

MULTIPLE PUBLICS, URBAN DESIGN AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Assessing Participation in the Plaza del Colibrí

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ABSTRACT

Contributions from cultural and feminist studies raise fundamental issues about contemporary culture as expressed between different social groups and epistemological problems associated with universal claims about the public sphere. At the heart of these critiques is the interrogation of relationships between subject and object, and distinctions between diverse forms of knowledge. However, lacking is a related account of the design profession and the normative relationships that exists between experts and non-experts, professionals and clients. This paper introduces some of these recent debates as a critique of conventional approaches to participation in the design of the public realm. Using the case study of a renovated transit hub, I introduce the term multiple publics to highlight the value of inclusiveness in urban open space projects. In doing so, I argue for strategies that begin with difference as a starting point in the design of public space.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the existence of a variety of methods and techniques associated with citizen participation, the design of the public realm is often tailored to the tastes and preferences of cultural, economic, and professional elites. This often results in projects that do not meet the needs of the poorest and most marginalized citizens. As such, public space can be viewed as a material expression of 'actually existing democracy' (Mitchell, 2003). However, as citizen participation in the design of public landscapes increases in importance, how are different voices expressed and what is the role of planning and design professionals in an increasing pluralistic and global culture?

This paper introduces some of these recent theoretical debates as a way to problematize conventional and functionalist approaches to participation in the design and production of the public realm. A case study of a renovated transit hub in San Francisco is presented that involved a range of stakeholders including advocates for universal accessibility, the homeless,

youth, older adults, and artists in a gentrifying Latino neighborhood.¹ The existence of overlapping jurisdictions also required the collaboration of several government agencies at the local and regional levels. After introducing contributions from other fields, I identify the limits of the current model of citizen participation that often emphasizes manufactured consensus and conflict avoidance. The case study is then presented as an illustration of an alternative model of citizen participation in the design of urban open spaces.

SITUATED KNOWLEDGE, THIRD SPACE, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Feminist and cultural theory raise fundamental issues about contemporary culture as expressed between different social groups and the epistemological problems associated with universal claims about the public sphere. In some of the discussion on the topic there has been a spatial turn, both metaphorically and materially, that introduces concepts such as situated, hybrid, in-between, and third spaces to describe the social and cultural condition of marginalized groups (Haraway, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996). Rather than viewing culture as a fixed object or dependent on relationships that privilege dominant groups, some argue that identities can not be assigned pre-given traits, but rather are mutable and fluid processes of negotiation; performative rather than fixed (Bhabha, 1994). Similarly, the term third space has been used by others to disrupt dualistic epistemologies such as space and time, real and imagined geographies (Pile, 1994; Soja, 1996). In material terms, third spaces are produced by processes that move beyond forms of knowledge which divide the world into dualistic, binary relationships (Johnston, Gregory, Pratt, and Watts, 2000).

More recently, geographer Don Mitchell draws on Henri Lefebvre's 'right to the city' to discuss the struggle over social justice (2002). Mitchell argues that such a right is dependent upon public space—how it is produced, who can make claims for its use, and ultimately as an expression of a truly democratic society. He critiques (neo)liberal urban reforms which increasingly seek 'order' as a purposeful strategy to police who has the right to inhabit public space. In opposition to the commodification and securitization of the public realm, Mitchell calls for continued struggles over public space as a fundamental right that is a defining characteristic of citizenship. An essential part of Mitchell's argument is the multiplicity of the public realm and the importance of different (political) identities in the appropriation and production of public space. It is the right to the city and the existence of multiple publics which serve as the basis to critique the current model of citizen participation in the design and creation of public spaces.

THE LIMITS OF THE CURRENT PARTICIPATORY MODEL

The exclusionary practice of citizen participation

Public participation has been an important mechanism for social groups to influence the making of public space. Emerging from the civil rights movement as a response to the lack of public involvement in decision-making, participatory planning and design has been the primary means for responding to the pressing needs of marginalized populations. As a result, many methods and techniques have been developed intended to involve different groups in decision-making.² However, despite these efforts the design profession is silent when it comes to recognizing its complicity in promoting an exclusionary public realm. While attempts are made to seek input from the public, it is often the case that genuine public discussion is limited.

