagery and thus serves as a device for both informing and soliciting information at the same time (Kaplan, 1979). Unlike lengthy surveys, pictures are engaging and participants invariably enjoy the process.

In the present study the photoquestionnaire was an important device for clarifying the preferences of the sampled individuals. There had been many proposals for uses of the study area and sentiments about these could be tested by including

a variety of photographs representing such uses. The results of the photoquestionnaire were frequently mentioned in subsequent meetings as indication of the public's priorities. At the same time, however, this device certainly did not meet universal approval. There were heated arguments about who should be sampled and heated criticism about the biases inherent in the material included in the survey. It is useful to examine these issues more closely.

#### WHO IS TO PARTICIPATE?

It would be difficult to argue that task forces and public meetings provide a representative view of the public's concerns. Nor do they necessarily involve large numbers. As any person in public office is aware, many political forces affect the mail one receives or any other indications of public sentiment. The option to be heard is, theoretically, available to all; the likelihood of exercising the option is far less universal.

When it comes to surveys, however, questions are often raised about the size of the sample and its representativeness. The prevalent use of polls and the public's increasing awareness of biases in polling make the strong association between surveys and representativeness difficult to separate. As an instrument of public participation, however, the intention of the photoquestionnaire is different from a poll. A major purpose is to provide the opportunity for participation for individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to be heard and have an interest in the issue. To have a representative sample would require a majority of people with no such interest in the study. They are not likely to come to meetings, ask for interviews, or respond to surveys.

The photoquestionnaire results thus constitute input from a sizable number of people whose opinions and concerns are likely to be ignored in the usual public participation procedure. It would thus not be surprising if the survey results would be at odds with the positions heard at public meetings as they represent voices not usually heard.

Who should receive the photoquestionnaire? As with many land use issues, there is the tension between input from those who live or work or own property proximal to the target area, on the one hand, and the public at large for whom the area is a major vehicular corridor, a setting for recreation, and simply a part of one's "world." If one sends the survey to a random sample, then, should one draw the sample from an area in and around the study area or from the city as a whole? Assuming that a random sample is an

appropriate group, are there others constituencies that should be given the opportunity to respond?

The Task Force working with the consultant team was to approve such decisions. While they never raised the questions of how to draw the random sample, the City's Planning Department was well equipped to do this and provided the labels for the sample -- drawn from the city as a whole. Letters were sent to 814 individuals inviting them to return a postcard if they wished to participate in the project. Only 24% of these requested a photoquestionnaire, and of these 70% returned the completed survey.

The Task Force members agreed with the consultant that certain targeted groups should also be in the sample, including property owners, employees working in the North Main corridor, Task Force members and other individuals directly involved in the decision-making process. A total of 158 employees and 87 others returned the questionnaire (representing a 45% response rate).

In addition, the availability of the questionnaire would also be publicized through the newspaper and other newsletters and interested individuals could request a copy. This provided an opportunity for participation for anyone in the community with an interest in this issue. Of the 176 requests, 133 (76%) were returned. While requesting a questionnaire is a straightforward approach for many citizens and for members of grassroots organizations, it is a far less likely mechanism -- as we learned -- for the business community. The Chamber of Commerce argued strongly and persistently that their membership should simply receive copies, or that they should be given copies to distribute. The fact that their membership, much as members of any other organization, could simply call and request a copy was not met favorably.

A final group included in the sample were high school students. The consultant's suggestion to include these future citizens surprised the Task Force and was not immediately favored. Why would one want to include these individuals, we were asked! In any event, 115 students drawn from each of the three high schools participated as part of their Social Science classes.

A total of 621 individuals participated in the photoquestionnaire. While no claim is made that these "represent" the citizens of the community, they do include many more individuals than would otherwise have participated and they encompass greater diversity of interests. As a matter of fact, the strong agreement on several issues on the part of the respondents was important in the impact the public participation had on the final outcome.

#### INSIGHTS FROM THE PHOTOQUESTIONNAIRE

The choice of items in any questionnaire can be biasing. Similarly, the selection of photographs has important consequences. In the present instance, the leadership of the environmentally-concerned contingent attacked the choice as too strongly development oriented. The Chamber of Commerce leadership, by contrast, was outraged by the antidevelopment flavor of the material included. Not that one would seek such animosities, but having both sides feel equally discriminated against at least suggested that serious bias was avoided.

In fact, the 40 photographs and the verbal items represented a diversity of viewpoints, including a variety of forms of development as well as more natural treatments of segments of the corridor. For all items, 5-point rating scales were used to indicate preference or degree of agreement. The responses to the photographs as well as to the items concerning "Desirability" of specified uses and "Attitudes" regarding approaches to the study area were separately analyzed using nonmetric factor analysis. In this way the participants' perceptions of the issues and future possibilities could be examined by extracting common patterns of response.

Based on this procedure, the photographs divided into three major categories: (1) scenes that were of natural settings, including wooden walkways and other clear signs of human influence as well as some that were more pristine (Fig. 1, left); (2) scenes of urban development, including many that had natural elements (Fig. 1, middle); and (3) scenes of light industry, reflecting the kinds of businesses that exist in the study area (Fig. 1, right). The preferences for these groupings were quite similar across the various samples, with the first set far preferred to the other two in every instance. The employees tended to rate the "light industry" grouping somewhat higher than did others, and the high school students somewhat favored "urban development." But consistently, the means for the latter two groupings were below mid-scale, and at least a full scale point below the mean for the "nature" category.

