GATHER AT THE RIVER Identification and Preservation of Local Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the search for community identity and vision through the development of a park master plan. Many residents of Knights Landing, a small, unincorporated community, and the designers saw the park planning process and the future park as an opportunity for uniting the sometimes divided community while also celebrating the rich history of the place. Participation strategies for this project included employing techniques to reach the Latino/a and Anglo populations as well as children and the elderly. The resulting concept for the park design, "Gather at the River: to remember our past, enjoy our present and build our future," lays the foundation for a community gathering place that will welcome everyone and celebrate the unique qualities of this place and its people.

THE COMMUNITY, THE CHALLENGE

Knights Landing is an unincorporated community of approximately 800 residents located in the Central Valley of California thirty minutes northwest of Sacramento. Adjacent to the Sacramento River, it is a diverse community rich in agricultural heritage. Comments from residents give a clear and accurate description of the community. (See Figure 1.) Understanding the history of this community is critical to understanding the discussions related to the creation of this community park. Much of the physical community was lost in floods and fires, but the memories and significance of these places is vital to the residents and is reflected in the park design.

The Patwin native-American tribe once lived along these riverbanks and were followed by Anglo settlers in the early and mid 1800s. Named after the ferry crossing established by William Knight, the town had a hotel and several warehouses by 1853. Spurred by bustling river traffic associated with agricultural production throughout the valley, the community continued to thrive between 1860 and 1890. Several floods in the following years washed away much of Knights Landing's progress. Subsequent flood control measures, levees, canals, weirs and bypasses, have aided to prevent future devastating floods (Walters and Anderson, 1992; Owens 1999).

How would you describe Knights Landing?

- *Small town, nice people, nice community, friends.*
- *Falling apart; gone downhill.*
- *One big family; everyone watches over everyone else; Community cares for you.*
- *Fun, noisy, windy.*
- *2 communities, divided Latino, white, small rural community, country town, poor, lots of tradition, lots of history, people know each other*
- *Not much for kids to do. We have to go out of town to Woodland. There aren't any organized sports except for the soccer. It's safe for kids, though.*
- *There are very rich people and very poor, and not many in-between. The town is small and rural. No services.*

Figure 1. Community responses during interviews.

After suffering difficult economic times along with the rest of the country during the late 1920s and 1930s, Knights Landing was dealt a devastating blow when Front Street and its many businesses were destroyed by fire in 1938. The Front Street area was never rebuilt; businesses did not reopen or moved and much of Front Street disappeared under tons of rocks as the levees were created in 1947. The resulting levees cut the community off from the river both visually and physically. Although the river once played a significant commercial role for the community (the largest yield was over two tons daily of salmon), recreational fishing and boating are now the primary activity (Walters and Anderson, 1992).

Mexico has had strong ties throughout the years to this area from the original land grant to William Knight from the Mexican government to more recent family members moving to join their loved ones. Today, Knights Landing's population is predominately Hispanic and Anglos. The Anglo population tends to be older while the Latino/a residents are younger with children in the local school. In recent years, the Latino/a residents have led much of the efforts to improve the community and planning for the future.

At the invitation of community leaders in 1999, landscape architecture and community development students at the University of California, Davis worked with the residents to define goals for the community's future. In the following years, students in design studios have worked with the residents to work toward these goals. One goal, and the challenge that is the focus of this paper, was the development of a design master plan for a community park during a landscape architecture studio in the spring of 2001.[1] The park master plan was the backdrop for a much more difficult task of bringing diverse community members together to identify the qualities

and characteristics of the community they want to preserve and showcase. In addition, there was the challenge of creating a place that was useful and meaningful to all residents, young and old, Anglo and Latino/a. As the only designed open space in the community, this centrally located park plays both a symbolic and tangible role in bringing the community together.

THE ISSUES, THE PLAYERS, THE APPROACH

Working within the time constraints of a 10-week quarter, the design process had to be efficient and effective. With community participation in the process a high priority, the approach undertaken was based on Hester's 12-step process (1985). To adapt the process to this particular community and project, steps were shortened or conducted simultaneously and information obtained by previous design studios was used, but the community-focused spirit of the process was retained. In developing the participation techniques, we also had to keep in mind that many community members were Spanish-speaking. All the materials we prepared and all meetings had to be bilingual.

