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Are We Prepared to Participate?

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Randy Hester's assessment of citizen participation is timely in light of the current proliferation of community-based planning initiatives across the country. These efforts, whether spurred by foundations, governments or universities, or stemming from good old-fashioned grassroots activism, could be considered harbingers of a resurgence of popular democratic activity. Meanwhile, more and more mainstream planners and designers are embracing participation as a means to assure and improve the outcomes of their work.

Yet these efforts may not be leading to more democratic, equitable and sustainable solutions to the problems confronting society. For example, there is an inevitable tension between streamlining a project and democratizing the planning and decision making process. Invariably, those directing the effort abbreviate the time allocated to building relationships and engaging in dialogue. Mutual learning, so critical to this work, is cut short, and professional elites and narrow local interests often dominate.

In reminding us that participatory practice is more often used today to promote the interests of powerful and affluent citizens, Hester calls attention to another problem. Participation is not only misled at the top, it is misguided at the bottom. But is advocacy to blame?

In his critique of this tradition in planning practice, Hester equates advocacy and the participation that empowers it with parochial power politics. The problem, however, is not necessarily with advocacy, but with the cultural environment in which citizen participation occurs. If we are unable to establish a culture of participation, the parochial planning Hester characterizes as advocacy will prevail.

Are we prepared to participate? Our "winner-take-all" society values individual achievement and material wealth above collaboration and collective endeavor. As schoolchildren, we are taught to compete and protect our self-interest; as adults, our waning interest in political engagement has weakened our ability to identify ourselves as members of a broader community.

Calls for broad inclusiveness too often assume community participants come on equal footing. In reality, while they contribute their life skills, experiences and crucial knowledge about their neighborhoods, they are often disadvantaged in terms of access to resources, time, technical skills and knowledge of government practices and terminology.

For participation to be more than hollow rhetoric we need a serious reconsideration of our educational underpinnings—the values, ethics and principles we learn in our homes, communities and schools.

We should begin at an early age to develop the awareness, skills and capacity necessary to serve as responsible, entitled members of civil society and participate effectively in the development of our communities. Education for participation should include critical thinking, organizing, listening and negotiating skills. It should build environmental literacy, understanding of government process and appreciation for the interrelationship of issues and problems in our society. Above all, it must inculcate tolerance, compassion and caring.

Several efforts to do this are currently underway in primary and secondary education. They include the Urban Network national curriculum project for elementary schools, the City of Neighborhoods program of the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, and several of New York City's "New Visions" public schools, notably the El Puente Academy for Social Justice and the Benjamin Bannecker Academy for Community Development.

Citizen participation must be informed by a broader ethic concerned with equity and social justice in order to avoid more regressive outcomes, ranging from "not-in-my-backyard" efforts to the establishment of local militias. Respect for diversity and embrace of difference is not simply a matter of political correctness, it is the fundamental key to prosperity in a heterogeneous society.