

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.

² 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.

³ 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

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.¹ 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,

this leadership group does significant outreach to those who do not attend community meetings. These inclusive methods have earned the Caspar Community county recognition as a de facto local government.

In 1998, Caspar residents worked with faculty and students from the University of California, Berkeley, to form a long-range vision for the town's development. This process, led by Professor Randolph Hester, has been guided by a 12-step method of community participation (Hester, 1984). Students in Hester's 1998 landscape architecture studio design class led residents in creating a phased plan for the town's development. Following this plan, residents first protected the town's most sacred place – the ocean overlook known as the Caspar Headlands – by raising money to have it made a state park. They then turned to priority two: creating a community center in an old school located at the intersection of two key roads. In February 2002, they purchased the school building and contacted Hester to help them design the surrounding property.

TOWN CENTER DESIGN PROCESS

On September 8, 2002, Professor Hester directed a community visioning charrette, assisted by a group of graduate students, including myself. After this charrette, I began acting as the project manager and, under Hester's guidance, did a large portion of the work to translate citizen desires into a Town Center design.

The Town Center design emerged through an iterative process of design and community feedback. This process included seven steps (primary actors listed in parentheses): 1) individual visioning in a guided exercise (approximately seventy residents at an initial charrette), 2) sharing individual ideas and choosing priorities, in small groups led by Berkeley graduate students, then presenting the priorities to all charrette attendees (residents attending the charrette), 3) integrating the small group priorities to define the site program and goals (Berkeley team), 4) brainstorming four initial Town Center designs (Berkeley team), 5) giving feedback on the initial designs (residents on the Caspar Community Board), 6) integrating the Board's comments into one design and presenting this to residents (Berkeley team), and 7) providing feedback on the final design (residents).

After the design priorities were compiled from the small group lists in step 3 (above), several people from the Berkeley group brainstormed four possible Town Center designs. The preliminary designs share certain elements, such as a building to block the cold north wind, but otherwise have different organizing structures – a village green encircled by a road, an internal Main Street to bring commercial activity closer to the existing school building, sequentially larger green spaces

opening from the school building toward the Headlands, or a new creek to carry stormwater across the site. The plans have approximately the same commercial square footage but different numbers of housing units.

We sent the preliminary designs to the Board for their feedback. Despite our adherence to community generated program elements (e.g., a firehouse) and our attempt to produce desired qualities (e.g., "intergenerational"), the Board's responses to initial designs were lukewarm (e.g., "we weren't wild about any one of the plans;" "we all had reservations of some aspects shared by all the plans"). They rated each design and drew suggested changes to each design on cellophane overlays.

The design team compared the Board's suggested changes to the four designs, looking for patterns. We incorporated changes that they consistently repeated in the final design: buildings should not block views to the southwest and east, parking and circulation should wrap around the outside of the site, and drainage should be unobtrusive. They desired that certain required commercial space be off-site, and that a maximum of four housing units be built. However, their central complaint was not immediately clear to us. They suggested changes to the plans' details, but for three of four plans, even those they preferred, they removed or minimized key elements without commenting on the overarching structure. For example, they removed the street from the "Main Street Plan" without rejecting the idea of a shopping promenade. We did eventually realize that the Board usually suggested buildings be smaller, fewer, and scattered more irregularly. We came to understand that whereas we tended to cluster buildings to enclose open space, their suggestions often arrayed active spaces like beads on a necklace.

In the visioning charrette, participants had drawn their "most loved" town center and listed its essential characteristics to incorporate in Caspar. To understand whether the lukewarm response had been because designers missed a particular guiding spirit, the design team re-examined the individual visions, with careful attention to residents' design precedents and to what attributes of those places residents valued. Anything that seemed new or unfamiliar in the visions was noted, as something possibly excluded from the design. These unfamiliar concepts revealed three clusters of missing elements: rural looseness; spaces defined by people and ritual rather than built form; and a spiritual reverence for nature.

