

# NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES

## Comparing International District and Kogane

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### ABSTRACT

**This article examines the challenge of negotiating community differences in the cases of two historic communities undergoing changes and redevelopment—the International District in Seattle and the Kogane District in Matsudo, Japan. Based on findings from participant observations and interviews, the article examines how the fragmentation of local communities presents both challenges for planning and opportunities for rethinking the practice of participation. The article argues that the challenges for participatory planning in fragmented communities lie not only in understanding and articulating the community differences but also in generating creative ways for meaningful interactions and negotiation of competing visions, interests, and values. The experiences and outcomes in International District and Kogane both suggest the importance of informal processes. Without the limitations imposed by institutional processes and formal participatory mechanisms, informal activities and social events can often produce unexpected and significant results. They allow planners and community organizers to navigate political and cultural nuances in negotiating community differences.**

### INTRODUCTION

The practice of participation in community planning is currently faced with the challenges of community change. Specifically, the fragmentation and continuing social and political changes present a profound contrast with the traditional notion and norms of 'community.' While the concepts of 'community' and 'community building' continue to dominate the discourse of participatory planning, the notion of unitary community no longer applies to the fast-changing social conditions in cities today. To examine this dilemma and its implications for participatory practice, this article compares two recent cases of participatory community planning in the context of fragmented communities—the International District in Seattle and the Kogane District in Matsudo, Japan. In both cases, the planning processes were confronted with the challenge of engaging fragmented communities through participation. Through a

comparison of these two cases, the article examines how the fragmentation of local communities presents both challenges for planning and opportunities for rethinking the practice of participation.

The findings for this study are based on the authors' extended contact and involvement in the respective neighborhoods and planning processes.<sup>1</sup> Through participant observations and interviews with key stakeholders, we explore ways in which participatory planning in different contexts can engage multiple constituents while allowing for negotiation of internal differences. Through a discussion of the cases, we are interested in identifying possible models of participatory planning that recognize the internal cultural, political and social differences within the 'communities.' In particular, we are interested in the fluidity of community process that extends beyond the institutional process and formal settings. Finally, as the U.S. model of participatory planning has often dominated the discourses of community participation in general, we are interested in potential insights into alternative models and methods of participatory planning practice that emerge from and address the needs of specific cultural contexts.

### COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES

In recent years, critiques of 'community' have become a focal point in political science and planning theories concerning social movement and contemporary social conditions. To many, the idea of community can be both a discursive and mobilizing instrument to engage in the politics of difference, as well as a concept that reinforces uniformity within a social or cultural group. For example, Sandercock (1998: 191) argues that the myth, or narrative, of community operates to produce defensive exclusionary behavior by describing who was here first, who really belongs. Young (1990: 227) further argues that the ideal of community denies and represses social difference, and that the polity cannot be thought of as a unity in which all participants share a common experience and common values. Tonkiss (2003, 299) also argues that a notion of community, most pointedly, can both enfold forms of diversity in the city and outline pockets of relative homogeneity along class, ethnic or cultural lines. In the context of these discussions, 'community' can become both an instrument and an obstacle in the local planning process.

Recent critiques of participatory planning have also centered on the challenge in coping with differences among the participants and stakeholders in terms of values, motives, and world views. The challenges often reside in the interests of seeing the community as unified (Baum 1994; Umemoto 2001; Lane 2003). The difficulties include overcoming diverse communication styles, cultural nuances, and group politics (de Souza Briggs 1998; Umemoto 2001). More specifically, Umemoto (2001) articulates the challenges to participatory planning as including



*Figure 1. King Street, heart of Chinatown, International District. (Jeffrey Hou)*



*Figure 2. Summer festival organized by community business association. (Jeffrey Hou)*



*Figure 3. Danny Woo Community Garden, created in the midst of community activism in the 1970s. (Jeffrey Hou)*

communicating across culture-based epistemologies, soliciting voices of multiple publics, and working with communities where cultural background of residents is different from one's own. The understanding of community differences therefore has direct implications for the practice of participatory planning. The ability of negotiating differences becomes an important question and agenda for the practice of participation.

