

COMMUNITY FUTURES: WEB TOOLS TO EMPOWER PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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The benefits of broad-based community involvement in urban design and planning are widely documented. This approach helps to increase community member satisfaction, enhance the sense of commitment in citizens, create realistic expectations of development outcomes, and build trust (Altschuler, 1970; McClure et al. 1997). However, these benefits do not come easily. Channels for community participation are written into many city laws, but this process can be complex enough to discourage even the most committed community advocates. The analog methods employed in current neighborhood planning processes to gather community feedback result in singular, static, and irregular interactions with the public. Rather than focusing on citizens' evolving needs, these two-dimensional snapshots often cause public discussion to flatten into polarizing "pro" and "anti" positions, and many community members who could provide valuable insight simply stay silent. These antiquated techniques ineffectively utilize digital technology as a means for broader community involvement and collaboration. Technical expertise alone is inadequate for solving community design problems and the involvement of private citizens helps to ensure that effective and relevant strategies are created. A truly participatory planning process requires a mutual respect for the skills and knowledge citizens provide - community history, local knowledge, cultural values and understanding. As this conference theme suggests, systems that make visible transitions across time, place and information spaces are incredibly valuable. How might we advance the use of online tools as a means to connect with people over time and space to produce new, deep and continuing insights to inform the design process?

With the advent of digital technology, new ways to elicit public participation in planning and design have become possible. This paper identifies key themes developing in this area and provides a case-study example of the *Community Futures Project* (CFP). Incorporating a multitude of open-source Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), the *Community Futures Project* provides a convenient and useful outlet for community members to contribute their ideas. CFP is an interactive online geographical information system (GIS) tool designed to encourage and record community participation and collaboration. GIS, with its sophisticated mapping and visual display capabilities, is a powerful tool with the speed and capacity to integrate many different layers of data, make public information accessible to people at the neighborhood level, and provide them with a way to integrate their own knowledge about the community. This input is woven into a continuous digital narrative that can be viewed as a momentary cultural snapshot or as an evolution of community sentiments over time. Advocates, political officials, developers, community members, and other stakeholders can utilize this information as a centerpiece for conversations to clarify problems and propose solutions. The visualization tool is valuable in a public participation process because it provides a common language through which all members of the community - young and old, poor and wealthy - can relate; it provides a focus for a community's discussion of ideas, guides community members through the design process, and "bridges the gap between the vision of the community resident and the technical thinking and jargon of the architects and developers" (King, 1989). Clearly the development of methods in community design are still at the exploratory and discovery stages. Collaborative online tools are a step forward in the development of such skills - progressing towards the art of designing with people.

REFERENCES CITED

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