

# **Usercentric, not Egocentric**

*The Potency of citizen participation in the planning and design for low-income communities*

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# Introduction

*“The ultimate objective of these [urban development programs]...is to create an environment in which people can grow and develop.”* (United Nations, 1967)

If urban development programs are intended to foster the communities they are intended for, why do so many initiatives fail? If the ‘ultimate objective’ revolves around the people, why are the users of these environments ostracized from the entire planning and design process? As Debra Stein jests in a 1991 article of *Urban Land*:

“Quiz: How should a developer put together a strategy to win community support for a project?  
Worst Answer: Make wild guesses about what the community thinks.  
Usual Answer: Rely on gut instinct and pray it’s right” (Stein, 1991)

It is unfortunate and ironic that governments, planners, and architects, more often than not, eliminate participation from the very users for whom these very facilities and services are planned. In the history of urban renewal, most revitalization projects have not furthered the goal of racial integration (Bratt, 1989), has failed to provide suitable living environments for individuals and have been unable to nurture a cohesive community. Egocentricity and paternalism in the development of many of these projects have resulted in the high cost of ineffective programs and further disillusionment of the community.

In a 1967 United Nations report, this paternalism has resulted in the stereotyping of the low-income community dwellers. “Too often the slums of the world are all regarded as housing the same kind of people, whether the slum is a newly made barrida or an ancient bazaar or bustee.” (UN, 1967)

Henry Sanoff agreed with this assessment, “People become invisible in the housing process to the extent that housing providers either do not see them at all or see them as stereotyped individuals.” (Sanoff 1985)

Herbert Gans adds his own perspective to these stereotypes, and offers an alternative:

[P]lanners and other professionals do not monopolize wisdom about goals and values, that diversity is valuable and that people are entitled to live in any way they choose, unless that way can be proved to be destructive to them or their fellow men. Goals and values arise out of the opportunities and restraints, which are encountered in every day life, and different age and class groups inevitably have different goals and values. The planner ought to respect these and give people the opportunity, resources, and freedom to choose what they want to do. (Gans, 1968)

If governments, planners, architects, and social workers are genuinely interested in the prime objective of urban redevelopment in low-income communities, why do we not simply ask the users what they are looking for? Instead of an *egocentric* process, we must take on a *user-centric* approach in our designs. “Planning must also be user-oriented; the goals which planners

work toward must related to the behavior patterns and values of the people for whom they are planning, and not just their own values.” (Gans, 1968)

*Citizen participation* is the best way to integrate the beneficiaries of low-income residential projects into the planning and design process of their communities. The citizen participation movement is rooted in the United States’ civil rights effort and the planning programs of the President’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency as well as the Economic Opportunity Program of 1964. “The transformation of community planning was, in large part, a response to a number of problems and concerns to which many federally initiated attempts to improve community well-being had been addressed.” (Gilbert, 1975)

The answer seems so simple, to “Just ask.” So why, forty years after the flurry of the civil rights movement, has this process of citizen participation failed to revolutionize the way these programs operate? This research paper shall:

- Analyze the egocentric process of urban housing for the less fortunate
- Evaluate why user participation is both crucial and necessary
- How egocentricity has been disguised under user participation
- Analyze the obstacles that can complicate the process of citizen participation
- Define the true nature of a user-centric process.

“...it is time to stop asking whether or not “better” housing as such improves the living conditions of its tenants and to inquire instead: What aspects of such housing have what impact on these tenants, within the context of their lives and the choices open to them?” (Gans, 1968)

# Egocentricity – from the top down

*“There appeared to be little or no incentive to listen to what intended beneficiaries had to say. After all, the agency had already identified both the problem and the solution.” (Gonzalez, 1991)*

## **Top-down and exclusion**

Many community development programs sincerely believe that individuals always make their own decisions, instead of a group. In fact, bureaucrats may favor governmental objectives over local ones to enhance their own career prospects. This top-down approach is a political decision making process, and not a user-centric one, and only serves to marginalize the already fledgling power of those who live in desolate situations. (Desai, 1995; Gonzalez, 1991; Montgomery, 1988)

This individual approach in making decisions is counteractive to the prime objective of building communities. “‘Top-down’ solutions imposed on communities tend to undermine the sorts of local initiatives that should be supported and encouraged. If the people affected are not engaged in the process, the work will go nowhere. Government’s role is to change ways of proceeding through collaborative decision making.” (Ewalt, 1998)

## **The blame game**

When a community initiative sponsored by the government or an independent program fails, it is often seen that the individuals are always to blame for their own problems. “Blaming the victim appeared to be quite common in the earlier development programs. For example, if an information campaign failed, then the intended beneficiaries were to blame. ‘Audience apathy’ was often cited as the main reason. Development planners seldom looked their own way and wondered whether the failure might have been due to their own shortcomings.” (Gonzalez, 1991)

## **Paternalism**

James Q. Wilson, a highly respected individual within the political environment “legitimized the notion that citizen’s concerns were simply not relevant to the massive task of redevelopment.” Wilson claimed that, “Planning with people assumes on the part of the people involved a willingness and a capacity to engage in a collaborative search for the common good. The willingness is obviously almost never present when the persons involved will be severely penalized by having their homes and neighborhoods destroyed through wholesale clearance” (Bratt, 1989)

The attitude, “It’s for your own good”, can only serve to keep low-income communities powerless, no matter how well-thought out and ‘successful’ an urban renewal project may appear. Simply stated, most development agencies do not listen to their beneficiaries.