## **CASES: INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT AND KOGANE**

### **International District, Seattle**

Seattle's International District has often been touted as a uniquely historic and multi-ethnic neighborhood resulting from successive waves of immigration. Since the late 1880s, Chinatown and Nihonmachi (Japantown) have existed side by side as Seattle became the hub of Asian immigration in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States (Chin 2001). The Chinese and Japanese immigrants were followed by Filipinos who began to arrive in Seattle starting in the early 1930s, mainly as seasonal laborers migrating between Alaska and Seattle. Starting in the 1920s, a significant African American community also resided in the District adding to the ethnic diversity of local residents. During World War II, the district suffered a major blow as Japanese American residents were sent to the internment camps. Only few returned to live in the District after war. Although the Chinese American community experienced increased levels of economic and social mobility during and after the War, many Chinese have left the district to seek housing outside in the neighboring areas, as the hotels and family association buildings were unfit for families to live in (Chin 2001, 73). By the 1960s, the District became primarily a community of poor and aging bachelors living in substandard single resident occupancy hotels.

Facing the blighted conditions of the neighborhood on one hand and encroaching development on the other, community activism began to emerge in the district that coincided with a Pan-Asian American movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The battle against the nearby construction of a large sports stadium, the King Dome, brought together activists from diverse ethnic backgrounds. While the King Dome was eventually built, many activists stayed to form new community-based organizations that provide housing and other social services to local residents, particularly the low-income elderly. In addition, the City agreed to establish a historic district to protect the historic and ethnic character of the neighborhood. Today, while community activism still thrives among the social service organizations, the district is faced with continued challenges. New developments continue to threaten the character and identity of the neighborhood. The presence of vacant and dilapidated buildings continues to dominate the image of the area. Finally, a new Vietnamese business area has been formed just outside the historic core

of the district bringing tensions to the boundary and identity of the 'community.'

While the pan-ethnic movement has been successful in obtaining government resources and gaining recognition for local Asian communities, it has also become a source of contention within the district. Specifically, persistent tensions have existed between social service organizations and the traditional community and family associations. The division often along ideological, political, and sometimes ethnic lines also influenced their positions toward various issues in the district. For example, on the parking issue, the social service organizations generally favor public transportation that would better serve the district's low-income residents, while merchants strongly favor expansion of parking capacity to attract customers who visit the district by cars. On housing development, the social service organizations advocate for more affordable and mixed-income housing in the district, while private landowners and merchants generally favor market-rate housing to spur economic development in the area.

Debates concerning the official name of the district highlight another persistent tension in the district. Many in the Chinese community prefer the name 'Chinatown' or 'Chinatown-International District.' For the social service organizations, the name "International District," implies a more inclusive acknowledgement of the ethnic diversity in the district. The disagreement also reflects a profound and significant divide over the different definitions and perceptions of 'community' in the District. While the social service organizations focus on the needs of the local residents regardless of their cultural background, others have emphasized the business interests and see the district as the center of specific ethnic communities. These conflicts and tensions present a major challenge in local planning as exemplified in a recent attempt to create an urban design master plan for the district.

### **Kogane District, Matsudo**

The Kogane district in Matsudo City was a former post town in the Edo age (1603—1864). Located on the historic Mito Kaido, it served as one of many resting stops for travelers between Edo (now Tokyo) and Mito. In addition to its location and primary function, family clans played an important role in the development of the area and continued to be influential in the district's affairs. The grandeur and prominence of the former family temples in the area testify to the power and influence of the clans. Today, however, while historic landmarks such as Tozenji Temple and Hondoji Temple remain prominent in Kogane, the historical townscape has become increasingly unrecognizable as a result of urban development since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1896, a railway from Tokyo divided the town into north and south. During the 1960s, widespread housing estate developments in the greater Tokyo region resulted in



*Figure 4. Redevelopment project at Kitakogane Station as viewed from the historic shopping street. (Jeffrey Hou)*

demographic and physical transformation of the area. In the 1990s, a high-rise redevelopment project around the local train station led to the latest change in the neighborhood, as supermarkets and department stores attracted business away from the local shops along the historic main street. To address the decline of local businesses and historic character, a group of local merchants, schoolteachers, outside professionals, and younger-generation residents from the clan families began to organize activities in hopes of revitalizing the historic neighborhood.

