

INCREASING WALKABILITY IN WEST HYATTSVILLE

A Case of Cross-Cultural Participation in Community Design and Planning

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ABSTRACT

Various public agencies in Maryland are pursuing community design and planning strategies that promote new urban patterns that are described by a plethora of buzz phrases: “Walkable Communities,” “Livable Communities,” “New Urbanism Neighborhoods,” etc. In some part, this is a response to local advocacy planning and changing demographic patterns that call for the development of communities with compact, affordable, mixed-use housing, with comfortable pedestrian access to employment, retail and regional transit centers and with improved recreational facilities and schools. In an attempt to put together new planning strategies to address these concerns, stakeholders in the process face many challenges. One of these challenges is the growth of new immigrant and multi-cultural populations within certain local communities. More than ten municipalities within Prince George’s County have populations where more than 25% of residents are foreign born. In West Hyattsville, nearly 30% of the population is foreign born with half of those community residents having arrived within the last 10 years. In addition, these communities are becoming increasingly diverse from a cultural perspective. In West Hyattsville, we see a population characterized as 25% White, 55% African American, 3% Asian, and 16% Hispanic. In addition, 10% of residents described themselves as multi-racial (a mix of two or more races). This multi-cultural context requires different methods of democratic process and produces many challenges in promoting community participation. This paper will describe the participatory community design and planning approach utilized in creating a plan for a more walkable community in West Hyattsville and discusses the issues that arose in the process. It will address the questions raised in the panel description and thus generate a discussion about how we understand, engage and plan for multi-cultural and new immigrant populations.

INTRODUCTION

Many communities across the U.S. are looking for ways to redesign their urban structure to make walking and bicycling a normal part of everyday life. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) calls these places “Active Community Environments,” or “Healthy Communities” and is promoting active living through community design as a way to combat increased levels of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and stress in children, teens and adults. In the U.S., the incidence of overweight adults increased from 47% in 1976 to 61% in 1999 but in children and adolescents the prevalence of obesity doubled in the same period. In the last 25 years, in particular, Americans have become more sedentary as our communities have been predominantly designed around the automobile. Many communities do not provide safe, convenient access for a pedestrian, which is essential to creating more livable communities. Furthermore, they often lack: alternative transportation facilities, land use planning that promotes compact development, convenient links to schools and public facilities, adequate provision of recreation, parks and trails, and programs to address community safety and crime prevention. However, these are all important components of walkable communities.

Various public agencies in Maryland are pursuing community design and planning strategies that promote new urban patterns that are described by a plethora of buzz phrases: “Walkable Communities,” “Livable Communities,” “Smart Growth Neighborhoods,” “New Urbanism Neighborhoods,” “Pedestrian Pockets,” “Sustainable Communities.” In some part, this is a response to local advocacy planning and changing demographic patterns that call for the development of communities with compact, affordable, mixed-use housing, with comfortable pedestrian access to employment, retail and regional transit centers and with improved recreational facilities and schools. In an attempt to put together new planning strategies to address these concerns, stakeholders in the process face many challenges.

THE WEST HYATTSVILLE COMMUNITY

The West Hyattsville community extends over Wards 4 and 5 of the City of Hyattsville. It is poised for significant change since it has been recently designated as one of the county’s TODZs (Transit Oriented Development Zone). It is located within the Capital Beltway about 2 miles outside Washington, D.C. and 2.5 miles from the University of Maryland’s College Park Campus. As part of a strategic TOD planning program of Prince George’s County, West Hyattsville is envisioned as the county’s first mixed-use, transit village development. Prince George’s County officials desire this type of development to eventually be extended to all 14 Metrorail stations in the county. The County is promoting Transit Oriented Development as one that includes, “compatible moderate to higher density

development, located within an easy walk of a major transit stop, generally with a mix of residential, employment and shopping opportunities, designed for pedestrians without excluding the auto” (Parsons-Brinckerhoff, et. al, 2003).