The initial meetings with a few community leaders (teachers, a non-profit leader, and volunteers) gave the design team a strong indication that the park needed to be more than a pretty place to play and picnic. These leaders wanted a park that everyone in the community would be proud of and would use. They wanted a place that was made for them and not one that they could find anywhere else. The search for the community identity and vision for the park is the crux of this paper and the foundation for the park master plan.

Several techniques were used to gain a better understanding of the community, the desires of individuals and community groups, and their visions for the park. For the most part the techniques are ones that have been used numerous times before, but the combination of these techniques, their specific design, and their delivery provide lessons for an effective means of understanding a community's spirit and desires. The methods used are discussed here.

To gain a sense of how the residents perceived their community and their desires for the future park, we conducted a listening phase where we interviewed the "opinion leaders"[2] and placed suggestion boxes throughout the town. Thirty-one opinion leaders were interviewed; no one that wanted to be interviewed was turned away. Ten persons interviewed were non-Hispanic whites and twenty-one were Hispanic. Our list of opinion leaders included Water Board officials, members of the Citizen's Advisory Committee, Grafton Elementary school faculty and staff, religious leaders, long-time citizens, existing park users (the Soccer Club), and a cross-section of citizens from various demographic groups (young, old, Spanish-speaking, English-speaking). During each interview we asked if there was someone else in the community that they thought we should talk to and then added that person to our list of interviewees. From the interviews we learned about how these residents feel about the community in general and the park in particular. Many of the sentiments we heard at our first meeting were repeated in these discussions. Residents wanted the new park to "meet the needs of all the community members."

During this same period, we also solicited input from the broader community. In an effort to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to voice their opinion in the early stages of the project, we placed suggestion boxes in several locations. We selected locations that received frequent use from various segments of the population -- the Community Center, the Senior Housing Facility, Mom's Diner (the only local restaurant), the Plug & Jug (a local convenience store), the Post Office, and the Grafton Elementary School Office. From these boxes, we received many suggestions regarding the park design: The respondents wanted to make sure the park was handicap accessible, existing vegetation was retained, and a large party area for celebrations was included.

While we were learning about what the citizens envisioned for the park, we also wanted to learn about the park itself and the surrounding community. We conducted a site analysis that included examining the existing vegetation, drainage, soils, views, history, ownership and uses. (The existing park included outdated and dangerous play equipment and minimal picnicking facilities. See Figure 2.) In conducting the site analysis, we were surprised to learn that most people did not know who owned the park property; there was uncertainty if it belonged to the School District, the water board or someone else. We discovered that the property is owned by the School District, but there is an agreement for maintenance to be conducted by the Water Board. In addition, the soccer field is maintained by the local soccer club. We also reviewed information obtained by the earlier group of university students. Several citizens led these students on a walking tour of the community during which they learned that the "missing" Knights Landing was important to the residents. Stories of the businesses that were once located along Front Street and childhood memories of the river were prevalent. This earlier group of students also conducted a photographic survey with the residents. Images of places such as those that are most special, most fun, least valued, and saddest were useful in understanding the community. In addition, the photographs of a place that "is" Knights Landing underscored the importance of the river and agriculture to the residents. (See Figure 3.)

After this initial phase of information gathering, we held a community meeting to share what we had learned and to enlist the community's help in verifying and further defining the goals

Figure 2. Outdated play equipment.

Figure 3. The Sacramento River.

for the park development. We designed the meeting to welcome everyone. Bilingual notices (Figure 4) were posted throughout the community and phone calls were placed to everyone that had been interviewed. The meeting day and time were selected to work with other community activities. In addition, several residents suggested we include a potluck dinner so that attendees could come immediately after work and bring their children. The potluck was an excellent idea because it gave a feeling of openness and camaraderie. Another important element of our workshop presentation was the inclusion of one of the students from the previous course. Community members often become discouraged when yet another group of students arrive to "study" them and give them a report or some pretty drawings. In an effort to show that we were continuing the work of the earlier students, not starting over, our translator for the evening was one of the previous students. A native-Spanish speaker from Mexico, this older student was well remembered from the earlier work.