The items dealing with the Desirability of specific possible changes in the study area formed four categories: Parks and recreation, Small business / light industry; Residential / office; and "Festival Center." The last of these incorporated many of the suggestions that had been favored by various developers and elected officials, including restaurants, boutiques, band shell, cultural center, and hotel. Here again the results across the various samples were remarkably similar. "Parks and recreation" was once

again consistently highly favored and with only a single exception rated far above any of the others. For the employee group, it tied with the "Small business" category. For the others, this cluster was among the least favored. The Festival Center category was at mid-scale for the random sample and for the high school students and below that for the others.

The attitude items painted a similar picture, with the "Public access" items and those concerned with "Monitoring the appearance" of the corridor receiving the strongest support. The item "Area should be largely natural" was highly endorsed by each group, and the consideration of "Adding to the city's tax base" received no more than middling support.

The responses to the photoquestionnaire thus leave no doubt that for all segments of the community that responded to the survey there is strong endorsement of leaving the North Main corridor in a relatively natural state. It is important to recognize that the strong support for parks and open spaces included both the pristine, and the more developed. The support for even moderately scaled urban development, by contrast, was limited at best.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Even more important than having input is what use is made of it. Land Use Plans are important for setting a direction, but it will be decades before the conse-

quences of the plan can be assessed. The voices (and dollars) that lead to development are generally more readily heard and more clearly evident in such plans. These can be defended on "rational" grounds. The rationality of offering diverse opportunities for public input, however, may yield different solutions. They did in this case.

One must expect that various factions would contest that the proposed plan is responsive to their own concerns. It is thus not surprising that letters to the paper complain that the plan does not reflect the public's desire for minimal development and maximal access. But such criticism must be viewed in context. The proposed plan does include continuous public access to the river and extensive open space. In fact, the proposed amount of development in the corridor is so far below what seemed likely to happen that some elected officials, heavily influenced by the business community, may have second thoughts about so public a process.

Ann Arbor is not unique. The "Green" movement is catching on in many places. When given a chance to express themselves, citizens are indicating that development has changed the landscape in ways that do not reflect their personal preferences. There is a sense of urgency to acquire land now to assure that in the future there will be tranquil oases amidst the urban surround. There is a concern that neighborhoods be protected from additional traffic. There is a growing realization that "progress" need not be measured only in dollars.

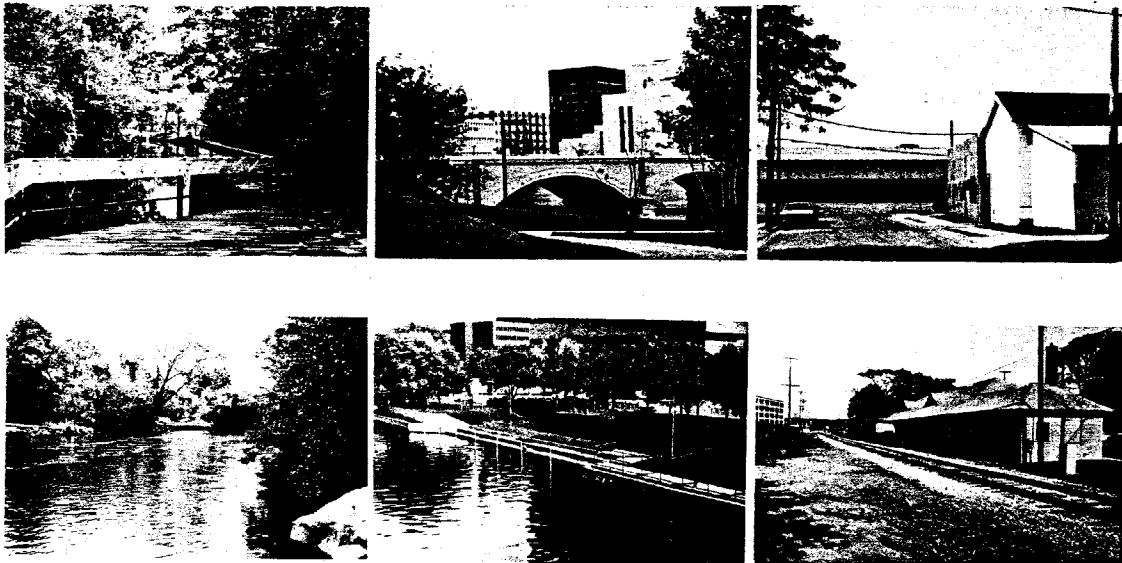


Figure 1 - Two scenes from each of the photograph-based categories.

#### Footnote

1. Wingfield (1984) provides a useful overview of procedure in the design context. Recent participation efforts in Third World nations have been particularly innovative with respect to diverse approaches (Canter, et al., 1988; Hardie, 1988).

#### References

Canter, D., Krampen, M. & Stea, D. (Eds.) New Directions in Environmental Participation. Gower Publishing, 1988.

Hardie, G. J. Community participation based on three-dimensional simulation models. Design Studies, 1988, 9, 56-61.

Kaplan, R. A methodology for simultaneously obtaining and sharing information. In Assessing amenity resource values. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report RM-68, 1979.

Wingfield, K. D. Public participation techniques for the landscape architect: A comparative analysis of their appropriate uses in the design process. Master's Thesis in Landscape Architecture, University of Michigan, 1984.

# changing paradigms

environmental design research  
association

edra 20/1989

proceedings of  
annual conference

School of Design

North Carolina

State University

© Copyright 1989 by EDRA, Inc.  
733 Northeast 18th Street  
Oklahoma City, OK 73105  
ISBN 0-939922-13-4

All rights reserved. No part of this book covered by the copyrights herein may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means; graphic, electronic or mechanical; including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems without written permission of the publisher.

Printed by: OMNIPRESS . . . "The Proceedings Printer"  
Mason, Wisconsin, USA

editors

Graeme Hardie

Robin Moore

Henry Sanoff