Similar to the International District, the 'community' in Kogane is also divided in many ways. One such division is directly reflected in the physical separation as a result of the railroad. The separation has led to the differential developments in north and south. While urbanization has drastically transformed the spatial character of the South, the North has remained largely rural with landowners depending on incomes from real estate and farming. In recent years, the separation is further reinforced by the mammoth redevelopment project near the train station. Besides the north-south divide, the population in Kogane is also divided socially and politically among ranks of traditional clan families and recent residents, with the clan families having greater prestige and influence in the district despite their smaller number. In recent years, with growing development of housing estates in the area, newcomers have become the majority in the district. However, this demographic shift has not been reflected in the leadership and political process in the district.<sup>2</sup>

The longtime residents and newcomers often differ in degrees of involvement and attachment to the neighborhood. The

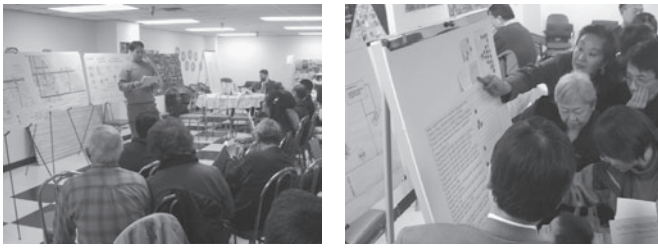


Figure 5. (Left) Community meeting in the International District. (Jeffrey Hou) Figure 6. (Right) Participatory workshop in the International District. (Jeffrey Hou)

former often express their pride of local history, whereas the latter are generally disinterested in the neighborhood and local affairs. However, the sense of attachment among the longtime residents appears to be more connected to their family history rather than the collective identity. While the traditional clans enjoy a highly regarded status in the district, the traditional hierarchy has become an obstacle to the process of community development. On one hand, the newcomers have been excluded from local decision-making. On the other hand, within the local leadership, the competing interests and conflicts often prevented different stakeholders from working together.

## PARTICIPATION IN THE FACE OF DIFFERENCES

### Politics of Multiethnic Community

How do the planning processes in International District and Kogane cope with the internal differences within the communities?

In the face of new construction as well as the need for economic revitalization and physical improvement, a recent effort has been taken in the International District to develop an urban design master plan. Led by Inter\*Im Community Development Association (ICDA), a long-time local housing and community advocacy group, the project would produce plans for streetscape and open space improvement, as well as a review of current land use and preservation guidelines. The planning process followed a characteristically bottom-up approach in Seattle involving community process and participation of local stakeholders. However, this process was stalled at the very beginning as other community groups challenged the role of IDCA in representing the community and leading the project. The dispute was eventually resolved in part by including a large number of community representatives on the project's steering committee. However, once the project started, another disagreement emerged over the name of the district itself. The lack of agreement on the name again stalled the planning process for months before members of the steering committee agreed to hold a special meeting to settle on an official name for the project. During the meeting, an agreement was reached



Figure 7. Children's neighborhood exploratory tour. (Isami Kinoshita)



Figure 8. Schoolchildren examining the work of the Chiba-UW collaborative studio. (Jeffrey Hou)



Figure 9. Temporary community cafe to encourage social interaction.



Figure 10. Construction of the Pocket Park.



Figure 11. Opening ceremony.