The interviews and responses in the suggestion boxes had given us ideas for the types of things the residents wanted to see in the park, but they did not tell us how these elements should function or what they should look like. At the workshop, we had the attendees work in smaller groups and discuss the items they would most like to see in the future park. These discussions allowed them to describe how they would like

Figure 4. Bilingual community workshop flyer.

to use the park facilities and why they were important. For example, one item that had received mention in the interviews and the suggestion boxes were barbecue and picnic areas. Through the workshop discussions, we learned that they wanted places for not only small family gatherings, but also places the overall community or extended families could use for celebrations. In addition, the desire to ensure that everyone would use the park came out in several of the discussions. For example, the track discussions included comments that the older residents would prefer a walking trail with shaded seating areas to a track around the soccer field.

As discussed by Hester (1985), we wanted to involve residents in establishing the design concept or gestalt for the park design. We decided to begin these efforts by working with the elementary school children. We developed an interactive lesson plan on design and concept development and met with three classes of 3rd and 4th grade students. After discussing design, creativity and concepts, we had the students each develop their own "theme" or "big idea" for the park. Afterwards, the students worked with two of their friends to develop a concept and a model of the park illustrating their concept. (See Figure

Figure 5. Student concept-building workshop.

5.) Ideas generated by the students included: a rainforest in outer space, camping, rich river, and enchanted garden. These ideas reflected the students' desires for a design that was modern or futuristic and naturalistic. They wanted a park that had natural elements such as "a native garden in local riparian setting," "a fishing rock," and "trees and hills," but also "futuristic lights" and "space ship play structures."

Based upon all the information gathered in these workshops and interviews, we prepared several exhibits to be displayed at a community celebration. We developed three schematic designs showing location alternatives for park features, program element boards with design options for various features, and a working model. These displays allowed us to obtain input from residents who had not been involved in the process thus far and also to give them an opportunity to learn what was being discussed. The feedback was also useful in furthering the design decisions particularly in regard to the design style of specific elements. For example, celebration attendees placed dots next to the photographs of design elements that they liked best, therefore we learned that those responding liked the modern play structures more than the natural timber structures. This finding, and others, was in keeping with what we had heard from residents at our earlier workshop and from the elementary students.

The input of the community members through this process gave us a clear indication of some of the most important concepts they wanted incorporated in the park. Beyond the functional elements of the park, they wanted the park to be a place to bring the community together, a place to remember and celebrate the history of the area, a place to respect the agricultural and natural landscape, and a place to inspire residents to work toward a better future. Armed with the knowledge gained in all the previous steps, the landscape architecture students generated a long list of potential design concepts. Four of those concepts were developed into design plans: Common Ground - Higher Ground, Bridge with the Past, The River, and Together at the River. After internal critiques and professional review, the final design, "Gather at the River: to remember our past, enjoy our present, and build our future," was developed.

The resulting design was presented to the community at a well-attended meeting at the school. In addition to young, old, Anglo and Latino/a residents, the local Water Board, School Board, and the County Parks Department were all represented. As a first step to "transferring the ownership" of the park back to the community, we asked one of the teachers, and active park planning participant, Maria, to act as the meeting translator. As the design presentation proceeded, it became clear that Maria was embellishing the students' descriptions with ideas she had heard from fellow residents at the workshops. It was clear that she understood where the design ideas had been generated and their underlying intent. The excitement and energy in the room increased with the presentation of each component of the design. As we were completing our presentation and were explaining that this master plan was the start of a process and not the end, we could see the community members begin taking the baton of responsibility. The discussion quickly turned to ideas for funding, materials or construction expertise. Following the meeting, community members formed an "action team" and have continued to work toward the realization of the park. Their concept of "Gather at the River: to remember our past, enjoy our present and build our future" lays the foundation for a design that will welcome the entire community and preserve their unique qualities.

LESSONS LEARNED

The park planning experience in Knights Landing provides lessons for others assisting communities with design or planning projects. These lessons are derived with the objective of increasing the effectiveness of the participation in regards to identifying and responding to community member concerns. The lessons are intended to be applicable to many participation methods and not limited to those we used.

