

The Community Design Review Process

NEIGHBORS, BUSINESSES, taxpayers, end users, and other community stakeholders are assuming a more prominent role in planning and approving projects. In every major American city, formal design review panels are empowered to weigh in on the functional and aesthetic merits of proposed developments. Informal community stakeholder reviews are also becoming the norm, offering designers another opportunity to connect with this important constituency.

When the review process works well, everyone benefits. Owners and developers understand the value of creating lasting partnerships in the community. The design team gains a broader perspective and a new understanding of how a building affects others. The community, when invited to participate in decisions on how a project looks and works, benefits because residents and businesses become invested in the process and its ultimate success.

When approached in a collaborative framework, community participation should extend long past the initial design review and approval phase. For many large urban developments, it often continues throughout the entire design, permitting, construction, and occupancy cycle. Community stakeholders, too often seen by design professionals as needing only to be “informed” about a project at the front end, can be powerful allies and project advocates long after the initial input stage. Furthermore, community input often can enlighten the design process and add viable ideas that can be incorporated into the design solution.

The role of the design team is to help lead the community review and approval process, often with the aid of a local facilitator, and inspire participants to offer constructive input. As diplomacy and design converge

on urban projects today, there are several ways architects and urban designers can strengthen community dialogue and build lasting partnerships in the process.

Share It. Before a new project can ever be built, it needs to be understood, even embraced. For this to happen, its purpose, benefits, and long-term value need to be understood. A partnership needs to be formed with key stakeholders and community representatives.

In preparation for the community review process for renovating and rebuilding the African American Museum (AAMP) in Philadelphia, project stakeholders were asked to bring an item of great personal significance with them to the kickoff meeting. One by one, a succession of neighbors, businesspeople, community leaders, and benefactors shared their items and the stories behind them. One young woman showed slave papers that were handed down in her family for generations. Others produced cherished duotone photographs, and told the stories of their ancestors. This opening exchange tapped the power of storytelling to begin building a shared vision of a revitalized AAMP. From that first meeting on, the project’s public and community stakeholders became a vital extension of the design team.

Getting to consensus with complex projects requires a collaborative and transparent community review process. Project proponents, together with the design team, establish this transparency by sharing information freely with community stakeholders. The central idea is to foster an open exchange, eventually leading to group consensus.

The exchange needs to be a dialogue. Design professionals often underestimate the influence of past development proposals and previ-

ous interactions that community members experienced. It is essential to ask questions and invite feedback about both positive and negative views formed during prior projects.

Map It. Managing the expectations of multiple stakeholders is a formidable challenge best accomplished by mapping out the roles and responsibilities of all involved parties. For many participants, this is their first experience with development, design, and review. They need a roadmap.

Community stakeholders need to be shown the path that can be taken together to reach a successful outcome. The design team needs



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One of the most significant changes in the practice of architecture over the past decade in the United States is the ever-increasing role the public has taken in shaping the design of buildings.

Sustainable development, and the health and environmental benefits of building green, are part of every community dialogue today. The new Durham County Human Services complex in Durham, North Carolina, is being planned for LEED Gold certification.

to clearly explain and illustrate the process. Constructive input can be encouraged by giving concrete examples of how stakeholders can make a positive impact. Setting expectations is the job of the design team.

At the start, there needs to be an honest overview of the process, including:

- ▷ What is to be accomplished, individually and together;
- ▷ What the business drivers behind the project are;

- ▷ Who does what—i.e., roles and responsibilities for all participants;
- ▷ How the design and building process works; and
- ▷ What the timetable is—namely, when key milestones will be reached.

Being honest with people about the limitations of the development process is one of the best strategies for managing expectations. Not every idea can be implemented, and not every person participating can be satisfied. Budgets have limits, and limits sometimes mean a compromise at some key moment. It is important to create an open and consistent participation process where people know what to expect.

Manage It. To keep things on track during meetings, prepare an agenda with specific time blocks assigned to each agenda item. In many cases, using an independent facilitator helps keep the process moving and can provide a buffer when conflicts inevitably arise. The facilitator should be a respected person in the community, someone who is seen as accommodating, neutral, and fair.

Group exercises can be used to build a strong dialogue and consensus. During the planning for a recent university project, large exhibit boards were displayed showing examples of design options for various components of the project. Each person was given three sheets of colored dots: green, red, and yellow. The group was asked to stick the colored dots on the images to express their opinion of the options. A red dot indicated a negative opinion, a yellow dot indicated indifference or no opinion, and a green dot meant a favorable opinion. Even before the dots were tallied, it was clear to

everyone in the group which design options were favored. This group exercise allowed the design team to zero in on preferred options and gave everyone a chance to provide input while enjoying the rating exercise together.

Keeping the human connection in mind is important. Informal interaction time should be built into the process, giving participants the opportunity to mingle with the team and each other before and after the official program ends. When given the chance to talk about kids, schools, and families, even the most skeptical community

trate the benefits of a project will vary by audience interest. Benefits may include:

- ▷ The development's economic impact on the community and surrounding businesses;
- ▷ Job creation, both initial and longer term;
- ▷ Tax revenue projections;
- ▷ Cultural and social enhancement;
- ▷ Public use and access; and
- ▷ Quality of life improvements.

Sustainable development, and the health and environmental benefits of building green, are part of every community dialogue today. The need to improve past practices and reduce the

impact of buildings on global warming presents both challenges and opportunities to project teams. Sustainable design is one of the most powerful value propositions available. Stakeholders not only want to envision green-based architecture, they also need to see how the project's design will advance user-healthy environments.

For example, a new 244,000-square-foot (22,668-sq-m) county human services complex now in design in Durham, North Carolina, is being planned

for LEED Gold certification. This initiative is a major departure from the image of the typical public sector building. The best tools for engaging and exciting stakeholders are tactile and dimensional ones. When showing project graphics, renderings, and models, think high touch. Use large-format exhibit boards to display renderings and sketches. Whenever possible, create models that people can walk up to and touch and view from all sides, and whose interchangeable parts can be moved around.

Celebrate It. An often-overlooked part of building community partnerships is the need to continue the relationship and share the recognition with stakeholders. Community partners need to be kept informed about the progress of the project, and their support and help should be enlisted when appropriate. Lastly, recognize their essential role when the project formally opens. At the official opening, include a recap on how the entire stakeholder and project team got there. Recognize the input and commitment of those involved in the community review—recognize them by name if possible—and emphasize why the process was effective in achieving an outcome everyone can be proud of.

At the opening of San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora in December 2005, part of a large mixed-use project in the city's Yerba Buena Arts District, community stakeholders were guests of honor for the dedication ceremonies. Swapping stories, one community leader recalled in his remarks the dramatic question asked by the architects at the initial design review session.

"They asked us to imagine that it was ten years in the future, and that we were walking into the museum. 'What do you see? How does the space make you feel?' We divided up into small groups to write down our answers. Now, we are here looking at some of the very things we wrote down back then."

When approached by architects and developers as a relationship investment, the community review process will pay off as stakeholders celebrate the project—and the partnership—together. **UL**

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San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), located in the Yerba Buena Arts District, invited community stakeholders as guests of honor at the dedication ceremonies in December 2005.

stakeholders will see the team as people—with shared goals, needs, and aspirations.

Sell It. More than any other element of a public review process, the ability to clearly demonstrate the value of a project is crucial to achieving a successful outcome. Design and aesthetics are important, but most stakeholders are pondering one question: "How does this project affect me and my community?"

Each project has a unique value proposition with its own set of community benefits. How best to illus-