Figure 12. Mural created by local schoolchildren.

to recognize the multiple communities within the district and to rename the project 'Chinatown, Japantown, Little Saigon – International District Urban Design Plan.'

As a result of delay caused by persistent conflicts and arguments, the final planning document did little more than reaffirm the unique cultural and physical characteristics of the district and included a list of general recommendations for improvement. Nevertheless, while the result was disappointing to several committee members, many also acknowledged the very process itself as a positive outcome of the project. To many, the planning process was the first time that representatives from opposing groups in the district could sit together to work on a project. The stakes of the project forced many participants to communicate with each other who would otherwise have no opportunity to speak with each other. Several participants acknowledged that the project became more about 'community building' rather than producing a plan. This positive outcome is evident in the fact that several members of the committee have stayed involved and currently continue to work together on the implementation phase of the project.

### Social Events and Activities

The grassroots process in Kogane took a radically different path compared to the International District. Rather than having a clear planning agenda or a road map and as a response to the rigid local planning process, the group of shop owners, schoolteachers and local organizers began with several outreach activities that included neighborhood exploratory tours for children and an "Art Flea Market" to engage other local merchants. These activities helped awaken interests among many local residents. For example, the responses from the children have in turn encouraged their parents, mostly newcomers, to discover the neighborhood. A citizen group was formed following the activities. Named "Bikimae Club," the group includes several younger-generation landowners, primary school teachers, and professionals.

In addition to working with local merchants and school children, the citizen group also enlisted help from faculty and students at nearby Chiba University. Starting in 2001, classes from Chiba University conducted systematic studies of the district's resources and characteristics. In 2003, the Chiba faculty and students engaged in a collaborative design studio with their counterparts at the University of Washington in Seattle.<sup>3</sup> The