Within the community of West Hyattsville, a 60-acre site of under-developed land exists adjacent to the West Hyattsville Metrorail Station. The city was interested in development options for this land, which lies within a community in need of larger revitalization efforts. The City’s strategy was based on the hope that innovative development of this parcel would “jump start” revitalization efforts that would later extend to other parts of the community. The site lies within a community with a unique set of opportunities and constraints. One of the most significant opportunities is its location adjacent to the floodplain and creek alignments of the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River and Sligo Creek that includes a public park network and various sports and natural recreation features. This location prompted community leaders to envision a mixed-use TOD model focused around a Riverwalk, similar to the community-led model in Naperville, IL. Other opportunities include a local commitment to “smart growth” and a history of public participation in community affairs (Murphy, 2003). However, the site is surrounded by underutilized commercial areas with marginal uses, run-down or vacant buildings, a perception that the area is plagued by crime, and various aging mid-rise housing developments creating a public image that has generated many obstacles for reinvestment in the community. Furthermore, the community’s streetscapes are very auto-oriented, engineered so that traffic can quickly pass through the area and thus not supportive of local businesses nor pedestrians.

While the challenges presented by disinvestment and image problems have affected the city’s ability to attract middle and upper income families to West Hyattsville, many others have been attracted by its affordability, the diversity of the population and a sense of community that often brings people together to solve problems or explore issues. A few demographic descriptors are noteworthy in understanding some of the community revitalization challenges for West Hyattsville, a community where almost half of the residents are renters, not homeowners. Family median income is \$45,355, well below the State average, more than 10% of families do not own an automobile and more than 20% take public transportation to work.¹

In West Hyattsville, nearly 30% of the population is foreign born with half of those community residents having arrived to the USA within the last 10 years. In looking at race as an indicator of cultural diversity in West Hyattsville, we see a population characterized as 25% White, 55% African American, 3% Asian, and 16% Hispanic. In addition, 10% of residents described themselves as multi-racial, a mix of two or more

racers. In establishing participatory process, language barriers can present unique challenges. Almost 27% of residents do not speak English in the home with 17% speaking Spanish and 13% reporting they do not speak English “very well” (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).²

COMMUNITY DESIGN PROCESS

The University of Maryland, through the Community Design Studio of the Landscape Architecture Program, was asked to assist the City of Hyattsville by preparing a plan to outline strategies to create a more livable, walkable community and to generate ideas for the development of a Riverwalk and mixed-use TOD on the 60 acre-site. The project approach included the following phases: Case Study Research, Community Analysis, Participatory Community Design Workshops, Design Recommendations, Report Preparation (Hill, 2003), and a final presentation to the community.

Phase One: Case Study Research - Development of an Educational Product focused on “Livable, Walkable Communities”

Students conducted research on model communities where walking and bicycling is a normal part of everyday life. The first phase of the project outlined what “model” communities could look like and lessons that can be drawn from them. The focus was a comprehensive one that included: alternative transportation facilities, land use planning and compact development, links to schools and public facilities, provision of recreation, parks and trails, and issues of safety and crime prevention. The case study research phase provided education and inspiration to both students in the community design studio class and community stakeholders that participated in the community workshops. The six students in the class presented the results of their research in an educational session that was part of the community workshop on March 15, 2003.

Phase Two: Analysis of Existing Conditions - Community Inventory, Analysis

This phase included the development of a series of maps, community analysis, community audits and studies that identified existing conditions within the community and outlined the opportunities and constraints that these present. Students conducted inventory and analysis of existing conditions in the community and produced the following products:

1. G.I.S. Maps that show existing community infrastructure within the larger Hyattsville community.
2. Community Studies within West Hyattsville including:
 - a survey of community residents to reflect community preferences and prioritize community design issues

- interviews with community “key informants” (community leaders, government officials, local police, religious leaders, etc.)
- an assessment of walkability as related to open space, recreation and the design of the existing streetscape environment.

Phase Three: Participatory Community Workshops

A community charrette was organized to gain input and provide design and planning education to community members on the topic of increasing walkability in West Hyattsville. During this workshop students presented the results of their case study research and the identification of opportunities and constraints that arose from the analysis of existing conditions. With the help of two professional landscape architects, Dr. Shenglin Chang and Ms. Renee Bartnick that facilitated the input from community members, participants shared ideas for increasing livability and walkability in West Hyattsville.