Participation begins with individuals.

Communities typically have someone that others trust and that is an advocate for the project. This person is the door into the community, but should not be seen as the only connection to other community members. Other individuals with differing ideas are sure to be in the community and need to be sought out. Community members should be given an opportunity to speak out individually either through one-on-one interviews, surveys, suggestion boxes, comment cards or other means. Many people are not comfortable voicing a dissenting opinion in a public setting so opportunities need to be provided to allow for those opinions.

Beyond the active community leaders, the community "power holders" (in the Knights Landing case, the Water Board and School Board members) need to be brought into the process early.

Their participation in the early stages has a double-sided benefit – they hear what the residents are thinking and wanting, and they have an opportunity to explain requirements that the project will have to meet. Officials can be convinced of a project's merits and become welcome project allies when they hear the enthusiasm of community supporters. Before bringing these power holders into discussions with community members, however, it is important to gauge their willingness to work with the community. If they are not willing to work with the community, it is best if the residents first have an opportunity to generate and discuss ideas amongst themselves. In one instance at a meeting following community workshops, we had

a county official rejecting every idea even before it could be fully articulated. Luckily the community members knew they had the support of others and did not discard ideas just because the official did not like them.

Asking obvious questions often reveals surprising answers.

When we conducted our site analysis of the town and park, we were able to note what we could see, but only through talking to the residents did we learn about what had once been and what they thought. We started by asking simple, open-ended questions such as describe Knights Landing. Instead of limiting their responses to a physical description, the residents told us about the social, economic, historic and cultural character of the community. In the earlier student project, residents were asked to photograph a variety of places in the community – places that were the most fun, the saddest, etc. These techniques provided a wealth of information and also started the community members looking at their home in a different way. In addition, obvious questions such as who will pay for it, who will take care of it, who will use it need to be answered. The answers can significantly influence the design.

Community members need to be asked to help with the project.

Volunteers are often relied upon in participatory design projects, but we found that asking people to help out (instead of waiting for them to come forward) had great benefits. Persons who might not otherwise be involved take an active role in the project, untapped leadership can be found, and the residents' sense of empowerment increases. The role of their involvement can take many forms. Residents can be asked to assist with the information gathering (Hester, 1999), presentations and other forms of dissemination, design generation, and construction. During one of our later construction parties, we spotted a Spanish-speaking woman who was working hard and was very comfortable with the tools. Through a bilingual community member, we asked her to take charge of one section of the planting and supervising others. She would never have proposed herself for this position, but was thrilled to be asked and did an excellent job. In some cultures volunteering is frowned upon because it looks as if the person thinks they are better than others (McGrew, 1998); they prefer to be asked to help. (For further discussion of cultural influences on participatory methods, see Owens, 2000 & 1997 and Daley, 1989.)

Previous work should be built upon, not repeated.

It is surprising, but not unusual, to learn that even the smallest, most out of the way community has been studied, mapped or "master planned." The information gleaned from previous efforts should be acknowledged, examined and used when appropriate. Community members become very frustrated and discouraged when they feel like they are repeating a process that they have already completed. Although the information may have been gathered in a different manner or is in a different form than would currently be used, the design team needs to finds ways to verify and update the information without starting over. In the same vein, if new residents join a design process late, they need to have an opportunity to voice their opinions, but not to override decisions that have already been made. Those that have been involved in the project should be given the responsibility of explaining the information that has been gathered, the discussions that have taken place and the resulting decisions. Newcomers should be given an opportunity to raise questions and learn if those questions were answered in previous discussions.

Designers using community participation methods must "learn how to punt."

Unlike some design processes where the participation of residents is not needed, a participatory process requires that the designer have alternative means in place for involving community members. Community meetings are unpredictable; sometimes fewer persons than expected show up, sometimes more than expected. Alternative plans need to be thought through before the meeting – how to facilitate one large group versus several smaller ones, or how to have more groups than expected. Many other scenarios can also occur. What if, as we had happen in Knights Landing, a large group of children show up part way through the meeting? We had a contingency plan in place for a children's group, but had to make adjustments for the large number of young participants and their late start. Other surprises beyond the number of attendees also need to be addressed. In our attempt to have a poster display at the outdoor community gathering, we had to deal with strong winds. The posters had to be laid on the ground instead of being mounted vertically. Their reduced visibility had to be compensated for by asking attendees to come over and look at them.