Part of the reason is that for most of the intervening period, the dominant model for development and communication was linear of “top-down”. There appeared to be little or no incentive to listen to what intended beneficiaries had to say. After all, the agency had already identified both the problem and the

solution. In this context, encouraging feedback and interactivity seemed to be a waste of time. (Gonzalez, 1991)

Many development programs do not systematically receive or process feedback from it's users. This exchange of information creates equality among all actors in the participatory process. Even when there is feedback, much of the criteria for housing evaluations have looked at quantitative measures of success or failure, and in turn, neglects other variables that cannot be measure by quantitative techniques. (Bratt, 1989; Gonzalez, 1991)

By neglecting to factor in costs and benefits that are not amenable to number values, it has been easy to make critical mistakes in the housing area. For example, although the negative effects on residents displaced from urban renewal areas may not have been considered terribly important, the initial decision to undertake urban renewal programs failed to consider the human costs involved." (Bratt, 1989)

The high human cost of many programs could have been avoided or minimized with the integration of feedback techniques in the evaluation of projects.

### **For the good of everyone else?**

Several housing analysts have concluded that this country's housing policies have been created to meet a multiplicity of goals other than to the benefit of it's users. The construction of urban renewal projects have been justified in order to revitalize a sluggish construction industry or remedy for other economic slides at the time. For example, the Urban Renewal Program, launched in 1954 as a result of the Housing Act of 1949, completely ignored citizen participation, instead using it to manipulate tenants for the good of the developers. "Urban Renewal meant to many low-income people and neighborhoods that were planned for, and not with." (Bratt, 1989)

### **Conclusion**

"The provision of housing, as a human need, has not been the driving force. Thus it follow that if providing housing and serving the poor have not been the central objectives, then assessing how well the recipients are housed, in the fullest sense of the word, would have merited little attention." (Bratt, 1989) The abuses of power – using the often futile situation of low-income communities for political and economic gains is the *democratic reason* why citizen participation needs to be integrated in the process of community revitalization.

# Why Citizen Participation?

*“User involvement in decision making can no longer be viewed as an alternative mode of practice sin the efficacy of our work requires a departure from traditional practice.” (Sanoff 1985)*

As previously stated, if government, planners, and architects are indeed concerned with the effectiveness of urban renewal projects, in not only the final product, but also improving the quality of every day life of it’s beneficiaries, then citizen participation is the essential in the development process. (Sanoff, 1985)

The problem of housing appears different from different perspectives. The developer is influenced by the market economy, whose priorities are derived from financial ability, not to urgency. The government is often only concerned with meeting the minimum legal standards, which are based “on the [theoretical] values and professional judgments of those who set them” (Sanoff, 1985). But what about user needs? Participation recognizes that the users of these communities are all unique and that everyone should have a voice.

Clearly, however, participation has a different meaning to different people and even a different meaning to the same people according to the situation; different users prefer to participate in different ways according to the situation. Participation is a means of protecting the interests of groups of people as well as individuals, because it satisfies their needs which are often ignored by large organizations, institutions, and the “expert” designers and planners. In architecture participation can be considered as the total organization of physical space, directly or indirectly involving in the decision making process whoever has to live with its consequences. (Sanoff 1985)

Citizen participation increases project effectiveness, socially empowers the community, and creates political currency that may have not existed otherwise.

## **Project effectiveness**

Just ask – again, such a simple and basic concept, yet rarely thought of in the “expert” mind of the planner or designer. Expert decisions are not necessarily better than the opinions of the community. (Sanoff, 1985) “Community participation is a means to achieve *better project results* and consequently better housing conditions for the community. Since people themselves best know what they want and what they can afford, only close cooperation between authorities and community can result in projects which satisfy both the community and the authorities. The objective of community participation is *project effectiveness*.” (Desai, 1995)

Design and planning decisions are by nature biased and depend on the values of the decision maker. For a decision, facts, and attitudes (the interpretation of those facts) are needed. Therefore, the chance of a project’s success increases because “it is better understood by the people who will use it.” (Sanoff, 1985) In avoiding the assumption that communities are homogenous, participatory development is “holistic rather than sectoral”. (Schneider, 1985)

