

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE DESIGN AND EVALUATION OF A PARK

RACHEL KAPLAN is Professor of Environmental Psychology at the School of Natural Resources and in the Doctoral Program in Urban and Regional Planning of the University of Michigan, where she is also Associate Professor of Psychology.

One of the reasons that post-design evaluation does not take place more frequently is that its sponsorship falls in the cracks. The architect is off doing the next project; the client has no funds for such an activity; the user, eager to let it be known that the product has its shortcomings, is in no position to sponsor such an assessment, though the eagerness to be heard is not lacking. In light of such difficulties, the process described here is particularly enlightening.

The evaluation was initiated by the Parks and Recreation Department of Ann Arbor, Michigan. It did not happen because of mounting complaints, but rather because the department people were interested in finding out how the downtown vest-pocket park fared. By all appearances the newly built park was doing well. Generally there were people sitting there, reading or taking in the passing sights; often people passed through the park taking a shortcut or a "longcut," depending on where they were going; and at lunchtime the park's trash containers overflowed.

It is quite unlikely the city had ever before taken such an interest in any of its parks. By and large, "evaluation" of the

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *George R. Owers and Thomas Raynes have been most helpful and enthusiastic public officials; Terry Brown and Charles Cares, the designers of the park, have continued to be interested and supportive. It has also been gratifying to have the encouragement of John F. Dwyer, Project Director of the Forest*

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numerous other parks had been in the form of observing the problems—coming to terms with vandalism, discouraging nocturnal misuse, and otherwise quieting citizen discontent. It was unlikely that the city would suddenly be inclined to invest its limited resources in such an evaluation. It would be hard to justify such expenditure, especially given the apparent “success” of this new little park.

Why, then, the interest? The same department had previously supported an innovative approach to citizen input in the design of the park. So the park had been designed in an atypical way. Citizen input was obtained early enough in the process that it had some impact on the final design. In an interesting way, one of the effects of the public participation in this process was also to increase the city’s sense of participation. Participation has a way of enhancing a “sense of ownership” and this seems to have worked both ways—for citizens and city at the same time!

There is no need to describe the predesign participation at length here (see Kaplan, 1978a). About 180 people had participated in this initial phase, reacting to photographs of models of settings within the proposed park. The models used to make the photographs must be described as “working models,” the buildings showed virtually no detail and the trees were effective in communicating size, but there was no attempt made to spend limited resources on “pretty” models to sell the park. Nonetheless, people could interpret these renditions and had no difficulty providing their preference ratings for each scene. Among the most important results of that study was the widespread desire for a “green” place—expressed in terms of a desire for color, for flowers, for grass, for big trees. In addition, there was a strong difference in preference between those who

Service’s North Central Experiment Station Urban Forestry Unit. The study reported here was supported, in part, by this unit of the Forest Service, USDA, through a cooperative research agreement. The study was also supported, in part, by the Parks and Recreation Department, which provided both supplies and assistance. Participatory studies are greatly enhanced by such interest and enthusiasm.

lived in the central business district and those who worked there. Clearly, such a park would be an amenity for the workers, but for the nearby residents it posed some threats.

These and other reactions offered by the participants were communicated both to the two designers on the project and to the administrators in the city's parks department. While other factors were also involved in the changed design for the park, the citizens' responses played a major role in the revisions. The desire for grass was not heeded, since it was felt that maintenance would be prohibitive. Attention was paid, however, to the texture of the ground material and to the size of the trees. The fear of "muggers" hiding behind everything, expressed by those who live in the area, was addressed, and the lunchtime users' desire for various seating facilities was also closely considered in the design.

The park was designed and eventually approved. Less than two years after the design participation effort, the park was a reality and duly dedicated. By the first spring of the park's existence the city asked me to evaluate its "success." The post-design evaluation discussed here took place several months later—in fall, about a year after the dedication. It was based in large part on a survey providing insights that would have been difficult to obtain in any other way.

THE SAMPLE

It is not unusual for studies in outdoor recreation to include only people who happen to be at the facility being examined. While this group should not be ignored, such an approach may not reflect the views of the larger group which, for whatever reason, is not using the facility at that point. To avoid this problem, the evaluation included two separate groups.