Lastly, an important lesson to be taken from this project is that the designer needs to be the designer.

Designers know what questions need to be answered, the opportunities a project holds, and the range of possibilities for design. The community members in Knights Landing understood that they knew more than the designers about their community and about their desires for a park, but they also knew that the designers knew more about how to put it all together and could give them ideas and guidance. They needed the designers to take their desires and give them form. In addition, the designers were the facilitators that encouraged and directed the search for community identity that formed the foundation for the park's design. Without these broad-

based community outreach efforts, it is likely that the design would have answered many of the functional desires of the involved community members, but the multi-generational and cultural spirit of the park's design and the overall community's dedication to its completion would not have materialized.

CONCLUSION

For a design to be responsive to a place and its people, the vision for the design needs to reflect that community. The designer must actively seek the involvement of diverse community members in identifying this vision. The participatory design process used in the Knights Landing project allowed us to reach many members of the community and to engage them in the discussions and decision making. Children, teens and elderly, as well as adults, were engaged in various stages of the design process. The involvement of Latino/a and Anglo community members was actively encouraged and supported. These diverse groups worked separately and together to understand their own desires for the park design and to develop a design that would be supportive of their collective vision. Other communities will have different residents, issues, and desires, but the lessons learned in Knights Landing will be helpful to designers assisting with their planning efforts.

ENDNOTES

[1] Construction documents were not prepared during this studio, but student involvement in the realization of the Knights Landing park continued afterwards. Several components of the master plan have been implemented including the design and installation of a playground, the siting and construction of the Knights Landing Family Resources Center (FRC) and the landscaping of the FRC entry.

[2] For our purposes opinion leaders were persons who represent a larger group in the community or who are in some way more involved with decision-making for the community.

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CRAFTING WESTPORT How One Small Community Shaped Its Future

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the ongoing participatory design effort in the small coastal community of Westport, California since May 2003. It opens with background information about the identity of its people and places, followed by detailed discussion of methods and results used during the process of designing its new town center. While the Westport community is, in many ways, representative of others of similar size and location, its idiosyncrasies led to unique results with regard to both methodology used and design outcome. The evolving needs of the community and their changing opinions regarding the location, functional relationships and views were incorporated in a design that was carefully crafted, adjusted and calibrated throughout the process. Moreover, the effects of a highly identifiable physical environment on residents' perceptions of spatial form resulted in sophisticated design solutions. Additionally, the way of life in Westport defined the need for a flexible process that addressed the community's remoteness and limited resources.

THE COMMUNITY

Westport sits on the edge of California's Lost Coast—it is the northernmost town on Highway 1. Similar to its environment, Westport has always been a community of rugged individuals. It owes its history to the lumber industry, whose peak occurred by 1900, when it was the largest town on the north Mendocino

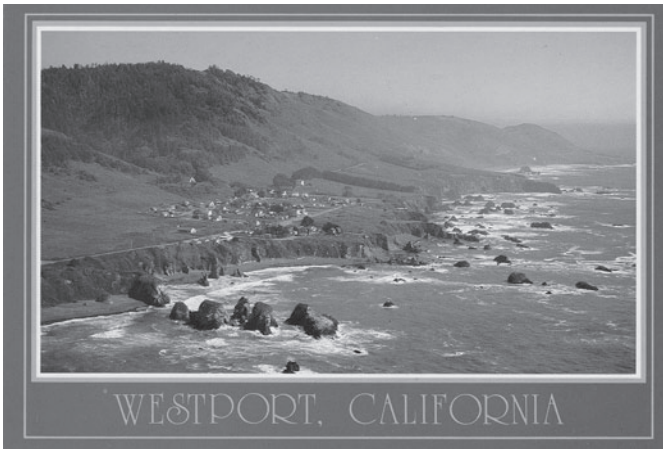

Figure 1. Postcard of Westport, California.