Phase Four: Development of a series of design recommendations for major “Windows of Opportunity”

In this phase, students provided a series of drawings and sketches that demonstrated the potential for re-design that exists in order to make West Hyattsville a more walkable, livable community. The specific sites that were the focus of these design recommendations are those that were identified by the workshop participants as being particularly important to increasing walkability and livability in Hyattsville. With only six students in the class, we outlined six project areas and prepared community revitalization strategies for each of these.

PRIORITIES IDENTIFIED THROUGH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Results of Interviews and Community Survey

A survey of residents, business owners, and community leaders was conducted in order to identify community needs and preferences. The survey was translated into Spanish and distributed in both languages throughout the community. More detailed interviews were conducted with local officials, business owners, and community leaders to gain additional insight. Ultimately more than seventy-five interviews and surveys were completed, and the following is a summary of the major findings.

The residents of Hyattsville voiced a number of concerns about their community including safety and crime issues, inadequate public amenities, and the lack of a strong and positive community identity. When asked, “Which aspects of Hyattsville do you find least appealing?” the community mentioned excessive crime, poor land use, too much traffic, and a lack of commercial amenities. The community also voiced concerns about the

existing lack of pedestrian amenities, a lack of housing options and job opportunities, visual blight, and out-dated parks.

During the surveys and interviews, the lack of a strong community identity was stated as a recurring issue. The community image is not well represented in the existing conditions along U. S. Route 1, Queens Chapel Road, Hamilton Street, as well as several other major circulation routes. The most common suggestions of how to improve the image and identity of the community were: revitalizing vacant lots, preserving and enhancing the historical core of houses, decreasing apartment buildings and increasing condominium communities, and offering incentives for residential and commercial owners to enhance their properties.

The community also expressed the need for inviting commercial spaces and improved transportation options. Lack of commercial amenities was the fourth most popular response among those surveyed or interviewed when asked what is least appealing about Hyattsville. One community re-design goal stated by the community was the need to establish Hyattsville as a destination point, not just a place that you drive through on

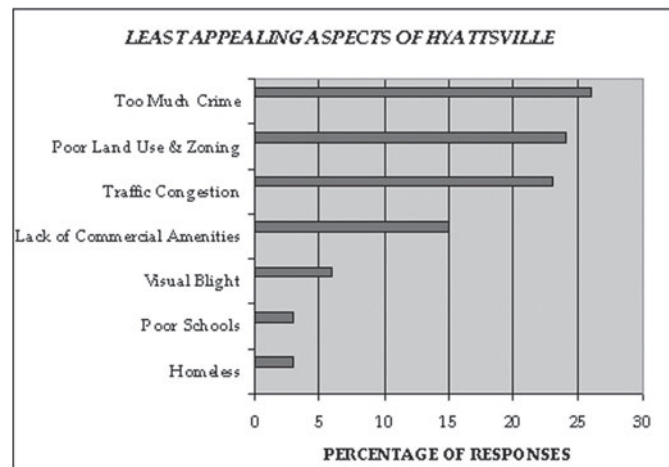


Figure 1. Least appealing aspects of Hyattsville.

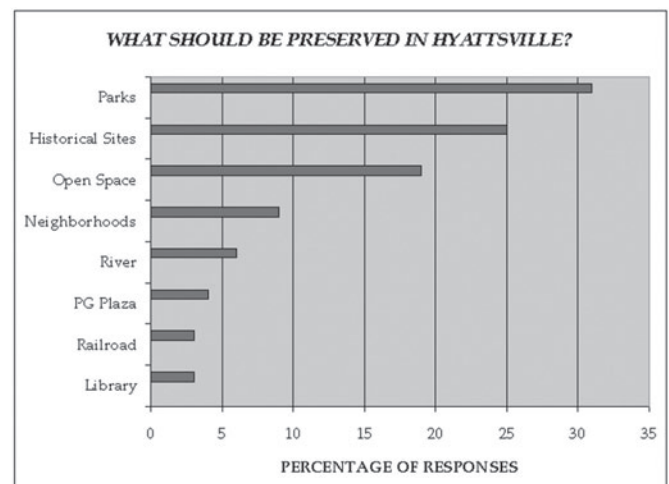


Figure 2. What should be preserved in Hyattsville.

your way to somewhere else. It was suggested that this could be accomplished by increasing commercial establishments, particularly retail stores, restaurants, and entertainment spots. Increasing public transportation options was also recommended as a strategy to alleviate traffic congestion. More specific suggestions included improved local bus and shuttle service, improved sidewalks, bus stops & benches.