Government sponsored housing or rehabilitation projects should require a maximum of user participation and control in the design and later administration of all building efforts. Interest in user participation is not rooted in romanticism about human involvement but in the recognition that users have a particular expertise different than, but equally important to that of the architect. This expertise, then, needs to be integrated into the process that concerns itself with the delivery of appropriate housing solutions. (Sanoff 1985)

A design or planning task can be made “transparent”. By understanding the components of planning and design decisions and choosing from among the alternatives, the users in effect generate their own plan rather than react to one done for them. “Participation in the development of housing provides the opportunity for users to express their needs and goals. But, most important is that through such a process there is individual learning through an increased awareness of the problem. (Sanoff 1985)

In 1981 Burns and Shoup observed resident satisfaction and housing investment behaviors in several groups of El Salvador housing projects.

The group that relocated into houses they built and owned themselves demonstrated greater satisfaction than a group whose housing was upgraded without any community organization or participation in the process, and without the group’s attaining homeownership. In addition, owners were more likely to invest in the upgrading of their homes. (Bratt, 1989)

Therefore it can be said that citizen participation can lead to effective solutions that lead to resident satisfaction, and an empowering sense of responsibility in the users. “It is now widely agreed that participation enhances efficiency and effectiveness.” (Schneider, 1995)

### **Citizen participation is a right**

It is true that community participation increases the success rate of low-income housing programs. However, a fundamental aspect of citizen participation is that “[p]eople have a right to participate in decision-making which directly affects their living conditions. Community participation is a form of grass-roots democracy.” (Desai, 1995)

John Montgomery (1988) accounts that because of more people becoming interested in public participation in the matters that affect them, the “bureaucrat-people” relationship is changing in Western society. “The value of citizen information is one of the ultimate justifications for any form of democratic participation. In addition to the assaults on public rights that occur when citizens have no means of protesting against injustice, authoritarianism is objectionable because of its operating inefficiency, much of which is caused by sheer ignorance.”

### **Positive social impact**

The places we live affect how we feel about ourselves. Rachel Bratt (1989) stated, “It is logical therefore, that the house is both an extension of oneself and a reflection of one’s positioning life. Despite, or perhaps because of, the obvious relationship between housing and emotional well-being.” The increased self-awareness and knowledge that results from using the community participation model of planning and design can blossom into profound changes on the citizens and their collaborators. Harmut Schneider (1995) predicted, “Count on collaboration to shift the attitudes and perspectives of actors.” Sanoff (1985) claimed, “...the user group is strengthened as well by learning more about itself.”

Patricia Ewalt agrees that user involvement in the decision processes affecting their lives attributes to positive development of the community. One can only imagine the positive affects in an environment where people are “poor, apathetic, and alienated.” (Montgomery, 1988)

Urban development projects have shown that it takes more than bricks and mortar to build a community. If they are to survive and flourish, communities need to have more than secure housing, available jobs, and good schools; they must also have a sense of community. This sense of community is critical in preventing housing deterioration and substandard school performance and serves as the foundation for healthy families. Feeling part of a community fosters a sense of ownership and serves as a deterrent to alienation. This sense of belonging acts as a strong defense against environmental and social factors that prey on many residents and social works services, provided in a variety of modalities, can enhance this community-building process. (Ewalt, 1998)

Another housing study in El Salvador also sponsored by Burns, “surveyed residents who had participated in a self-help house-building project. Focusing specifically on attitudinal changes...” Burns concluded that the participants showed increased solidarity within their communities. “In contrast to studies depicting life in conventional public housing, these project participants gained identities through exercising initiative, and in so doing, realizing the intrinsic worth of self-expression through taking active part in designing, building, and managing their projects.” (Bratt, 1989)

It is the goal of many agencies that provide community development services to eventually withdraw from the community when it has been established as sustainable based on *self-reliance*. (Desai, 1995) Sanoff (1985) agrees that the product is not the end of the continual process or renewal. “...it must be managed, reevaluated and adapted to changing needs. Those most directly involved with the product, the users, are best able to assume those tasks.”

### **Political currency**

One positive aspect of citizen participation in planning that may not be immediately realized by the bureaucracy is the resulting political capital of successful partnership between people and their government. (Desai, 1995) Montgomery (1988), in observation of America’s political system said, “Explanations for the almost ceremonial suspicion of bureaucrats in America are both diverse and inconsistent. When taken together, they seem to illustrate the latent quality of this reluctant interdependency, since the very people who castigate the bureaucracy are the same citizens who demand more government.”