The *on-site* sample included people who happened to be in the park at the various times that interviewers were there.

Three female interviewers approached people who were in the park at different times of day and on different days of the week, over an interval of several weeks. As it happened, a particularly cold October made the park a less popular place than it had been only a short time earlier. The interviewing period thus was allotted several weeks, in the hope that milder days would return.

The *off-site* sample included people who lived or worked within a two-block radius of the park. Questionnaires were delivered to residences and to business establishments within the prescribed area. For the residences, 339 questionnaires were dropped off and 82 were returned (24%). For the business places, approximately 380 questionnaires were left at 90 places and about 40% were returned. At each of these establishments, a responsible person was asked to see to it that employees had an opportunity to respond. If more copies were desired, they could be obtained from the Parks and Recreation Department. Return envelopes were attached to each questionnaire.

The nonresidences included a great diversity of establishments. There were several doctors' offices and small law firms, many small shops, and a few large units, such as the telephone company, the newspaper, the public library, and some banks. It is not known how the questionnaires were distributed to employees, or which kinds of establishments were more likely to return questionnaires.

While the off-site sample included 82 (35%) participants who lived in the park area and 142 (61%) who worked there (as well as 9 who did not provide enough information in answer to the questions), the on-site sample consisted mostly of people who neither live nor work in the central business district. Of the 163 people in this sample, 103 (63%) fell into this category, with 16 (10%) who lived downtown and 44 (27%) who worked in the area.

The two samples were remarkably similar with respect to other variables, however. About half of each sample was

female, about 40% male, and the rest did not indicate sex. About 55% of each sample indicated age in the twenties; however, the on-site sample included a few more people in their teens (12% as opposed to 3% of the off-site group), and a few less people in their forties or fifties (9% as opposed to 20%). The off-site sample included 29% who indicated they were students; for the on-site group, 37% were students.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

All participants responded to the same questionnaire. It included a cover letter, signed by the superintendent of the Parks and Recreation Department and written on the appropriate letterhead. The letter indicated that replies will be "most helpful to us with respect to this park as well as others the city might be able to build in the downtown area in the future." It also mentioned the fact that citizens had participated in the process of designing the park. "This makes us particularly interested to have continued input about how the citizens feel about the park as it is now." The bottom of the page included a small map showing the location of the park on the intersection of two busy downtown streets, across from a furniture store, near the savings bank, and adjacent to a new commercial building.

The questionnaire was three pages long and included both open-ended items and scaled items. The major sections of the survey covered the kinds of uses and frequencies of use, satisfactions, problems, and particular places within the park that were favored.¹

The major independent variables included: age, sex, student or not, full-time employment or not, frequency of park use, length of work or residence in downtown park area, whether park was passed on foot, by bike, or by car, and—of greatest interest—whether the participant lived or worked in the area.

USES, PROBLEMS, AND SATISFACTIONS

This section is organized in terms of the major topics covered by the questionnaire. For each of these topics, items were combined to form scales based on results of an ICLUST Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (Kulik et al., 1970). The various scales are discussed in terms of the entire sample and in terms of the background questions.² Differences with respect to the question of living or working in the downtown area are the subject of the next section.

USES AND IMPORTANCE

Questionnaire items dealing with why the park is used and how important each of these is to participants led to two major categories. One of these includes activities performed in the park: people-watching, sitting and reading, being near trees, having lunch, meeting a friend. Ten such items combined to form this "general use" scale. The mean correlation among these items was .29, and the alpha coefficient of internal consistency was .81. Two pairs of items were highly interrelated within this set of ten. The two dealing with eating correlated .65; the two dealing with meeting friends correlated .54.

Another cluster of items (mean correlation .35; alpha .68) included ways in which the park was important but did not necessarily require its direct use. The four items included: "A nice place to see as you go by," "Having stores right near the park," "As a link between State Street and downtown," and "Just knowing it is there." This cluster has been named "conceptual importance." It was relatively more important to the off-site than the on-site sample, and to people who are more likely to pass the park by car. It showed no difference, however, as a function of frequency of park use.