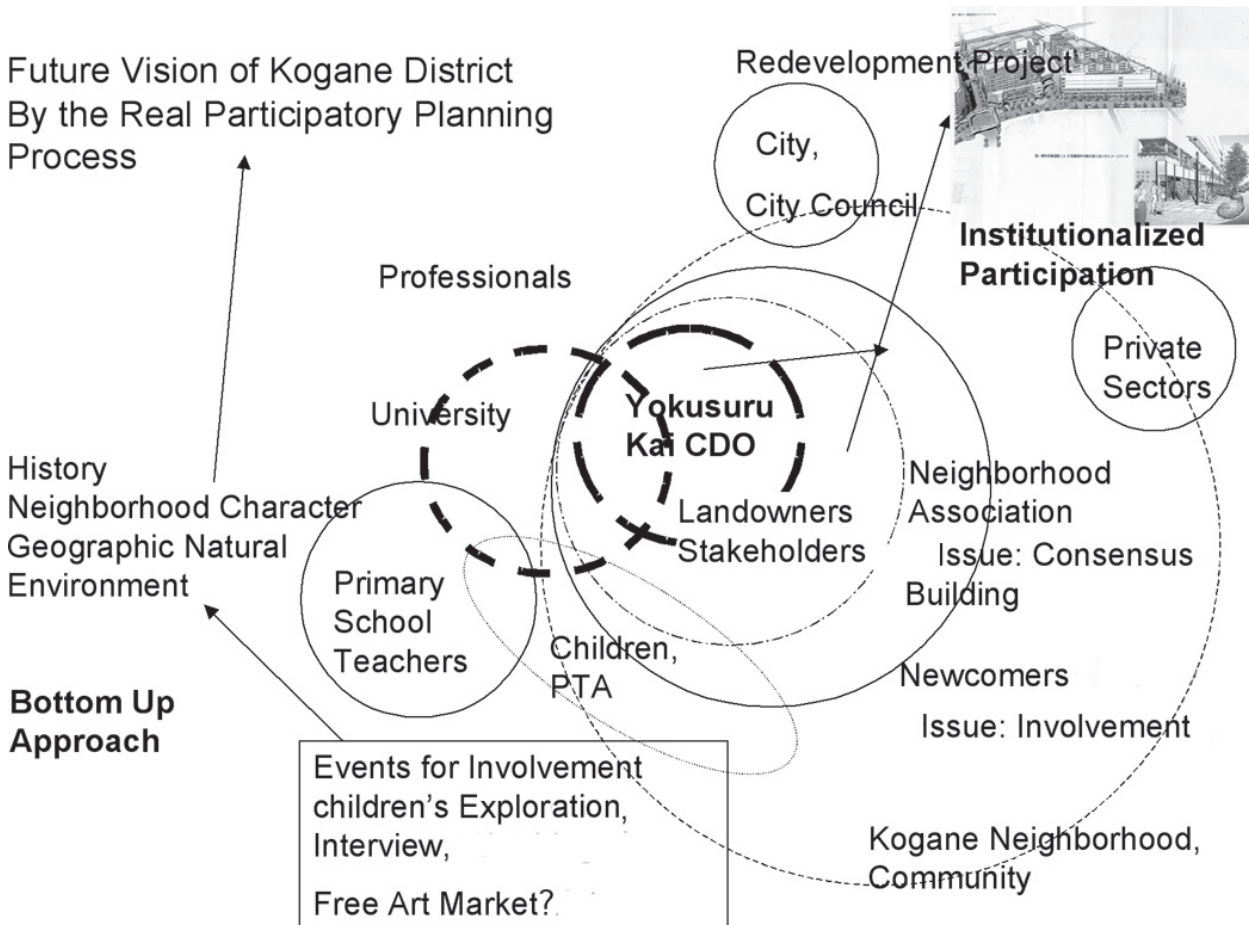


Figure 13. Community process in Kogane.

studio brought students and faculty from both universities to develop proposals for neighborhood improvement. The works of the students were displayed at vacant storefronts and sidewalks, and were presented at a neighborhood symposium organized by the Bikimae Club. The exhibit and symposium generated further interest among the residents. Inspired by the students' proposal, one landowner offered part of his private garden to create a community café and pocket park, open to the public. The pocket park was completed in the following year as a design-build project undertaken by the students at Chiba University.

Another important outcome of the community building process was the move to establish a new neighborhood organization in the district. After five years of involvement in neighborhood activities, several landowners decided to form a new association to carry out larger community development projects and to involve more stakeholders. At the district level, through personal networks among several landowners, the new association 'Kogane wo Yokusuru Kai (Association for Better Kogane)' has been effective in involving other community leaders and merchant organizations. While the process in Kogane has not led to formal planning outcomes, the small-scale activities initiated by citizen organizations have animated communication and interactions among local residents and raised their awareness of the issues and history of the district. The activities serve as an important first step toward formulating future visions for the district and contribute to capacity building among the local citizens.

### **REFLECTONS: INFORMAL PROCESSES IN NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES**

Despite the remarkable differences in planning contexts and participatory approaches, the experiences and outcomes in the International District and Kogane both suggest the importance of informal processes in addressing and negotiating internal differences within the respective communities. The most meaningful and transformative part of the participatory process in both cases has occurred outside the institutional process, including informal communication and social events. In the International District, while planning process produces little substantive results, many participants view the rare interactions, including efforts to communicate outside formal meetings, as constructive in eventually creating a working relationship among the opposing stakeholders despite their differences. In Kogane, the outreach activities created a process that bridged different groups and stakeholders in the district, including merchants, landowners, long-time residents, and newcomers. Specifically, the activities involving school children transcended the perceived boundaries between the different groups. Through the exploratory tours and dialogues, what used to be family heritage became a shared history. In both International District



*Figure 14. (Left) Creating a community at the Community Pub – “Yu Shin.” (Isami Kinoshita) Figure 15. (Right) Pub visit by the Chiba Prefecture Governor (left). (Isami Kinoshita)*

and Kogane, the informal processes have been particularly important in addressing the political and cultural nuances in the respective contexts. It allowed for creation of new meaning and understanding in the community.