In order to make Hyattsville a safer place to live and work, the community suggested revitalizing vacant lots and run-down properties. They also identified the need to increase the activity and visibility of the police, especially in isolated areas and parks. Some of the community voiced the need to establish a responsive and active local government. The community would like to see improved communication between city administration and the public, increased funding for youth and senior programs, and a more entrepreneurial spirit in local government.

When asked what spaces in Hyattsville were most valuable to the community, the most popular answers were the parks, open spaces and local historical sites. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed or interviewed named these places as sites to be preserved.

When asked to rate community amenities such as schools, parks, and shopping establishments, respondents voiced satisfaction with amenities such as schools and libraries, the post office, parks, and transit services. Amenities that are in

need of improvement include entertainment establishments, restaurants, pedestrian amenities, and job opportunities.

Through the surveying and interviewing process, the community was asked to identify what services were lacking in Hyattsville, as well as suggestions as to what the local government could do to improve the community. The services people identified to be most lacking included commercial amenities and adequate crime prevention, representing over forty percent of all responses. Other services that respondents would like to see include: more public transportation options, traffic calming, community services, recreational centers, affordable housing, and improved parks. Respondents felt that the most important thing that government could do to improve Hyattsville was to increase crime prevention efforts.

While the primary mode of transportation for half of the respondents is the car, over 25% mentioned community problems related to traffic congestion. Increasing the number and variety of transportation options available would reduce the number of vehicles on the road and make Hyattsville more inviting to pedestrians. Widening sidewalks, improving lighting, and enhancing landscaping would create a more inviting pedestrian zone, and enhancing crosswalks and incorporating traffic calming devices would make it a safer place.

Various community residents mentioned that reducing visual blight should start with the revitalization of vacant lots. This would increase activity throughout the community and create

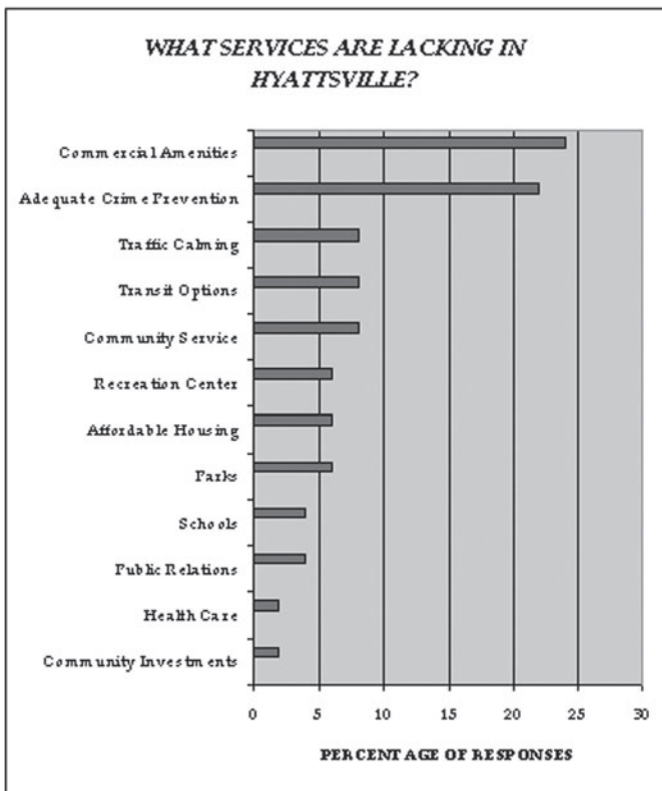


Figure 3. What services are lacking in Hyattsville.

