

The Challenges of Citizen Participation

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The process of residents getting together with architects and planners to decide how they want their city to develop represents a relatively new orientation. Decisions about urban planning and development in the United States have traditionally been limited to the financially and politically powerful, and the professionals they hire. In fact, most of the developments that characterize Nashville--such as urban renewal and transportation infrastructure--were not based on any sort of public consensus, but were the result of decisions made from the top.

The Nashville Civic Design Center-- like other organizations employing innovative methodologies in urban design--has used its resources to push for an expanded role for people of diverse backgrounds in the planning of their city. The Plan of Nashville process is an example of the incorporation of citizen participation in the determination of a city's future. The staff and volunteers of the design center went out to the neighborhoods and asked questions, attempted to build consensus, then shaped the preferences and ideas with their own expertise.

Working for deeper democracy in an entrenched system of power, though, is never easy. Processes like this raise interesting questions. For instance, who were these residents that came to the meetings when the decisions were made? What was the nature of their experience? What about the people who didn't or couldn't show up? Were they aware of the meetings? Were some important viewpoints excluded from the process? What about disagreements? How is it possible to tell when residents have truly reached consensus, and when only the opinions of a particular demographic or vested interest are being captured?

The questions will multiply as this book is published and Nashville continues to grow and develop. Will the residents that contributed their efforts to the process recognize this new vision, which has been adapted by architects and designers? Will neighborhoods use the Plan to advocate for development that fits this vision? Will they stand up against those who do not develop according to the vision? Will they be successful in efforts to influence the city's development process? How closely will the Nashville of the future resemble this collective vision of what it could be?

As a step toward being able to effectively answer these questions, the design center has collaborated with us, community development researchers, in designing a survey for the Plan's participants. The survey will be made available shortly after the release of this book. The analysis of this data will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on participatory planning and design. Our hope is that our study of the Plan of Nashville process will contribute to the enhancement of the practice of participatory urban design, both in Nashville, and in other cities. We hope that this shift toward more egalitarian community development processes will continue, and we believe that the end result will be more interesting, beautiful, and livable cities.

The vision put forward by this book reflects the use of state of the art methodology, but the challenges of achieving genuine citizen participation in civic design and development are far from met. We look forward to being able to capture the experiences, characteristics, and opinions of the participants in the Plan, and to sharing our analyses of those data with those who wish to continue with this type of work.

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