The general use cluster reflected the importance of the park to the off-site sample participants who were frequent park users, to the younger women in the sample, and to those participants who were more likely to pass the park

either on foot or by bike. The park as a place to eat was particularly important to people with full-time jobs and to the nonstudents. Meeting friends in the park was of greatest importance to the younger participants and to those who had not worked downtown for a long time.

SATISFACTIONS

All but two of the thirteen items dealing with satisfaction can be considered as one "general satisfaction" cluster (mean correlation .46; alpha .91). The exception is a pair of items dealing with planned activities and special programs ($r = .61$). For the sample as a whole, this pair of items showed by far the lowest mean rating (3.2 on 5-point scale), while the general satisfaction cluster rated 4.1.

The issue of activities received quite some mention in the open-ended responses. Probably the major sore point with respect to the park revolves around this issue. Some local citizens have complained of excessive noise and excessive duration of concerts. On the other hand, many of the residents, as well as people who work in the area, expressed a desire for more such activities. While the disgruntled are seriously affected, their numbers are few indeed. Still, this is clearly an issue that needs to be dealt with and handled carefully. With respect to satisfactions, however, there seem to be different reasons for a moderate overall level—a combination of those for whom there are too few and those who wish there were none. And the groups do not line up cleanly in terms of any of the independent variables.

The general satisfaction cluster incorporates four themes that are valuable to examine separately. Two items deal with satisfaction with the seating—both the arrangement and the kind of benches. Since this was a subject of concern and interest in the predesign participation, it was specifically noted in this evaluation. Four items tapped aspects of the appearance of the park, including the placement of the trees and plants, the paving pattern, and the overall appear-

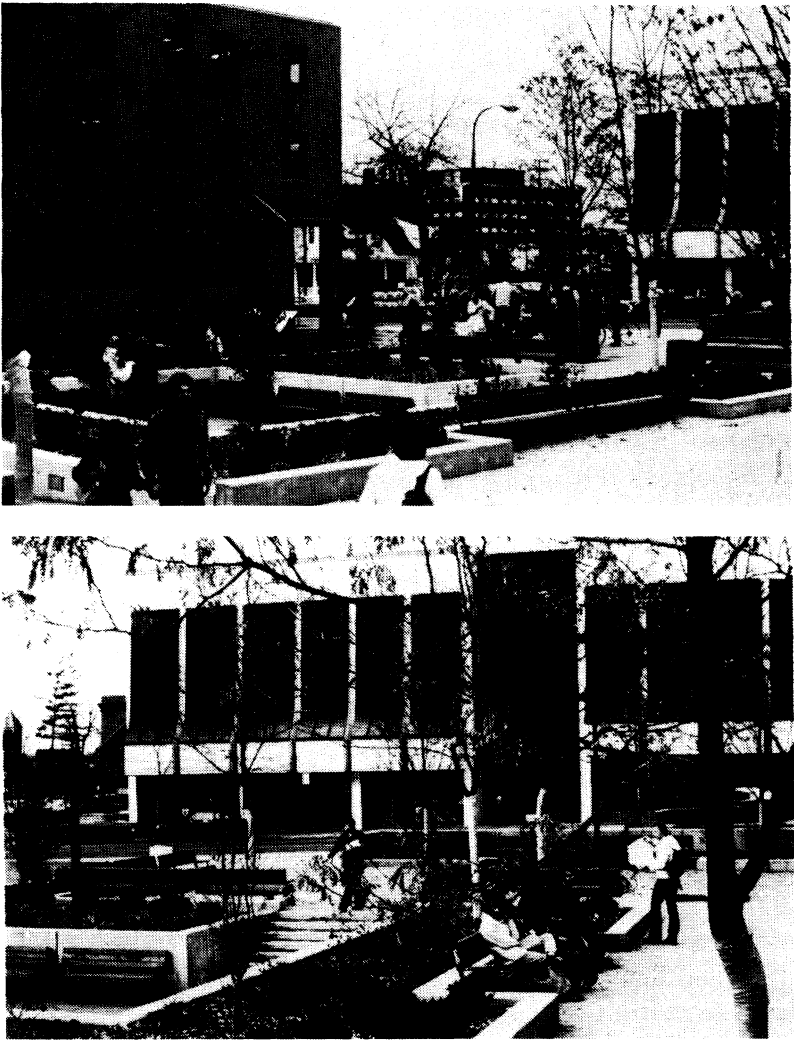


Figure 1: Some Views of the Park

ance. Once again, these were issues that loomed large before the park was designed. A single item inquired about satisfaction with the "people who are there." Clearly, if people perceive that the park is used by the "wrong kinds of people" it would affect their satisfaction. Finally, a single