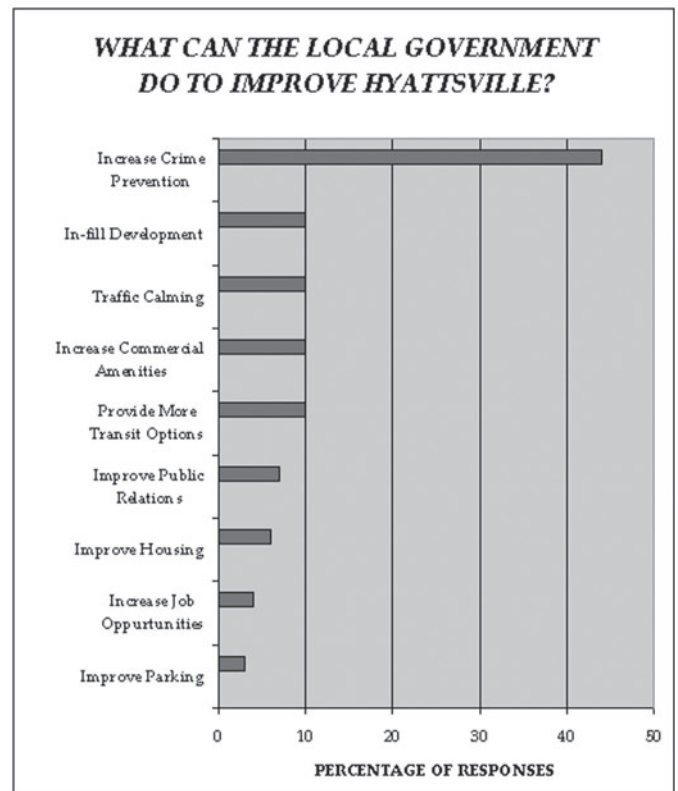


Figure 4. What can local government do to improve the community.

more high-use spaces. Others mentioned the impact of large, unsightly parking lots. A number of respondents also mentioned problems associated with underused parks that needed updating.

Results of Community Workshop

A community workshop was conducted with local residents and community leaders with a series of exercises that assisted them in envisioning ideas for a revitalized, more walkable West Hyattsville. This workshop occurred on March 15, 2003 at the Hyattsville Municipal Building where over 20 community stakeholders participated.

Students made a presentation on the characteristics of an “active community environment,” which included case studies from successful mixed-use and pedestrian friendly communities. Students presented the results of the survey and interviews with Hyattsville area residents and key informants. Students also presented opportunities and constraints that resulted from their community-wide inventory and analysis. This analysis focused on the public spaces within West Hyattsville, especially the streetscape environment and open space networks. After the students’ presentation, a question and answer period followed with current and former mayors, council members and residents.

Following the question and answer period, attendees of the workshop were divided into two focus groups. Both groups were provided with large-format maps of the project area and markers. A group facilitator led the discussion and kept each team on task. The first exercise was to establish goals concerning West Hyattsville’s revitalization. As group members made comments and suggestions, one or two people translated the comments into graphical form on the map. Next, objectives were established. These objectives described how the community’s goals would be achieved. In these two exercises, participants could choose from a range of goals and objectives that had been mentioned in the survey and interview phase, or they could outline them and others and prioritize them. The last exercise was the discussion of design strategies. Here, participants were asked for specific design ideas and indicated where in the project area these ideas should be carried out.

While discussions were lively and different opinions were raised in regard to desired densities, the following goals were identified as being most important to achieve in terms of community revitalization of West Hyattsville:

- Focus on the pedestrian instead of the car
- Provide more active community centers and playgrounds
- Develop local transit to provide transport from Metro to home/shopping

- Develop reforestation program for Northwest Branch of Anacostia River
- Encourage more diversity of land uses and less chain stores

In the discussion of community design suggestions to improve the physical environment of West Hyattsville, a number of specific elements were identified as priorities:

- New bike trails, pedestrian trails, crosswalks, sidewalks, medians, traffic calming and landscape improvements at specific points identified by the participants
- Reforestation and native tree plantings
- Increased density and mix of uses close to Metro with pedestrian promenade
- Active public green spaces, “sensory gardens,” restorative planting
- Infill development to minimize impact of large parking lots
- Community gateway