Incorporating these changes, the Berkeley team drew a single design and presented it to approximately fifty residents. To show the spirit of the town center, particularly the previously missing elements, the final design had a number of small scenes showing people cloud-watching, jumping into a pile of hay, and sitting around a campfire circle. We suggested this final design be implemented in phases. The presentation

emphasized four aspects of the design: ecological site factors, changes between the preliminary and final designs, activity scenes in the final design, and a phasing sequence in which the final design could be built over time as funding opportunities and community needs arose.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. When asked to “please state your favorite thing, or one thing you would change,” no one opposed the overall design, and only four people chose to make a suggestion (e.g., that the property have a caretaker). Seven of forty attendees particularly appreciated the process (e.g., “I’m amazed with the discussion and how everyone contributed to come up with the plan”). The written survey yielded similar results. The community seemed to feel that designers had faithfully translated their desires into a design.

DISCUSSION

In short, we began with four initial designs that were not well-liked and ended with a final design that was much more positively received. Which techniques caused this gap in understanding to arise, and which helped restore communication?

Three aspects of the process appear to have fostered or perpetuated misunderstanding. First, details which would communicate desired attributes did not survive the small group prioritization of goals. Residents and/or group leaders often collected the group members’ detail-rich suggestions under a detail-free heading. The residents in my group collected several items, including “suncatchers and refractors and things that wave in the wind to highlight the presence of nature and awaken your senses,” and summarized the group as “environmental sustainability.” Such abstract language allowed significant leeway for designer (mis)interpretation, particularly since designers studied the group summaries instead of the brainstorm lists before designing. An improvement to this method would be to ask groups not only to prioritize their goals but also to “please select one or two concrete details that demonstrate what each of your most important goals might look like.” Alternatively, when compiling the small group goals, the compiler could review the brainstorm lists and provide both goals and supporting examples to designers.

The second technique that may have widened the resident/designer gap was that the Berkeley student team brainstormed preliminary designs in Berkeley without community members present. As designers sought to spatialize goals such as “environmentally sustainable” and “intergenerational,” physical and social details from our studies or from Berkeley’s urban environment were more mentally available than the Caspar environment. Instead, we could have brainstormed initial designs while still in Caspar. Since this was not possible, we could have attempted to regress to the mindset we had

when in Caspar through photos and other methods. To help people remember Caspar clearly, while we were in Caspar, I could have asked everyone to draw sketches, gather small plant or soil samples, take photos, or keep a journal of their personal reactions to the place. If people individually chose what to record about the physical setting, they would be more likely to remember not only the setting, but the feelings the setting evoked. By reviewing these reminders, the Berkeley team would be vividly recalling Caspar’s particularities when designing, instead of Berkeley’s. Of course, the details that are important to students will not be the same as those important to residents, so this strategy should be combined with strategies that remind students of the residents’ priorities.

Finally, a focus on form and professional-looking graphics probably inhibited communication about the initial proposals. Board members responded to details in the scenes, such as the placement of buildings. But the most important details – people and their activities – were not drawn in the preliminary landscape plans. Thus, as noted above, their comments on details did not tell us whether they preferred a shopping promenade or a village green. They objected to the main street, but because people were not shown walking on a boardwalk from store to store, the Board did not comment on the overall concept. Although their feedback was still crucial and quite helpful, detailed scenes of people shopping or lounging on a green would have made our central questions clearer and given us the answers we needed.

Fortunately, four other aspects of the process seem to have assisted communication and restored local desires and vision. First, structuring the initial charrette around three different modes of expression – drawing, writing, and talking – meant that a person comfortable in any of these modes could communicate their individual vision. Second, since the visioning session led residents through a long (10-15 minute) guided imagery exercise, it solicited some responses that were quite imaginative and artistic. Impressionistic drawings and poetic descriptions were especially valuable in helping us find a spirit to guide the Town Center design. Third, asking the Board to review initial designs and draw suggested changes provided crucial corrections on physical elements’ size and placement. Finally, citizen comments suggest that the phasing diagram and the phasing story told in the presentation were quite important. The plan seemed uniquely suited to the community since we explicitly recommended they adapt it to suit their needs and resources over time.

