

BEST PRACTICES
PLANNING TOOLS
LAW


During February's Llum BCN Poblenou, Barcelona's annual winter light festival, attendees peruse a free art installation, one of more than 30 altogether.

Barcelona Throws a Party

BARCELONA, THE CAPITAL OF SPAIN'S CATALONIA REGION, is particularly adept at generating the active, dynamic street life that Jane Jacobs identified as key to a successful city. One notable element of its success is, as a local friend put it, "Barcelona knows how to throw a party."

In February, the city held its annual winter light festival: Llum BCN Poblenou. This was the festival's seventh year, but only the second in the Poblenou neighborhood. Poblenou is a mixture of warehouses, old factories converted into art studios, cultural centers, and design and architecture schools, along with a number of newly built office and residential buildings. It is definitely not a neighborhood found in most of the tourist guidebooks.

This year's three-night festival included installations by 20 professional artists or collectives and another 15 by students and faculty from local design schools. They were scattered across an 80-square-block area beautifully

identified by green laser installations along three of the major streets. Some projects lined the streets; others were limited to small interior spaces.

More than 190,000 city residents accepted the invitation "to discover a new way to inhabit the city's streets, and ... a vision on how ... public space can evolve in the future," as the program states.

As planners or elected officials, we are dominated by the number, breadth, and intensity of problems to be solved in our communities. It is easy to ignore an equally important part of our job: making sure that people can not only live and work in a city, but that they want to live there, too. That they enjoy the streets, the parks, and the architecture. And most

important, that they enjoy being with their fellow citizens. By incorporating public art into our communities and providing opportunities for residents to engage with each other, cities can turn themselves into the kinds of vibrant, welcoming places people want them to be.

How do they do it?

Such success takes good planning. The neighborhood festival prides itself on showing the most innovative work by the best contemporary light-and-sound artists in the world. But that lofty goal does not detract from the accessibility of the art. Only once did a friend ask after a performance, "What was that about?" The key is the selection of immersive and participatory works that immediately engage people of all ages and backgrounds. What fun to suddenly see yourself in a work being projected on a huge wall, or to make lights change by clapping in unison with your neighbors!

This party takes a year to plan. A single curator and two assistants identify potential art works, collaborate with property owners and others to secure spaces in the neighborhood, and oversee the budget. Keeping the same team in charge over the years allows the festival to hone its knowledge of artists and what works in the available spaces.

The festival's commitment to Barcelona's art, design, lighting, and architecture schools adds energy as the student teams compete for honors presented by a jury of noted designers and artists from across Europe. The work is judged specifically for innovation and experimentation. The schools are invited to participate, assigned to a specific site, and given a stipend of 4,000 euros. It is a great showcase for the schools given the sheer number of people who see the work.

The festival's support of individual artists depends on specific projects. With the amount of equipment needed for some of them, those costs can go as high as 50,000 euros. Another needed planning skill: maximizing the quality of the festival within its set budget.

It takes a plan

The festival embraces the city's attitude toward its residents, no matter their age, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. There is no sense that a particular exhibit is too highbrow or too popular. Everyone participates at the same level—without barriers. That includes price: Everything is free. I toured with a five-year-old and a seven-year-old. What they loved and connected to, I did as well.

The festival organizers—including the city planning department—are clear that this is a party given by Barcelona, for the people of Barcelona. The mayor heads an 11-member commission—all elected officials—that functions as the executive branch. She appoints individual council members to oversee specific departments: culture, security, etc. They reject the typical planning inclination to justify the costs of a festival with multiple objectives; in other words, that it will attract tourists and promote local industries. The city gladly accepts donations, but it does not commodify the festival. Nowhere are you encouraged to buy a telephone or think kindly about an electrical company—the type of advertising that is so common in most municipal festivals. Its sole justification is a good time for the city's residents.

As I noted above, it is not easy to throw such a party. Barcelona's ability to coordinate city departments in closing streets, cleanup, providing security, and working with local businesses, residents, and institutions is impressive. Even more impressive to me is the city's ability to design and implement a plan that nurtures social trust. Thousands of residents come together every year in an unfamiliar part of Barcelona and have a great time for three consecutive nights. And for that, the city deserves credit. Clearly, it knows how to throw a party. ■

—Chuck Thurow

Thurow was formerly APA's assistant research director, deputy director of planning and development for the city of Chicago, and executive director of the of the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago.

Annexation 101

WHEN CITIES SEEK TO EXPAND their boundaries, they typically turn to annexation, the process by which land is transferred from one unit of government to another, most commonly from a county to an incorporated city. Annexation serves many practical purposes: providing more efficient services, adding to the local population (and the tax base), providing areas for future growth, and extending planning and zoning authority. It can also be a controversial and politically contentious process.

Laws governing annexation authority and processes differ from state to state. Most require consent by a majority of landowners and residents in the proposed area. One common exception is when the territory to be annexed is surrounded by an incorporated municipality. A few states (including Texas, North Carolina, and Indiana) permit involuntary annexation. In Texas, home-rule cities may unilaterally annex any land that is under their extraterritorial jurisdiction.

Most states also require annexed areas to adjoin the existing municipal boundary. This requirement encourages orderly expansion and discourages cities from leapfrogging over less desirable parcels in order to annex land on the urban fringe.

