

Charrettes

A charrette is an intense, collaborative effort to solve a specific design or planning problem. The term “charrette,” which means “cart,” originated in the late nineteenth century at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where to be “en charrette” was to describe students who, when finishing competition drawings, would jump on the collection cart as it rolled away. In a modern charrette, interested citizens work along side design professionals to draw out their own vision for their community.

APPLICATION OF THE PARTICIPATORY CHARRETTE

Charrettes are used at any scale of design—from regional planning to specific redevelopment projects. In deciding whether to use a charrette, one must first look at the complexity of the problem. A problem dependent on many variables or involving multiple decision makers requires a collaborative approach. For large, potentially controversial projects, a charrette can accelerate the design process and encourage citizen participation and support, which may mitigate negative reaction by the public. Due to the expertise and time required to properly run and facilitate a charrette, it may not be cost-effective for small single-issue projects.

PREPARATION

Funding. For municipality-sponsored charrettes, planning departments front most of the costs. Additional funds may be available through developers, smart growth initiatives, and private foundations, or through state and federal funds. Possible measures to minimize costs include using planning staff as charrette facilitators and inviting area professionals to volunteer on the design team.

Organization. Preparation for charrettes can take anywhere from one to four months. Sponsors should gather background information to determine the appropriate participants, design team, and location of the charrette. Planning departments should provide information on the project site, including

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market analyses, environmental studies, and citizen group directories. Understanding the physical and social context of a project will help organizers gather applicable design precedents and identify stakeholders. The design team should represent multiple disciplines including planners, architects, landscape architects, and traffic engineers. The charrette should be geographically accessible to encourage greater participation and be close to the project site so participants can understand the physical context.

Publicity. A participation charrette can generate great excitement in a community, developing media interest on its own merit. Still, sponsors can promote the charrette by distributing posters and brochures and issuing press releases. Key stakeholders should be directly notified about the charrette through personal invitations or phone calls.

THE CHARRETTE SEQUENCE

Kick-Off. The kick-off is an informal gathering where participants can view the site, meet participants, and get a project overview. A representative—possibly the city planner—describes the context for the project, introduces community leaders, and answers questions.

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City of Aspen Department of Community Development

The kick-off is an informal gathering where participants can view the site, meet participants, and get a project overview.

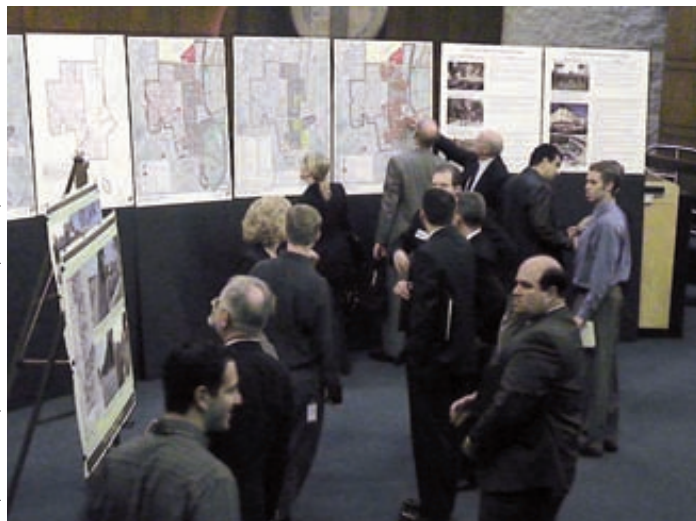
Design Workshops. Next is a series of participatory workshops where citizens and designers develop alternatives for the project. The design team collects and organizes the suggestions, and then synthesizes the information into feasible alternatives. The participants review and discuss the revised proposals, giving immediate feedback. The process continues until all aspects are reconciled—a process usually lasting two to five days.

Final Presentation. During this stage, the design team prepares final presentation documents and solicits final suggestions. Upon revision, the project is submitted to the local decision-making body for approval.



City of Aspen Department of Community Development

A participatory workshop where citizens develop alternatives for projects.



City of Irvine Department of Community Development

The final presentation where the design team presents documents and solicits final suggestions.

THE PARTICIPATORY CHARRETTE ADVANTAGE

Building Trust. In the participatory charrette, citizens actually draw their vision of a preferred community and identify strengths and weaknesses of the existing environment. By inviting public participation in the planning process, the process becomes transparent. Citizens are more likely to embrace charrette-based plans with enthusiasm and optimism because they have had input.

Increasing Participation. Participants need not have design experience or a robust planning vocabulary because most ideas are communicated graphically, which lessens the danger of misinterpretation. Through involvement, participants take ownership of the project, monitoring progress and working together toward implementation.

Accelerating the Planning Process. Most major design decisions can be made in a week. Time constraints actually promote excitement, motivating participants to generate creative solutions quickly. Visual documentation of the charrette process also can speed up the implementation process by clearly illustrating the proposal to decision makers, developers, and builders.

Developing a Clear Vision. Renderings, sketches, and photos begin to turn vision into reality, unifying the recommendations of all participants. Designers concerned about all the aspects of the project—look at nothing in isolation. Through continued feedback, citizen concerns and conflicts are resolved in the beginning of the process, avoiding costly redesign of projects.

Creating a Feasible Plan. Charrette-based plans have a greater probability of implementation than conventionally derived plans because the process fosters broad community support. Designers learn first-hand about citizen concerns while citizens come to understand the limitations, costs, and benefits of proposed alternatives. Decision makers learn to discern good plans from bad ones, implement contextual design, and become more responsive to planning recommendations.

CHALLENGES WITH THE PARTICIPATORY CHARRETTE

The trust and excitement generated by the charrette process can quickly turn into skepticism and disappointment if the plans are not properly implemented. In some cases, implementation fails because of an internally flawed process (i.e., no consensus was reached or the plan was not fully completed during the charrette time frame). The process may also be externally flawed (i.e., critical stakeholders were not present at the charrette). Participants must be told charrettes are part of a larger process and be realistic about the outcome. Franz Heitzer ■

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