The very nature of this historical suspicion of the actions and motives of the American government leads one to believe that a positive experience in citizen participation and decision-making could only benefit everyone involved. “Participatory development covers one dimension of good governance, and it overlaps with the political, judicial, and administrative dimensions. The complex relationships among these dimensions are specific to time and place, but there should always be scope for positive synergies.” (Schneider, 1995)

### **Conclusion**

Participatory development is an integrated partnership based upon the communication of the parties involved, “...during which the agenda is set jointly, and local views and indigenous knowledge are deliberately sought and respected. This implied negotiation rather than the dominance of an externally set project agenda. Thus people become actors instead of being

simply beneficiaries.” (Schneider, 1995) Indeed, this attitude in the revitalization of our low-income communities can benefit the users and streamline the efficiency of the sponsoring bureaucracy.

# Egocentricity Cloaked Within Participation

*“it is likely that the major factor behind citizen participation was the government’s desire to channel protests in the streets into more comfortable and controllable discussions at the negotiating table.”*  
(Bratt, 1989)

## **Community Participation or Community Control?**

Mandated by law, public hearings are now usually required for anything that involves public expenditures. However, much participation is no more than “citizen reaction to the public presentation of community plans.” (Sanoff, 1985) Sanoff continues,

Present government housing delivery systems treat low-income families as depersonalized and manipulated objects, often no more than a statistic. While lip service is often given to the need for user participation in the government housing process, the reality is that low-income families have very little input into the location, planning or design of new projects. Rather, the crucial decisions are made by professionals who often have very little knowledge of, or contact with, their client group.

Involvement can be misconstrued as a means for citizen control, or to be used as nothing more but a tool to gauge community reactions. Much of this involves the government’s reluctance to give “substantial power to low-income groups” and to cut off communication and/or defend when criticized. Sometimes leaders of community groups are ‘co-opted’ into political parties and government departments, thereby extending the party’s or department’s influence over local constituencies. As a result the community loses its power and influence in an unresponsive, bureaucratic process. (Davies, 1975; Desai, 1995; Montgomery 1988)

True participatory development represents major qualitative changes rather than a change at the margin of conventional “beneficiary participation”. (Bratt, 1989; Sanoff, 1985; Schneider, 1995) “A more responsive approach would advocate involvement of the potential users in the major decisions about design, management and ownership.” (Sanoff, 1985)

Vandana Desai (1995) concludes that if the poor are left out of the design stage “obviously the most critical from the point of view of ensuring that [program’s] meet ‘real’ needs,” then why should anyone expect the poor to display an enthusiastic response “to give up their free time to work on community projects...when they have had no effective voice in the establishment of project goals.”

Desai also questions the individuals who run non-governmental organizations (NGOs), since higher social status and higher levels of income and education are conducive to higher participation rates and relative power.

Many NGO’s, especially the large ones, function bureaucratically and use formal procedural rule to carry out their tasks. Non-governmental organizations are prone to ossification, particularly if they are dominated by charismatic leaders who are unresponsive to new ideas and view innovation as a threat to their authority. It is also well-known in development circles that NGOs are often firmly controlled by

dominant personalities of this kind... Many are run by middle-class individuals whose views are liberal and paternalistic rather than radically egalitarian (Desai, 1995)

Egocentricity hidden under the guise of 'participation' is one way that "the project cycle, or even the project concept, is dominated by outsiders' perceptions, planning from the top down" (Schneider, 1995) In fact, Debra Stein (1991), in her *Urban Land* article, "Taking the Guesswork out of Winning Community Support" claimed that public opinion research can determine the "kind of messages need to deliver to win support, and convince decision makers to get behind the project." This assumption, though probably well-intended, is little more than the 'expert' telling the community what they want or need.

### **Conclusion**

The 1966 Model Cities program was aimed at tackling the most serious physical and social problems of the most troubled portions of American cities in a five-year span. The most important lesson that could be learned was summed up by Sherry Arnstein, then chief staff advisor of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): "In most cases where power has come to be shared it was taken by the citizens, not given by the city. There is nothing new about that process." (Bratt, 1989)

# More Obstacles to Participation

*“The participation of everyone in everything appears to be a prescription for chaos.” (Gonzalez, 1991)*

## **Bottoms Up Goes Bottoms Up**

In 1991, Hernando Gonzalez published *Some Myths of Communication and Development* in regards to misconceptions regarding community development. Myth #20 was titled, “The more participation the better.” Gonzalez recommended representative participation instead of direct participation in very large groups. Another alternative may even be breaking things up into smaller groups. (Sanoff 1985) In either case there must be some authority and autonomy involved in the process so that the bureaucracy is “held accountable for actions they take on behalf of their constituents.” (Gonzalez 1991)

Myth #21 was “Development should be bottom-up instead of top-down”. As a “romantic vision”, a complete bottoms-up approach to design certainly looks attractive. However, in the environment of the low-income neighborhoods may not have the resources, opportunities, and benefits that the rest of society may have available to them. Patricia Ewalt (1998) agreed that community initiatives that were completely bottoms up were less effective in gaining support for issues, and were “less likely to produce the comprehensive changes needed to address more complex realities.” The redevelopment process of lower income communities needs to be a user-centric oriented partnership between those who have “more relative power than those who have less. In other words, it is interactive.” (Gonzalez, 1991)

## **No recognition of the political environment**

Vandana Desai (1995) claimed that the basic problem behind many citizen participation projects is that idealists want “politics without politics.” Desai claimed that all political organizations inevitably involve a “degree of delegated power to leaders” and that each organization’s interests is perceived differently among all it’s members. “Any kind of ‘democracy’ or ‘participation’ has to balance mechanisms to prevent abuse of this discretion by leaders with the grant of some discretion; the problem is that judgment is very difficult.”