Many of the methods and techniques used in participatory process are now used as a form of placation to manufacture consensus rather than a means to enter into a meaningful dialogue about conflicts and differences between a range of participants, professionals, and other stakeholders in public processes (Lake, 1994). This often bounds the discussion of public concerns and priorities to certain social groups over others. As a result, public participation has become a highly bureaucratic, standardized and disingenuous process.³ These issues raise concern about contemporary citizen participation which assumes a universal and neutral framework for decision-making. From this perspective, a value system that privileges rational discourse over conflict and difference can be viewed as a form of oppression (Sandercock, 2000). By taking on an increasingly narrowed scope and by focusing primarily on the binary interaction between professionals and clients, public and private sectors, the dominant participatory model has overlooked the broader issues of identity, representation, and agency within the broader political and cultural economy. Together, these inadequacies have greatly limited the effectiveness and legitimacy of participatory approaches and the role of design professionals. Approaching public process from a position of neutrality, design professionals often overlook their own inherent biases and how these values contribute to promoting a universal and totalizing public realm.

Multiple publics

The concept of multiple publics provides an analytical concept from which to begin to theorize the possibilities for an alternative practice of urban design. To begin with, it questions the idea of a singular, liberal, public realm which purports to be the forum where all citizens come together to discuss matters of common interest and concern. In critiquing Habermas's conception of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser (1990) observes that "we can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a

masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule" (1990: p. 204). Fraser proposes the creation of 'subaltern publics' comprised of different social groups with their own unique claims and epistemology. To Fraser "the idea of an egalitarian, multi-cultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics" (p. 212). Fraser's 'subaltern publics' draws consistent parallels with other feminist scholars which argue the importance of social difference in public decision-making (Young, 1990, 2000). Heterogeneity and multiplicity in the public sphere presupposes openness to social difference as a starting point for discussions concerning the public.⁴ However, discourses concerning citizen participation within the design and planning professions primarily center on consensus and agreement. Conflict is to be avoided and clear boundaries are drawn between participants and professional facilitators. Rarely do professionals question the boundedness, both of problem statement and physical extent, of public projects.

To move beyond these limitations, arguments are being made for rights-based models of planning and design that begin with cultural and social difference (Sandercock, 1998, 2000; Mitchell, 2002). However, some might ask, is it possible to overcome social differences to identify commonality among multiple publics? As the following case study illustrates, participatory process that emphasize social group differences can achieve this goal, and in doing so, also facilitates dialogue about larger, global issues (Friedmann, 1987; Miller and Eleveld, 2000). In practical terms, such outcomes can enable policy reform and the changing of institutional procedures that involve the public in democratic decision-making.

CASE STUDY: PLAZA DEL COLIBRÍ

The Re-making of the Mission District

The Mission District is home to about 60,000 residents, or 8% of San Francisco's population (U.S. Census, 2000). It is easily accessible to downtown and includes several major transportation hubs including Bay Area Rapid Transit and multiple bus lines. Mission Street is the main corridor running north and south through the district, which intersects with 16th Street, a major transfer point for regional and citywide transit. The Mission is also the cultural center for the larger Bay Area Latino population, and is the historical location for immigrant arrivals including an influx of Latino immigrants after 1950. However, by the mid to late 1990's, there was a sense among long-time Bay Area residents that the social landscape was changing. People were less empathetic to the acute social problems of the Mission including homelessness, drugs, and gang violence (Solnit, 2000). For a variety of cultural and economic reasons, the neighborhood had become a desirable



Figure 1. A homeless man lies on the plaza while police officers stand in the background watching a parade go by. (Source: Michael Rios)

location for residence and night life. Proximity to downtown, accessibility to transportation, a pleasant micro-climate, and an abundance of warehouse spaces attracted outside investment from individual builders and real estate agents alike.

It is against this backdrop that a group of non-profit organizations and local activists began a discussion about recent transformations of the Mission District and how a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station located at the corner of 16th and Mission Streets became a magnet for displaced and homeless populations. Some residents believed this was the cause of drug dealing and other illicit activity on the station's plaza, and that part of the problem was attributable to the design and layout of the BART plaza.

Engaging Difference

Beginning in 1996, a series of community meetings and workshops were held to address community-wide concern about the declining conditions at 16th and Mission Streets.⁵ Among the original participants were non-profit organizations,



Figure 2. Three-dimensional models were used to facilitate small group discussion and enable workshops participants to develop design and programmatic ideas for the plaza. (Source: Michael Rios)

social service providers, police officers, residents, and public agency representatives. To broaden the outreach to low income and non-represented groups, a series of focus group meetings were held with hotel tenants, the physically and mentally challenged, artists, senior citizens, and local youth. The purpose of these meetings was to identify issues particular to these groups and to encourage participation in subsequent community meetings. These groups confirmed the wider concern about the deteriorating conditions of the transit plazas surrounding the station and a desire to see this open space improved. From these meetings emerged particular concerns as experienced by these different groups as well as a list of solutions for improving the station. Based on this vital information, further site assessment, and subsequent workshops inclusive of focus group participants, a series of design principles were established to respond to site conditions and the multiplicity of groups actually using the plazas, albeit for different reasons. Three principles guided the design: increasing accessibility and choices, improving visibility and connectivity, and encouraging a diverse range of activities and people on the plazas.