THEORY & CONCLUSIONS

Participatory design has been promoted partially for its ability to overcome race, class, and gender divisions (e.g., Umemoto, 2001). This study shows that even when designers and residents share many demographic characteristics and personal values

(e.g., environmental sustainability), and even when designers are attempting to follow citizen-generated criteria, significant gaps in understanding can arise. In this case, the gap seems to be the pervasive difference between the local and the global – between the rooted, particular perspective of residents and the more detached, abstract perspective of designers.

This local/global duality is at the core of large bodies of theory, including place and placemaking (Tuan, 1977; Bruner, 2001), and bioregion and re-inhabitation (Berg & Dasmann, 1978; Snyder, 1995; Thayer, 2003). Most definitions of “place” begin with the five senses – sight, sense, taste, touch, and smell. Kevin Lynch explains “the sense of a region” as “what one can see, how it feels underfoot, the smell of the air, the sounds of bells and motorcycles, how patterns of these sensations make up the quality of places, and how that quality affects our immediate well-being, our actions, our feelings, and our understandings” (1976). These small sensory impressions combine and create an overall identity for a place. Theoretical literature often claims that a “place” is a space imbued with meaning, so that places are “embedded in the everyday world around us and easily accessible, but at the same time are distinct from that world” (Jackson, 1994). Its meaning comes from three sources: biophysical properties, social and political processes, and a sociocultural interpretive framework (Cheng et al, 2003). The concept of “place” emphasizes how quirky, particular, and extraordinary aspects of a location combine to make a unique impression.

The concept of “bioregion” is similar to the concept of “place.” Bioregions are not simply “geographic areas having common characteristics of soil, watershed, climate, native plants and animals,” but also “a cultural idea... (A bioregion is) a geographic terrain and a terrain of consciousness” (Berg & Dasmann, 1978). Bioregionalism differs from place theory in its greater emphasis on ecological factors, but the two concepts overlap greatly (e.g., Hough, 1995). Like “place,” “bioregion,” emphasizes individual sensory experience, focuses on interactions between nature and culture, and celebrates local peculiarities. The opposite of place and bioregion, “placelessness,” is not just the existence of “look-alike landscapes,” but also that “behind these lies a deep-seated attitude that attends to the common and average characteristics of man and place” (Relph, 1976: 79).

Advocates of both places and bioregions recommend actively strengthening the uniqueness of places by placemaking or reinhabitation. Reinhabitation refers to settling in a particular place, considering oneself a permanent member of local human and non-human communities, accepting its ecological limits, and working to repair the social and environmental fabric of a lifelace (Berg & Dasmann, 1978; Snyder, 1995; Thayer, 2003). Caspar residents seem to have begun this process of reinhabitation. They have formed a self-governance

organization and through this organization, they work for a greater balance between their human community and aspects of local ecology. For example, they host an annual Gorse Festival to have a celebration while promoting the removal of this aggressive thorny shrub through work sessions and information sharing. One resident even ferments “gorse wine.” Activities like this, which strengthen local culture and ecosystems such that they begin to co-evolve, are the essence of reinhabitation or placemaking.

With Caspar residents working to reinhabit their particular locale, does this mean that the initial communication gap between residents and designers was between place and placelessness, between place-promoters and place-obliators? Could designers be missionaries of a global monoculture? Some writers charge that the current academic environment perpetuates a culture of “rootless professors,” whose greatest allegiance is “to the boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths” at the expense of geographic membership (Zencey, 1996: 15; see also W. Jackson, 1994). After studying the codes of ethics in landscape architecture professional organizations, Bob Scarfo concluded that “the landscape architect’s knowledge and abstract language... cannot subjectively convey the inhabitants’ values. Nor can it produce contextually meaningful landscape forms” (1987: 687).