## **Denial of Responsibility**

Jonathan Davies (1975) brought up the fact that many operators of Community Development Programs (CDPs), “dedicated to a belief in self-sufficient grass roots community movements do indeed quite genuinely wish to take a back seat and to, ideally make themselves redundant.” He questions the genuineness of this self-effacement.

In a very real sense it is a form of denial of responsibility rather like that indulged in by local Council officials. Officials react to criticism or protest by saying, ‘We don’t make decisions, it’s the Council.’ Activists react to Councillor’s criticisms of protest by saying, ‘It’s not us, it’s the people who are protesting and attacking you.’ As an ex-activist, however, I know perfectly well how central is the guiding hand of the imported expert, grass roots or not grass roots; and the denial of responsibility can very often be simply a device to set Councillor and Citizen directly at each other’s throats while the activist sits with a ‘told you so’ smirk on his face. (Davies, 1975)

### **Lack of Organization**

Desai brings up the fact that citizen participation is rarely a complete success. Because of lack of experience, government responses to participation often aren't very well organized. "This is reflected in the lack of suitable personnel....and the working approaches of professional staff who have been trained in conventional housing techniques which involve little, if any, popular participation, and who have little idea of how to incorporate it in their planning." (Desai 1995)

Even participatory intervention runs the risk of excluding certain people. Rohe and Gates (1986) conducted a mail survey of 51 neighborhood planning programs was conducted between 1979 and 1981 with questions regarding on the role of neighborhood planners, accomplishments and limitations. "Lack of support for the program was one of the most frequent mentioned problems. If any of these groups feel that it has been excluded or has not been given sufficient opportunity to help shape the program, it is likely to withhold support down the road."

Therefore it's the agent's responsibility to "understand the composition of the community by class, income, gender, age and so on, as well as their underlying power relations. To make it easier for minorities to express their views it is sometimes desirable to consult the people individually rather than in groups." (Schneider, 1995) This precaution in participation will ensure that the process is efficient, effective, and to the satisfaction of it's beneficiaries.

## Usercentricity – Collaboration in Design

*“A more satisfactory conception places participation in a people-centred development process which is demand-driven, in the sense of being ultimately based on the dynamics, perceptions, priorities, capabilities and resources of the people.” (Schneider, 1995)*

### **Real Participation is democratic**

On February 21-22, 1994, the OECD Development Centre and the Development Assistance Committee jointly sponsored a seminar on participatory development. One key conclusion was the vital role of participation in every phase, including the preparation phase. “Preliminary analysis allows people to become the subject rather than the object of their own development, and gives them a sense of belonging to, or appropriation of the project.” (Schneider, 1995)

The convention also concluded that the most flexible and open techniques in citizen participation should be used and that true participation includes open recognition of different interest, perspectives, information, and styles. “Trying to forecast the behavior and methods of participation of poor populations with no control over their own situation is futile.” (Schneider, 1995)

Henry Sanoff recounts the Yerba Buena Planning Ballot which had become the subject of over 20-years’ worth of planning, controversy, litigation and dissension. “In one year alone, more than five different alternative plans for developing YBC had been propose.” The situation had deteriorated so much that protagonists had more importance than those of ordinary citizens because of meetings, speeches, press releases, and debates that rose the level of public interest without providing any effective way for the people to make decisions or give opinions.

The Yerba Buena Planning Ballot was achieved as a way to overcome this situation, to broaden active citizen participation by providing others – people who do not or cannot attend or speak out at public meetings – with a medium to express their feelings and ideals...the ballot provides a realistic context for citizens to order their preferences and serves as a tool for planners, designers, and policy workers to measure public reactions and preferences on a variety of planning issues.