At the conclusion of the workshop, students were able to take suggestions from the community and synthesize them with their own design skills as they entered the design phase of the West Hyattsville revitalization project. The input from the workshops, surveys and interviews were incorporated into design strategies for six areas of West Hyattsville that were identified by workshop participants as having the most potential for improvement or transformation. They were: Prince George’s Plaza, Queens Chapel Road Streetscape, Hamilton Street Infill Development and Streetscape, West Hyattsville Riverwalk Proposal, and the West Hyattsville Town Center. During the design phase, various community leaders were invited to the studio to comment on the design work in process, a presentation of student’s design ideas was scheduled three weeks before the final community presentation so that students would get feedback before their design ideas were finalized. This formal critique session included jurors from the professional community, as well as, other landscape architecture faculty, and community representatives.

REFLECTIONS ON PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

In order to understand, engage and plan for a population that is culturally different from the planning and design team, our intent was to structure a participatory process that involves the community in a range of settings with multiple methodologies and across the various stages of the project. In this way, our goal was to engage as many perspectives as possible within a limited time frame. Since the demographic research pointed to potential language barriers, we were prepared to work in two languages: English and Spanish. Since personal conflicts limit people’s participation in workshops, we attempted

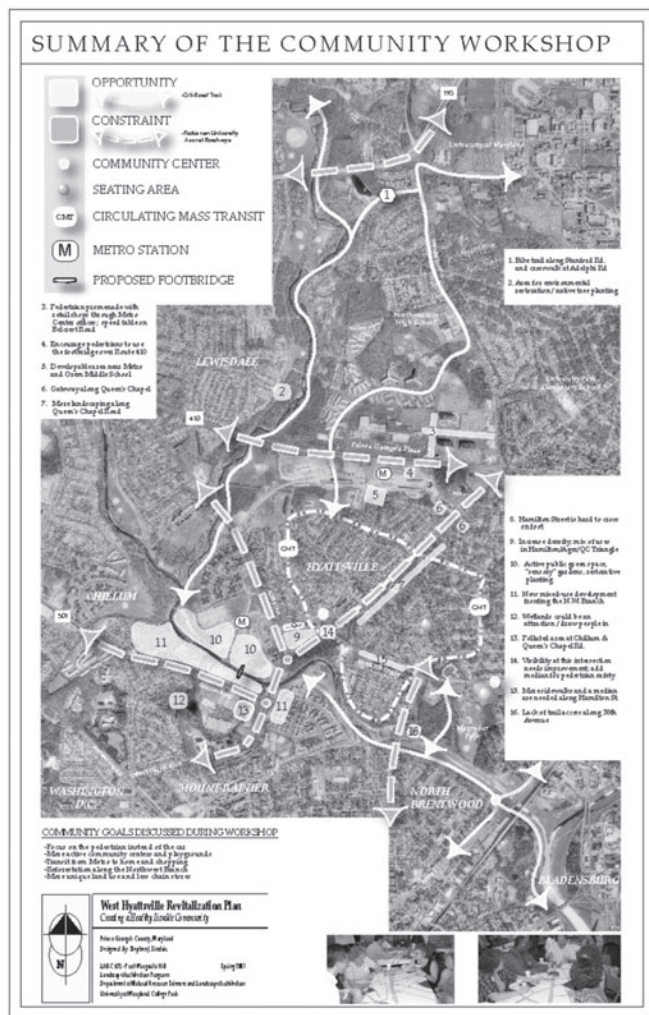


Figure 5. Summary of Community Workshop.

multiple methods of engagement and communication including e-mail, phone, visits to workplaces, places of worship, places frequented in the community (grocery stores, popular restaurants, laundry, library, etc.).

In a community design setting that creates a partnership between communities and the university, a number of challenges are introduced into the participatory planning and design process. While partners share the ultimate goal of generating planning and design strategies that are sensitive to unique cultural and environmental opportunities and constraints of the community, participation goals differ across different stakeholder interests. Students are attempting to increase their learning and professional development skills. They value learning methods that allow them to gain insights that are outside of their understanding, in particular, when they come from different cultural and socio-economic experiences. Faculty are experimenting with different models, pushing the boundaries of what we know, and looking for better teaching and planning methods. Community members have an inherent interest in having a voice in the development process, making

sure their specific needs are met. Some political or community leaders may have an interest in the participatory process only to meet the legislated mandate for it, others may be trying to get support for specific ideas that are part of their political agenda, while others are negotiating with different interest groups in their community to understand where the larger community consensus exists.