The cases of International District and Kogane exemplify the nature of political and cultural differences within rapidly changing urban communities. The politics of difference are not just a phenomenon of contemporary social movement but a reality that permeates through different sectors of society. The presence of differences presents particular problems for participatory planning as it challenges both the notion of homogenous and unified 'community' and the limited repertoire of institutional consensus building process. The comparison of the participatory planning experiences here is therefore significant in providing insights on how participatory planning can work with internal differences and fragmentation in urban communities and continue to be a legitimate, useful, and empowering planning practice. As evident in International District and Kogane, participatory planning process should recognize community differences as the inevitable characteristics of democratic society. However, the challenges for participatory planning in these contexts lie not only in understanding and articulating these differences but also in generating creative ways for meaningful interactions and negotiation of competing visions, interests, values, and cultural differences. The tools and mechanisms of negotiation should not be limited to institutional processes and formal mechanisms as commonly found in literature and practice. Instead, informal activities and social events can often produce unexpected and significant results and are a necessary step for navigating through community differences.

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In the International District, participant observations were made throughout the planning process, in community meetings, workshops, and informal contacts with individuals in the community. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key neighborhood stakeholders and organizational participants in the local planning process. The research is part of a jointly funded project supported by the Royalty Research Funds at University of Washington. The co-

investigators of the project include Daniel Abramson, Gail Dubrow, Jeffrey Hou, and Lynne Manzo, with assistance from Amy Tanner. In the case of Kogane, action research has been conducted through involvement in the process of the community enhancement activities since 1998. Observations of the community activities were conducted at meetings of local citizen groups. Interviews with the residents were also made in different phases of activities.

<sup>2</sup> In Japan, *Chonai Kai* (Neighborhood Association) has the responsibility of managing a neighborhood. It plays a quasi-governmental role as virtually the smallest unit of local municipal administration. In Kogane, the board membership of Chonai Kai has been composed of the traditional clan families. Newcomers on the other hand have been excluded from participating in the association.

<sup>3</sup> The studio was jointly developed and conducted by the authors, along with Professor Sawako Ono at Chiba University. More information about the studio is available at <http://www.caup.washington.edu/larch/chiba.htm>.

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# PARTICIPATORY DESIGN, THE SPIRIT OF PLACE, AND THE PITFALLS OF PROFESSIONALISM

## Evaluation of the Town Center Design Process in Caspar, California

Carey Knecht

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### ABSTRACT

**This case study evaluates the citizen participation process used in the design of a town center for Caspar, California, a five-hundred person community on California's Mendocino County coast. This essay considers participatory design as a method for bridging the difference between the local and the global, between the world view of residents – who often have a rooted, particular perspective that stems from and contributes to the local sense of place – and landscape designers – who often live elsewhere and tend to have a more detached, abstract perspective. Participatory techniques that widened, and that narrowed, this divide are identified.**

### BACKGROUND

Caspar is a small coastal community in California's Mendocino County, approximately 160 miles north of San Francisco. The town sits in a relatively uninhabited fifteen-mile stretch between Mendocino and Fort Bragg. The town lies on a coastal plain overlooking the Pacific Ocean, at the base of the forested hills of Jackson Experimental State Forest. It straddles Highway One, the artery carrying car travel and development through the North Coast corridor. Currently, approximately 500 people live within the informal borders of the unincorporated town.

The town site of Caspar originated as the center of the Caspar Lumber Company's operations, which began milling lumber in 1861. In 1997, after four decades of dormancy, the Company's 300 acres were offered for sale.<sup>1</sup> Faced with the possibility of having 80% of the town's open space developed as a resort or suburb, concerned citizens formed the Caspar Community, a non-profit organization devoted to "consensual self-determination" (Caspar, 2003). In the self-governance system they initiated, residents hold quarterly meetings in which they make decisions using an informal consensus method. Any resident willing to commit the necessary time can join the non-profit's Board of Directors, and for important decisions,