Jurisdictions annex for various reasons. For example, a city might annex residential subdivisions, commercial or industrial areas, or undeveloped areas where growth is anticipated. Development in the annexed area can increase property and commercial tax bases and generate additional revenue to support city services and infrastructure development and maintenance that could benefit residents of the city and surrounding areas.

Annexation also allows a jurisdiction to fully extend its regulatory authority, including planning and zoning. The result may be more logical patterns of growth and development in the surrounding area.

Important reminders

Cities should carefully consider the costs and benefits of pursuing annexation, how well it aligns with current goals for growth and development, and the full range of potential impacts that could result.

Any city considering annexation should document existing population figures, land uses, and development within the proposed boundaries of the growth area. It is also important to evaluate how annexation will affect the timing of new development, both within the annexed area and existing municipal boundaries.

Another issue is the likely demand for public services within the proposed annexed area. This may include police and fire protection, road improvements, water supply, and sewers, as well as schools, libraries, and parks. Communities should first evaluate the costs of extending services and determine whether they can be provided efficiently.

While annexation may expand the local tax base, the costs of providing services may exceed the tax revenue generated. Therefore, it is vital to conduct a thorough fiscal analysis at the proposal stage, including comparing likely property tax revenue, license fees, and other income associated with new development with projected service costs. The analysis should also consider whether the transfer will cause the jurisdiction currently governing the annexed area to lose revenue.

Finally, cities should consider potential political challenges, which could range from concerns about higher taxes, changes in political representation, and loss of community identity on one side, to reduction in levels of service and traffic congestion, to name a few, on the other. ■

—Anna Read, AICP

Read is an officer with the Broadband Research Initiative at the Pew Charitable Trusts. This article is adapted from an APA Planning Advisory Service *QuickNotes* article. APA members may access the full *QuickNotes* archive free of charge at planning.org/pas/quicknotes.

Design Takes Center Stage

AFTER YEARS OF FOCUSING ON BASIC development issues—particularly zoning and environmental standards—planning and zoning boards have taken a renewed interest in design. Board meetings are increasingly dominated by topics like transit-oriented development, form-based codes, and multiuse anchor buildings. Meanwhile, new board members, conscious of meeting legal requirements, are often left puzzled.

A bevy of approaches

While design review legislation has been increasingly supported by courts throughout the U.S., local governments often have questions about specific approaches. For that reason, Illinois, to cite one example, amended its statewide municipal code in 2007 to allow for the review of exterior building design and to designate a board or commission to do so.

Still, board and commission members may be uncertain about requirements such as community benefit agreements, issues related to the regulation of aesthetics, and the practicalities of new construction techniques and materials.

Suburban residents in particular are increasingly concerned about design details—including the fine points of landscaping, signage, and lighting. Meanwhile, the technical aspects grow ever more complex.

In many communities, zoning codes remain the primary tool to guide new construction. And traditional zoning is still effective in managing land use, parking, and density. But zoning provisions generally do not enhance the design and appearance of buildings and their surroundings. The answer, in many cases, is design guidelines, which remain a powerful regulatory tool—so long as they are flexible and based on public input.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many U.S. cities created historic districts governed by zoning overlays. Subsequently,

appearance codes were drawn up in a number of states to provide legal backing for these expanded design review requirements. Some local governments also require developers to provide detailed

site plans for projects in sensitive areas. Yet these plans are often vague when it comes to details of design.

The next step may be to include an architectural design review element in the approval process. Some communities already have architecture review commissions com-

posed of local design professionals. The rules for such oversight vary. In Illinois, design review is usually limited to commercial developments. In some cases, the review is conducted by a subgroup of the plan commission and may be limited to large projects. Occasionally, a community may hire a “town architect” to review special projects.

Facing changing economic conditions—and difficulty in recruiting and retaining commissioners—many municipalities are choosing to skip citizen input and delegate routine design review to professional staff members. Another result is that we are now seeing hybrid approaches that allow both discretionary reviews and variances to be the province of a single commission.

Tools and resources

Successful movements (and organizations) often begin with a few individuals. As chair of a suburban appearance commission and founder of a Scenic America

affiliate, I initiated an organization devoted to design review in the Chicago metropolitan area. The Municipal Design Review Network held its first meeting in 2011 to identify problems in design review, make appropriate improvements, and help local municipal staff, urban design professionals, and citizen planners deal with design issues.

Early participants included representatives of the Illinois Chapter of APA and other planning and professional organizations. Some 100 municipalities have been connected to date, and more than 1,000 individual government officials have participated in MDRN programs.

MDRN’s advisory committee actively shares information and insights about the practical and legal challenges presented by the varied approaches to design review. It offers symposiums, technical forums, and a variety of publications to municipalities throughout the state of Illinois on the practical and legal challenges of site planning and related design review. The network is now associated with the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University.

Based on my many years of involvement both with local governments and design commissions, I urge readers to use APA resources and local professional organizations such as MDRN to find solutions for these increasingly complex and challenging issues. ■

—John R. Hedrick

Hedrick is an attorney and consultant in the Chicago area. He is the founder of the Municipal Design Review Network and a contributor to the recent PAS Report, *Design Review: Guiding Better Development*.

RESOURCE FINDER

APA Research KnowledgeBase Design Review Collection:
bit.ly/DesignKnowledgeBase.

Design Review: Guiding Better Development, PAS Report 591:
bit.ly/PASDesign.

DePaul University’s Municipal Design Review Network:
bit.ly/MDRNDDePaul.