More benignly, the communication gap may just have been a cultural gap between Place A and Place B. The design team might be sympathetic to place-related thinking and even have allegiance to a certain place, but to a different place than the location of the design project. This is certainly possible. My life in Berkeley is different from life in Caspar in almost all sensory, social, and cultural details. For example, the background noise in my life is traffic, not ocean surf or seals barking. I buy basic groceries as I walk home, but Caspar inhabitants have to drive seven miles on the highway. During the day, I see many more people; during the night, they see many more stars. When residents jokingly refer to my “urban aesthetic,” they are suggesting that these many details combine to make my design preferences different from theirs.

This second possible gap, between Place A and Place B, is likely to be present frequently, since few landscape architects limit their work to their immediate residence. But this second gap may frequently combine with or trigger the first gap mentioned, between place and placelessness. Even designers sympathetic to place-specific thinking may shift into a more universal, abstract mode of thinking when asked to understand a new spatial context and offer services to its residents.

The risk is that this universal, abstract mode of thinking would drown out local influences. To counteract this, designers should become aware of when abstract or outside influences

are loudest and then be more deliberate about listening. In the Caspar case study, four types of universal influence or detachment were most important. First, our lack of personal relations made it possible for us to disregard the impact of the design on single individuals when local residents could not. Second, we knew and invoked a wide palette of design shapes and precedents, many of which were slightly exotic, like Italy's Piazza San Marco, or abstract, like the Golden Nautilus. Third, since we participate in a professional design culture, academic knowledge and trends shape our priorities. In Caspar, one preliminary design emphasized stormwater management. Though important in Caspar, we focused on stormwater primarily because of Berkeley faculty members' strengths, and because of increasing concern with stormwater pollution in the San Francisco Bay. Fourth, our preconceived design-related norms of right and wrong influence our designs. In Caspar, we repeatedly pressed for raising the density of the town center. I still think more housing would help Caspar achieve its goals. But my commitment to high density originated in the San Francisco Bay Area, where rapid population growth is devouring Central Valley habitat and farms. I can't say I weighed the issues in Caspar with a fully open mind.

Of course, these four differences between designers and residents form the core of the design profession's strengths as much as its weaknesses. As designers, we are paid for possessing these same attributes: personal disattachment, wide knowledge of possible designs, time-evolved and current design skills and judgments, and awareness of design decisions' broader social and environmental impacts. The forms, ideas, and values we bring can cross-pollinate local ideas to create excellent new solutions. It allows designers to serve as educators. Designers can even accelerate widely-desired social change if they provide compelling design options that are particularly socially or environmentally responsible (Hester, 1995). Participatory design provides the method for maintaining our profession's strengths while not obliterating or obscuring a place's uniqueness.

Without deliberate effort, design can be a top-down process that ultimately promotes homogeneity. However, participatory techniques can help designers honor the specificity of local ecology and culture. To avoid communication pitfalls, designers should be particularly aware of shifts from details to abstractions. Ideally, residents should navigate designers to the level of abstract principles and then back again to details. Techniques that promote a holistic understanding of the place through artistic methods are also especially helpful. Special care should be taken when dealing with social relationships, design precedents, academic trends, and normative judgments, because these are areas where a cosmopolitan or detached perspective is most likely to override or drown out local influences. Participatory design can serve

as a method for bridging differences between "the local and the global;" between the world view of residents – whose views come from and contribute to the local sense of place – and landscape designers – who often live elsewhere and tend to be somewhat cosmopolitan due to their training and professional frame of reference. As placemaking and reinhabitation efforts increasingly counter placelessness, designers should teach themselves to assist communities trying to "become native to [their] place" (Wes Jackson, 1994).

ENDNOTES

¹ The Caspar Lumber Company's acreage had previously been sold to the Caspar Cattle Company (CCC), owned by a long-time resident who wanted to prevent harmful development. But was the first time the land truly might have been purchased by a developer was when the CCC could no longer hold the land and put it up for sale in 1997.

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