item inquired about "having the park there," since this is an oft-neglected source of comfort to people. When "success" is determined by "user hours," it is easy to conclude that underused parks are not important to people. However, knowledge of the existence of a park may be one of the hidden benefits.

In fact, the "having the park" item received by far the highest mean rating (4.7). This appreciation was, if anything, strongest for those who use the park most, especially among the off-site group.

Both the seating and appearance clusters (means of 4.1 and 4.0) were the sources of greatest satisfaction for women and for those who use the park most frequently. Further, those who passed the park on foot more often, were also more appreciative of these qualities.

PROBLEMS

The five kinds of problems did not intercorrelate very highly. These consisted of traffic, maintenance, safety, crowds, and noise. Their mean ratings are all comfortably low, with the first two causing the most difficulties (means of 2.5 and 2.3, respectively). The item regarding "crowding at lunchtime" received a mean of 2.0, while noise and "feeling unsafe" rated 1.8 and 1.7, respectively.

The park is located at the intersection of two heavily traveled streets. One of these is a three-lane, one-way artery, with cars parked on either side. The other has two-way traffic and considerable pedestrian use; it serves as a major corridor within the shopping district. There is a traffic light at this corner. The on-site sample seemed to find traffic more of a problem than did those who returned the questionnaire by mail. Otherwise, traffic did not seem to differentiate subgroups in the sample as a source of problem.

Litter and general maintenance of the park were rated as more of a problem by the nonstudents and by those who could see the park from their place of work. Lunchtime

crowds were more likely to be seen as a difficulty by the off-site sample, and by those who used the park most often, but did not appear to be a major difficulty for any particular group. Litter and maintenance were problems that received quite a few comments. The city was aware of these, but may not have realized the extent to which others cared too.

The issue of the perceived safety of the park is particularly interesting. The fact that these items (referring to feeling "unsafe in the daytime" and "unsafe in the evening") were rated so low is striking. Women rated these items significantly higher than did men (means of 1.9 and 1.4, respectively), but for both sexes safety seems not to be a source of problem in the park.

RESIDENTS, WORKERS, AND OTHERS

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important distinctions revealed by the predesign participatory study was in terms of people who lived downtown and those who worked there. The park was designed with their separate concerns in mind and the post-design evaluation was conducted so as to obtain responses from these groups. This, then, becomes a particularly vital independent variable for comparing responses.

A little less than half the sample (47%) consisted of people who worked downtown. Of these, 82% had full-time jobs and only 10% were students. Women outnumbered men almost two to one, and about half of the working group was 30 or older.

About a quarter of the sample were residents of the downtown area. Of these only 37% held full-time jobs and 60% were students. Not surprisingly, they were, on the average, a younger group with 80% under 30. Men and women were equally represented.

The remaining quarter of the sample (28% actually) neither lived nor worked downtown. About 43% were stu-

dents and about 42% were employed full-time. Women accounted for 52% of this group, and about one-third were over 30. This group also included more people in their teens than did either of the other two groups.

The three groups are distinctly different in terms of several of these variables and one would expect them to see the park as a distinctly different place. The park serves a different function in terms of use. On the general use question, and in terms of eating in the park, the local residents rated the park significantly lower. For those who work in the area and for the nonlocal users, the park is much more important as a place to sit and rest. Comparably, the satisfaction with the people in the park is distinctly lower for the residents (mean 3.5) as opposed to the workers and others (means of 3.9 and 4.1, respectively). But it is equally noteworthy that with respect to the other satisfaction items the three groups do not differ!