As demonstrated by the Yerba Bueana Center, participation needs to be “more than an affirmation of the designer’s intentions” and that participation need to have a “sense of achievement” by all those involved in the process. (Sanoff, 1985)

### **User-centricity**

Of course, ‘insiders’ (beneficiaries) and ‘outsiders’ (the developer) may see problems in different ways. The problem occurs when “development agencies insist that their official view is the only valid interpretation of reality. (Gonzalez, 1991) It is important to realize that the intellectual interest of outsiders is secondary to the perceived interest of the community. (Rahman, 1993)

Planners should also evaluate what has already been collected about the social problem before attacking an intervention scheme instead of relying as Stein remarked, ‘wild guesses’. “A

development agency can start with available information, such as government reports, social science research, mass media stories, nearby schools, particularly those at the college level, may have researched the problem on hand.” (Gonzalez, 1991)

*User-centricity is partnership that makes progress in the user’s interest.* As Desai, aptly puts it, “While effective participation does have substantial casual effect over the outcome, the outcome is not dependent exclusively on the effectiveness of participation, for there could be structural predeterminations, like the leaders who play an important role in developing political consciousness and mobilizing themselves and the community they represent. (Desai, 1995) To eliminate the risk of a powerful force blocking effective collaboration, people’s organizations and their leadership must be strengthened. (Schneider, 1995)

Identify and eliminate rigidities in process procedures such as making more flexible time-constraints (if at all possible within a bureaucratic frame work) and decentralization of the decision-making process to make way for participatory decision-making. The facilitator over the process must make sure that a group of participants are pushed into a commitment. They must “own” a decision. (Schneider, 1995) Sanoff (1985) added that the facilitator can use systematic procedures for which users (lacking design training) can organize themselves into planned action.

The utilization of external aid can be considered a balancing act, “Too high a volume of aid may discourage mobilization of local resources and increase dependence. Conversely, if the financial contribution is insufficient, the conditions for participation imposed by the project leaders will be too demanding, thus compromising the mobilization of the resource of the population and of the environment.” (Schneider, 1995)

The architect’s role is to facilitate the user group’s ability to reach decisions pertinent to the environment through a communicable procedure. Most often this will take the form of creating awareness, which permits citizens to be critical of housing alternatives. Such architectural assistance is oriented towards sensitizing groups to housing issues (Sanoff 1985)

User-centricity is an engagement between community leaders, planners, and the beneficiaries for whom the urban redevelopment is for. Desai (1995) recommends an informal patron-client relationship. Rahman (1993) concludes that, “Implicit in this concept of participation is the concept of self-reliance. This does not mean autarky, but possession of a sufficient combination of mental and material resources...” This self-reliance is achieved by drawing upon external help as long as it is not at the cost of self-respect, and “autonomy of choice and action, current and future.”

Schneider’s (1995) assessment agrees with Rahman’s:

The concern for sustainability must be present in the promoter’s mind from the very outset in the process of approaching individuals and groups with a view to enhancing their participation...In the context of participatory development, sustainability does not imply that a given activity can be continued indefinitely without change. Rather it means that people (individually or collectively) reach a stage of self-reliance that enables them to pursue their current activities and to cope with changing circumstances with a relative high degree of autonomy. Sustainability therefore requires resources, know-how, skills, vision, self-confidence and enabling socio-political and economic relationships.

### **Non-governmental organizations**

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as external partners holds advantages over governmental provide in that there may not be the same bureaucracy and political structure as those programs sponsored by state and national governments. With this independence, these organizations are more likely to “promote authentic forms of participation” (Desai, 1995) Yet, “organizing the urban poor clearly has political undertones...An NGO can only perform this function if it has a good relationship with the public agency involved.” As long as the NGO does not stifle local initiatives or offer “ready-made interventions”, the organizations can be effective in user-centric planning (Schneider, 1995)

### **Participation Evaluation Process**

The importance in the participation evaluation process is that architects and planners usually know little about the actual performance of housing environments, from the user’s point of view. “An evaluation procedure would provide a continuous process of feedback and assessment to architects from the user’s point of view.” (Sanoff 1985)

This sort of ‘Participatory monitoring and evaluation’ can help to develop the responsibility and transparency that make it possible to keep all actors in the process informed, in the management of development activities. “This perspective is often not taken into account in conventional evaluation...conventional evaluation is a pre-structured exercise with prescribed procedures...[leading] to recommendations by an external evaluator, is commented upon by the project manager, and provides the basis for decisions by the commissioning agency” (Schneider, 1995) Schneider also perceives that participatory evaluation includes the same logical steps, but according to different rules. “Criteria and indicators are not prescribed in advance by the commissioning agency or external evaluator.... Participatory evaluation thus serves not only to check and improve a project, but to promote the participants’ ability to review critically their own practices.

### **Conclusions**

Because of the successful nature of true participation, “there has been a dramatic increase in the number of architects working directly with community groups and users of buildings who have not had access to professional assistance.” (Sanoff 1985) Rohe and Gates’ made eight propositions, which rises directly from a user-centric way of thinking that were touched on earlier in this research paper:

1. Compared to traditional planning approaches, neighborhood planning programs are more responsive to local characteristics
2. Compared to conventional approaches to planning, neighborhood planning programs result in an increase in the number of citizens participating in planning.
3. Neighborhood planning programs are more project- rather than policy-oriented and result in more local physical improvements an increase in the political constituency for planning.
4. Neighborhood planning will result in a wider range of problems being addressed by the planning process and an improvement in public services.
5. Neighborhood planning programs will result in more social interaction and a stronger sense of community in local areas

6. Neighborhood planning will result in a greater integration of participants into the larger society and increase the vertical ties between the community and larger social organizations.
7. Neighborhood planning programs will result in an increase in citizen access to and trust in local government
8. Neighborhood planning programs should result in a more equitable distribution of public goods.