Another challenge that is part of this university-community participatory model is rooted in the question of how do we nurture a commitment to service and civic engagement in the context of design and planning education. Inherent in the process is reflection on a range of civic issues including: social justice, environmental justice, social change, community voice (Who decides what the “common good” is), democratized access to information, and the redefined relationship between the “professional” and the community stakeholder as a reciprocal process of exchange of information and resources. Students are given the opportunity to engage with multiple players in local problem solving exercises. This allows students to hear and consider the voices of their fellow classmates and of their fellow citizens as part of the design and planning process and allows them to directly experience how this shapes the development of the physical landscape in addressing community issues. It allows the development of specific skills and competencies related to the landscape architecture discipline that are rooted in a service model (intellectual skills, participation skills, action-research skills, design & planning skills, communication skills) but that establish a reciprocal process where all the participants are both learners and teachers.

In a reciprocal educational model, the process flows in multiple directions, engaging multiple players: students, professors, professionals, community members, and government representatives. Students, acting as the professional team, learn from community members as they engage them in interviews, surveys, and by working with them during the community workshops and in their design process. They also become educators as they share what they have learned through their community analysis and case study research with community members. The interim design critiques are designed to include community residents and professional designers. This event becomes a learning tool, not only for the students, but also for the community members who hear a critique of the students’ design approaches from a professional perspective. The dialogue allows community members to be exposed to a process of design inquiry that is different from the one they experience in talking to other community members. In some ways, this becomes another educational tool that may be helpful in future evaluations of design and planning proposals in their community.

CONCLUSIONS

While the cross-cultural community participation model for design and planning outlined here in this paper, has many benefits for all of the stakeholders in the process it also has many challenges.

One benefit is the enhancement of students' personal growth and professional development that occurs while developing a commitment to service and civic engagement. In this regard, I believe the university can play an active role in civic renewal by engaging students in their communities and encouraging them to think critically about the importance of civil society and their roles as citizens in the democratic process. This is particularly relevant for landscape architecture students who will one day interface with the public as design and planning professionals. This experience can foster a sense of civic responsibility in landscape architecture students, so that they not only become prepared for professional careers but they are able to channel their knowledge and skills to promote the "common good" and to help solve public problems by engaging diverse partnerships.

There are obvious benefits to the community partners who benefit from a range of planning and design services. Sometimes these services assist communities in achieving physical change in their communities. Other times the process becomes an important fund-raising tool to support revitalization efforts; and other times the process is an important part of the community dialogue that occurs to focus community priorities and identifies issues that need further work and collaboration. The dissemination efforts related to this work help illustrate to the larger, local community the potential role that the university can play as a partner in civil society efforts. These partnerships not only provide much needed design and planning service to communities but also fulfill the university's interest in inquiry, innovation, education and service.

However, there are many challenges that occur when planning and design services are structured as part of the university teaching environment. One of the challenges is presented by the limited time frame of the studio environment. Sometimes the studio ends while there are continuing needs to refine the planning and design process for the community partner. Other challenges are presented by the struggle of the student professional planning team as they strive to overcome stereotypes presented by their preconceptions of underprivileged communities especially as they have been portrayed through the local media. There is also the constant balancing act that occurs as the instructor struggles to introduce students to a range of skills (GIS, community analysis, demographics, participatory process, design) while providing community service and relating to the client needs that are inherent in that relationship.

ENDNOTES

¹ The City of Hyattsville is characterized by 48.9% renter occupied housing units and 51.1% owner occupied. In Hyattsville 21.1% take public transportation to work and 13.4% do not own a car. This compared to the county statistics where 11.9% take public transportation to work and 10.5% do not own a car. In the neighboring, more affluent Montgomery County, only 7.5% of households do not own a car. Median income for households in the State of Maryland is \$52,868 while in Prince George's County it is \$55,256. This is in contrast to the median income in Montgomery County, which is \$71,551. (U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2000).

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