One might expect the residents to find the park to have more problems than would those who can enjoy it during their working day. By and large, this was not the case. With respect to safety considerations, the three groups showed no difference. In terms of noise, both the residents and the employees found this more of a problem than did the nonlocals. But the questions regarding maintenance and lunch-time crowding were seen as more problematic for the people who worked in the area than for the other two groups. This might suggest that the workers use the park more than do the locals. This was, in fact, the case. But when comparing frequent park users, the residents and those who work in the area showed virtually no differences.

As very little background information was included in the predesign study, it is difficult to judge whether the current sample and the earlier one were comparable. It is particularly gratifying to see that the kinds of concerns expressed in the earlier study are not reflected here. The issue of safety is clearly no issue. The desire for a pleasant place to sit and have lunch seems to have been met with enthusias-

tic response by those who work in the area. And the satisfaction with having the park there seems to be met with equal delight by all user groups, regardless of their residence and employment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Post-design evaluation can be useful for two quite different purposes. One of these involves the generic information that is gained—in other words, in terms of applicability to other settings at other times. The other is in terms of a better understanding of the existing facility and its needs and improvements. Related to this second area are the potential benefits of such a process to the participating community.

In terms of the first of these purposes, this study may have some utility for other small downtown parks. Some of these are of a practical sort and others are important for the more abstract insight they provide. A park that serves a residential clientele and one that serves a daytime working group must meet a variety of demands and must avoid a variety of problems. Here the residential group consists mostly of students and younger people, many of whom will probably not live in the area for a very long time. They are less likely to use the park extensively than are the people who work in the area, for whom there are few alternative places to be outdoors. As such, it is appropriate for the park to be designed with the needs of the working group in the fore—as long as the worries of the other group are also met. The park, as a result of the predesign input, is overseenable and yet affords a variety of moods and settings that provide a sense of privacy. One of the respondents commented that the “park gives me a feeling of security—much more than a house or store would.”

The study also is important in separating the actual use of the park from its conceptual importance (Kaplan, 1978b). It

is just as important for many people to have the park there as a resource as it is to partake of it physically. Its enjoyment and satisfaction cannot possibly be assessed by a user count. While the satisfaction of "having it there" was greater for those who used it more often, this was the source of greatest satisfaction for users and nonusers alike. The park is passed by hundreds of people each day as they drive along the major thoroughfare at its perimeter; hundreds more pass it on foot as they go to the bank, the library, the shops, or the federal building a block away. No doubt many of these passersby notice the changes in season as they are reflected in the park—benches high with snow, trees showing signs of life. In addition to such enjoyment there is the even more vicarious satisfaction of recognizing that the city has provided such a place and of knowing that the park is there should one want to visit it.

Another area of conceptual satisfaction was something of a surprise. An open-ended questionnaire item dealt with people's reaction to the fact that there had been public involvement in the planning of the park. The response to this item was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, with "good idea," "great," and "excellent" the most common responses. It is clearly the fact of participation, the knowledge that the public had been involved, that was so warmly received. Here is a reaction that, like the positive feelings about the park's "being there," is a conceptual satisfaction of considerable strength and importance.

In some ways the many facets of participation emerged as a theme in the study as a whole. For example, in the pre-design study several participants expressed their willingness to help with the park's maintenance. While one assumes that picking up litter is in the public domain, it is less clear that pulling weeds is a permissible activity for other than a city employee. And yet, many people would be eager to offer such help and are certainly knowledgeable enough. Such participation was hard for the city's administrators to fathom in discussions before the park was built. As it turns out,

some people do it anyway, and others would if they felt it were proper.

Citizens are delighted to participate in the affairs that affect their lives. They willingly respond to questionnaires and they are enthusiastic knowing that their involvement is sought. In this case, the process of obtaining their input both before the park was designed and once it was created was part of such participation. The information that such surveys can provide (Kaplan, 1979) is also part of the participation. And the participation can go still further. The sense of ownership that some people feel about the park could be turned to good use and even enhanced by encouraging them in their efforts to help care for the park. How much easier it would be for the park to retain its special role as "an oasis in an urban desert" with the goodwill and cooperation of the many who are only too happy to help keep it that way.

NOTES

1. Space limitations preclude discussion of the results of this part of the questionnaire.

2. Only results significant at $p < .05$ are included in this discussion. They are based on t tests and analyses of variance.

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