Legitimizing difference

One of the outcomes of the focus groups was the ability to openly discuss issues not directly tied to the project. Many hotel tenants identified police harassment as a major safety concern. Advocates for universal accessibility were able to identify specific issues particular to the visually and hearing impaired as well as individuals using wheelchairs, such as poor sight lines and head-high hazards. For local artists, many were troubled about the growing gentrification in the neighborhood, its effect on the community's identity, and the lack of public places to express dissent.

Acknowledging special needs of different plaza users, the conversation broadened to include a multitude of identities and interests. As one of the project team volunteers noted, "there was an understanding that there were different publics and that conversation had to happen early on between the different publics." With each subsequent workshop, interest from the neighborhood grew. The local newspaper began promoting the project and encouraging people to participate (New Mission News, 1998). Many were pleased that Mission Housing, a community-based organization, led the project. In addition to organizing the initial focus group meetings, Mission Housing reached out to a significant Latino community which comprised the Mission District. Special attention was given to encouraging participation from this group and included bi-lingual translations and providing daycare at meetings and workshops. Urban Ecology, the initial planning consultant representing urban design, land use and transportation interests also aided in outreach efforts. The organization conducted surveys during

different times of the day and week to gain an understanding how the space was used by transit riders.

There was general agreement that the plaza was going to be an inclusive space. A design team volunteer and resident of the Mission noted that “because of who the lead partners were in this particular process, they were able to turn out a wider range of folks– the more marginalized folks who use the plaza or live nearby in residential hotels.” Revealing to many was how this urban open served a vital function for many living in the neighborhood:

One of the things for instance that came out, one of the aspects of SRO’s (single room occupancy hotels), is that people who live in SRO’s are not allowed to have people in their rooms and they have no living room or community facilities, so they have no place to go other than their room. So I think the plaza is in fact a place where people can be comfortable and hang out and visit and just watch the parade that goes by and goes on there 24 hours a day.

The responsiveness of public agency officials and staff was a surprise for community members, and in many ways, agency representatives were viewed as equal participants in the process. In the course of the project, the agencies increasingly served in roles unfamiliar to them– that of advocate and facilitator– despite that the project was being managed by several non-profit organizations. “In a way the agencies are not the public, but they are a public in this conversation,” as one participant noted. This sentiment was confirmed by an agency representative: “Institutionally, we were doing something we’ve never done before... we had no control over who was going to be designing the thing or how it was going to go forward, so we were forging new territory.” This initially provided a challenge to many of the agencies which had not worked collaboratively with one another:

You step into a setting where nobody is in charge...you got the regional agency and the other guys and everybody



Figure 3. The symbol of the hummingbird is culturally significant for immigrants and migrant workers. (Source: Michael Rios)

kind of coming on with their own perspective you’re bound to run into some.... At least lack of clarity and that can generate conflict. It can generate conflict also in terms of internal agency priorities.

However, despite these hurdles the different agencies were able to move forward, and in the end, embraced community participation as a vital aspect in realizing the project to its completion.

While the outcome of the process helped to solidify support for the project, it also validated regional efforts to support neighborhood transit improvements in the urban core. As a recipient of funds from a newly funded transit enhancement program of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), the project helped to serve as a demonstration of a successful community participation process and was used as a model for subsequent projects funded under the program. Plaza del Colibrí was also the first completed project under the program and served as one agency representative noted “a major poster child” for transportation sales tax re-authorization in the region. Funding for MTC’s transportation program, which started with less than \$12 million in 1998, has increased to over \$50 million and includes funding for community planning, capital projects, and transit-related housing (MTC, 2004). The project also served to change many policies and procedures of the participating agencies. “The fact that this project was in essence designed by the public was something really new for BART,” commented one of the BART Board Directors. “It began a process of reinventing the way we plan and think of our existing stations (and) has really transformed the organization of BART.”

Materializing difference

What started out as a minor transportation improvement became a viable public open space to serve different users. To create a new image for the plaza, the project team conscientiously sought out the involvement of local artists.



Figure 4. Colorful papel picado was chosen as a detail for railing surrounding the BART entry. (Source: Michael Rios)

Using symbols and colors familiar to the predominately Latino and immigrant population, local artists helped to re-imagine the space to be culturally relevant to the community. For example, hummingbirds, which are featured in the detailing of new handrail panels and a community board, migrate between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. They also symbolize migrant workers which speaks to the history of Mission District as the home to many Irish, Latino, and more recently, Asian immigrants.⁶ Additional features included the use of vibrant colors for the railing panels which were designed to mimic *papel picado*, or paper cutting, which is used for neighborhood festivals, celebrations and special occasions.