In conclusion - are people the best judge of their own situation? Barry Checkoway recounts a cartoon drawn by Werner and Bower:

Werner and Bower draw two pictures, one of an expert standing over a respondent and asking preconceived questions listed on a clipboard, the other of villagers sitting together and discussing their common interests with the help of an indigenous facilitator from the village. The caption reads: "For local health workers and their communities, the need is not to gather information...but to gather everyone together and look at what they already know." (Checkoway, 1997)

The nature of citizen participation can only help create more successful renewal projects in low-income neighborhoods, increases resident satisfaction, empowers the community towards self-reliance, and nurture the learning process for the government, planners and architects, and most importantly – the citizens themselves.

## Case Study: Phipps Houses

**Main Source:** Ewalt, Patricia L., Freeman, Edith M, & Poole, Dennis L (eds). (1998), *Community Building: Renewal, Well-Being, and Shared Responsibility*,

Community-based development organizations (CBDOs) are neighborhood-based nonprofit organizations that construct affordable housing and create employment opportunities for low-income communities. CBDOs have also been the subject of ongoing debate – many critics claim that these organization “ignore ‘empowerment’ and instead opt for ‘economic efficiency,’ and they argue that CBDO directors choose a ‘bottom-line business pragmatism’ rather than working to promote ‘neighborhood-controlled social change’” (Rubin, 1997)

Phipps Houses seem to break away from the model of the typical CBDO. It is a nonprofit housing developer, as well as an affiliate of Phipps Houses Community Development Corporation (PCDC). THE PCDC mission is to build and sustain enduring communities – focusing on core service areas of family assistance, community organization, and children and youth services. Phipps Houses was founded in 1905 and is one of the nation’s oldest and largest not-for-profit developers of moderate and low-income housing. “Although it is not uncommon for municipal housing authorities to directly provide social services for tenants, it is very rare to find a nonprofit developer who does so.” Another uniqueness of Phipps Houses is that the group primarily produces permanent housing for the general public, instead of temporary housing or for a specific user group.

The practice principles of the Phipps Houses Group exemplify a user-centric approach to urban renewal. “This voluntary sector model of multiple relationships with residents should become more common as direct federal housing development continues to diminish and increase attention is place on the need for integrated social work services in housing settings.”

Phipps has developed six practice principles to support innovation and freedom of choice in their application of this user-centric process:

1. Housing and social work services should be integrated and provided to tenants in distressed communities.
2. Staff of social work programs in housing settings should understand and subscribe to a collective vision of the program’s purpose.
3. Efforts should be made to provide services on site.
4. Social work programs in housing settings should maintain a dual focus on the individual family and the collective.
5. Community development activities should be extended to the surrounding community and not be limited to the building alone.
6. The task of community building is constantly evolving and should be continually evaluated.

Patricia Ewalt comments that “the Phipps Houses Group strikes a sensitive balance between the interest of tenants and owners, with the overriding belief that family and community well-being support family empowerment and prevent building deterioration.”

In the early 90's Phipps took on two renewal projects in housing development "sponsored in a community well known for poverty and unsuccessful attempts at renewal." These two projects were the Mapes Court (1990, 91 units) and Crotona Park West Cluster C (1992, 196 units) housing developments that were previously abandoned buildings in the South Bronx of New York City: both to be occupied by a mixture of low-income and moderate-income residents.

The first process of this user-centric process is an interview with each family by PCDC staff members to discuss family composition, financial resources, needs, and how the staff can help meet the family's goals. "The interview not only serves to orient the new family to the unique structure and opportunities in this housing development, but the worker gains valuable information for continuing the process of establishing a productive working relationship."

The staff members not only encourage tenants to stand up for themselves and advocate for their needs, but even visit meetings sponsored by other provider groups within the community:

Ironically, an increased sense of tenant ownership leads to a great number of tenant complaints. As tenant associations and other community groups develop, tenants take an active interest in the quality of their buildings and neighborhoods. Thus, as they are empowered in other spheres of their lives, they also make greater demands on management. Rather than blaming PCDC workers for instigating tenant dissatisfaction, management recognizes that active tenant participants ultimately increase building security and stability.