An assessment of the improvements after the year the plaza was formally dedicated, indicates that most, if not all, design criterion have been met.⁷ In addition to the well-integrated public art, the completed plaza addresses many functional aspects as well. This included improving visibility and accessibility, and encouraging a diverse range of activities and people on the plaza. Sight lines have dramatically improved to allow visibility across the plaza, and seating now accommodates a range of plaza users including residents, the homeless, youth, seniors and transit users. The usable space has been increased, eliminating pedestrian conflicts and providing ample space for a bus waiting area. Lighting has also been improved to address safety concerns and the use of the plaza at night.

Problems, real and perceived

A considerable amount of energy has gone into thinking about how to activate the plazas with different uses. Many, including the project team members, felt that the implementation of programmatic elements has been the most disappointing aspect of the project. Several local art groups were invited to assume responsibility for programming rotating art exhibits in the plaza space. A community arts board was designed and equipped to provide space for this function. However, as one of the individuals managing the project confessed, “there was really no art association that would step forward to play the



Figure 6. The inclusion of vending is intended to activate the plaza space. On opening day, local organizations were encouraged to sell food and other items for their own fundraising purposes. (Source: Michael Rios)

institutional role that was expected. They all sort of thought there were deep pockets and they should just get paid to show up for things.” In another instance, participants wanted to ensure that the space could also accommodate an outdoor market. Specific equipment was installed for such purposes including water taps, electrical outlets, phone jacks, as well as a secure space for storage and. However, institutional barriers and rigid permit requirements of both BART and the City of San Francisco, has prevented vendors from using the plazas to date. Some feel that the space is ready to receive these uses and it is only a matter of time before these and other programmatic issues will be addressed. The fact that the process allowed these ideas to be discussed and considered, down to equipping the plaza with water and electricity, should not be overlooked. In 2003, the project was recognized with a San Francisco Beautiful award, the only transportation project in the city to win this award.

DISCUSSION

Despite the increasing importance of citizen participation in urban design projects, this case study illustrates the complexity of participation in diverse settings. In an increasingly pluralistic society, approaches to community participation in the design of public landscapes need to be equally plural. In the case of



Figure 5. The redesign of the plaza increases visibility, increases the usable square footage of the plaza surface, and provides for a range of seating choices. (Source: Michael Rios)



Figure 7. Plaza del Colibri serves a variety of uses and users including a space for gathering and relaxation. (Source: Michael Rios)

Plaza del Colibrí, defining the public in terms of its multiplicity enabled a range of diverse interests and actors to find successful solutions that satisfy both individual group and collective goals. In addition to physical changes that responded to participant goals, the process also yielded changes to institutional procedures and served as a demonstration project which informed regional transportation policy leading to increased funding for such projects.

Transit stations represent a significant component of the public realm, both in terms of the amount of people that use public transit as well as the level of resources invested in related infrastructure. Despite trends toward privatization and consumption, transit stations serve a vital public function, that of providing mobility to all citizens. As such, spaces of mobility can also be viewed as places of struggle, resistance, and hopefully democracy, in an era when the public realm is quickly disappearing.

As public space is being transformed into privatized enclaves for consumption on one hand and made more 'secure' by government regimes on the other, a critical form of urban design practice is urgently needed. As this case study illustrates, engaging difference in the planning and design of urban open space can advance the goal of democracy, not only in terms of participation but also in terms of the production of meaning for different social groups.

Another important issue that this case study raises is the changing roles of different actors from the public and non-profit sectors. It would appear that historical state functions such as planning and implementation are being transferred to governance networks that blend elements of civil society and the state. More studies are needed to explore this changing relationship and the consideration of these actors as equal participants in constituting 'an actually existing' public realm. In the end, are we not all citizens struggling to create democratic spaces?

ENDNOTES

¹ A longitudinal case study was undertaken that included pre-design site observations and an exit survey in 1996. Subsequent site observations of the completed project and semi-structured interviews with key informants were undertaken in May, 2004.

² See Sanoff, 2000.

³ For a similar critique of citizen participation, see Hou and Rios, 2003.

⁴ For a discussion on the topic of "difference", See Miller and Eleveld, 2000. The authors argue that "having differences" implies continuation of dialogue, as opposed to "being different" which implies essential characteristics that "prevent communication and cooperation" (2000: p. 89).

⁵ In total, the participatory process involved close to ten community workshops and presentations over the span of five years. A community advisory committee was created during the implementation phase,

representing individuals and organizations from throughout the neighborhood.

⁶ This is described in detail from a program handed out during the dedication of the plaza on May 17, 2003.

⁷ An on-site assessment and observations of plaza use was conducted between May 10-13, 2004.

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