As one Phipps staff member aptly put it, the program needs to "develop with the community – not ahead of it." Other CBDOS become destroyed because they often "advocate progressive change in opposition to conservative neighborhood associations" (Rubin, 1997)

Because of this careful approach in putting the beneficiaries first, the results are obvious. In a survey of 145 families in these two projects, 77% of families cited specific ways in which they saw their employment situation improve within the next five years. 17% said that living in a community increased their motivation to better their lives and become more independent. 19% claimed that the community bettered their motivations to become more independent and lead better lives. 12% said that living in Phipps Houses led to a desire to participate in even more programs and activities. Phipps works because of the multilevel process of empowerment. "It is not sufficient to focus only on developing a sense of personal power or working toward social change, but efforts to change should encompass individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels of practice" (Checkoway, 1997)

Community-based development must be seen as much as a set of attitudes and beliefs as it is a combination of technical skills. The goal of successful CBDOS is not simply to put up buildings, but to recreate a community, both in a physical and in a social-psychological sense." Community-based development organizations are not about leading an in-the-streets revolution, but they are about increasing social equity. It is too easy to ignore this fact and complain that CBDOS have abandoned the fight for social change by building homes and seeking funding to do so. But it is equally easy to point out neighborhood associations that have failed from lack of community participation, or those that have been taken over by a small clique of self-centered individuals. (Rubin, 1997)

Physical development, social advocacy, and providing social services are not seen as alternative choices to attacking problems in revitalization, but rather as complimentary approaches to rebuild and restore communities. (Rubin, 1997)

# Case Study: the United Way

**Source:** Julian, David A. et al. (1997), 'Citizen Participation – Lessons from a Local United Way Planning Process', *American Planning Association*, 63, 3: 345-355

## The Hypotheses

The United Way Planning Process was tested according to three hypotheses in participation as follows:

1. The higher the individuals' levels of participation, the greater their perceived empowerment.
2. The higher the individuals' levels of participation, the greater the congruence between the participants' policy recommendations and actual policy decisions.
3. The higher the individuals' level of participation, the greater their sense of community.

The method of testing these hypotheses were composed of six community-planning groups assigned to review data regarding the need for specific community services. These groups were made up of 10-15 representatives of local human service agencies and citizen volunteers, selected according to their knowledge and expertise. These planning groups reviewed these needs according to six categories of services: economic opportunity, health, family education, family preservation, public safety and agency support. After thorough review of this data, member groups prioritized these needs and gave them to the Planning Committee of the United Way Board.

## Results

The first hypothesis was, "The higher the individuals' levels of participation, the greater their perceived empowerment."

The results of the analysis showed no significant differences between the groups at high, moderate, and low levels of participation in how they perceived their ability to influence policy. However, members at the high level of participation judged the procedures in which they participated to be more effective than did the members of groups at the low and moderate levels of participation...the result shows that participants in the United Way planning process believed they did not have the power to influence decisions. In reality, what United Way defined as participation can also be considered as consultation. Although participants at the high level of participation served as advisors to the United Way Planning Committee, they did not really participate in making decisions.

The "citizen participation" that the United Way claimed as their decision-making process was really based on a consultation model – one that provides two-way communication but little power.

The second hypothesis was, "The higher the individuals' levels of participation, the greater the congruence between the participants' policy recommendations and actual policy decisions." However, the agreement between those with high levels of participation with the Planning Committee were less congruent than those with low to moderate levels of participation who had no contact with the committee members. It could be said that those with a higher level of participation felt empowered to say how they truly feel on the subject matter. This also did not reflect well on the United Way: "Planning Committee members may have established their

priorities according to criteria different from those the citizen planning group used. This supposition implies that Planning Committee members retained the power to decide how United Way funding was to be distributed.”

The third hypothesis was, “The higher the individuals’ level of participation, the greater their sense of community.” Among the different levels of participation, there were no significant differences among the groups. “The explanation for this result may involve the degree to which participants felt empowered. This result suggests that is unrealistic to expect individual psychological benefits to accrue to participants simply from consultation, at least in the case of relatively affluent professionals. Such benefits might accrue to participants as a result of the transfer or sharing of power.”

### **Methodology**

Not only is the definition of “citizen participation” in the United Way model to be question, but the methodology in which the entire study was conducted:

Manipulation check data indicated that a significant number of group members at the moderate and low levels of participation had discussed United Way planning issues with other individuals, which may have diminished the distinctions among high, moderate, and low levels of participation...as well, most study participants were extremely well educated, worked in local human services agencies and had resided for a relatively long time in the community where this research was conducted. It is likely that the participants, regardless of their level of participation, already felt empowered and had high levels of sense of community before participating in the United Way planning process.

### **Conclusions**

The results, as well as methodology concerns did not give citizens real power to influence policy – so why should anyone expect the participants to feel empowerment? David Julian concludes that, “organizations intent on using citizen participation to enhance planning practices should focus on the degree to which citizen participants are empowered to make decisions. Participation without some degree of power implies tokenism and may inhibit efforts to develop consensus around key planning issues.”

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