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Participation in Place:
Notes for Future Design Juries

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Central and salient among the shared values that enabled this year's EDRA/*Places* Awards jury to select six winning projects was a concern for user participation in design and planning. Although we based our decisions on other criteria as well, participation was a gate through which projects had to pass in order to be considered for an award.[1]

By my count, about ninety percent of the projects that reached the final round employed some form of user or public participation, compared to about forty percent for the design and planning submissions overall. And all the winners, in every category, employed participation. For example, research winner "Three Public Neighborhoods: Assessing Public Housing Development" involved project residents in conducting the research; research winner *Healing Gardens* used the findings of user studies and evaluations to help set design guidelines.

Participation can be a desirable part of the design, planning or research process, and could even be considered a form of research. But reflecting on the jurying process, my sense is that the consideration of participation was sometimes too obligatory in both the submissions and the jury discussion. We need to enrich and embolden our consideration of participation, to regard it as less of an end in itself and more in terms of how it makes places that encourage a democratic society, and ask whether participation in the design, planning or research process is necessary or sufficient in determining the merit of a project.

I would suggest that we expand our view of participation to include the idea of "participation in use," examining how people use and are involved in managing places. I would further suggest that we evaluate projects based on how they

catalyze participation in the development of a democratic and shared society. These concerns should not be revelatory, especially to *Places* readers and EDRA members. As *Places* editor Donlyn Lyndon once wrote: "Good places make people feel that they belong, that they have a stake in the world that they share with others."[2]

Projects that Make Good Places

Like many juries, we operated with a mostly tacit, generally shared set of values, criteria, definitions and priorities that allowed us, within our limited time together, to make our final selections with little conflict. Our interests, as reflected in our selection of winners, included enabling pedestrian activity, promoting social inclusiveness, creating urban open space and using the full power of nature to enrich our environments.

At the same time, I believe we all subscribed to a meta-value, that award-winning submissions should also somehow encourage the making of place. But what does that mean? Although the jury members may have held similar values about the qualities necessary to transform space into place, the definition of place remained inchoate throughout the deliberation process, in part because our work of reading through the submissions, discussing them and reaching final decisions filled our allotted time.

After we finished making our selections, *Places* executive editor Todd W. Bressi asked, in a debriefing session, why we thought that none of the numerous New Urbanist submissions had made the final cut. Juror Karen Franck suggested that we showed little interest in them because they seemed instant, quick-stop, ready-made; that the quality of place was sought, unsuccessfully,

solely through design and not won through the practices of use and the making of histories.

Franck's comment recalls various writings about place attachment. Michel de Certeau asserted that place is "practiced space"; Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires propose that place is "space to which meaning has been ascribed."[3] Clearly, this line of thinking begins to suggest a definition of "place" that future juries could use: juries should be considering not only the practices that places engender or prohibit, encourage or discourage, and that invest places with history, memory and meaning, but also evidence of participatory practices in use, not just in the process of production.

It is also important that juries look for participatory processes and places that empower their users, politically, economically and psychologically, rather than affirming existing power asymmetries. They must look to places that create communities that encourage people to reach outward, rather than focus inward, places that recognize and celebrate diversity—not within the dialectic of a totalizing humanity such as that portrayed in the "United Colors of Benneton," but in terms of recognizing the tensions and contradictions in the ways different people live in the world and in the narratives they create to make sense of it. They should turn their attention to places that educate, encourage and inculcate these values, beliefs and actions. Among the projects we selected this year, the Rosa Parks Elementary School was notable in this regard.

Product Versus Process

These expanded definitions of participation suggest a number of critical questions, and open new avenues of possibility, for future juries:

• If one can consider a design or plan as a hypothesis for the future use of a place, should the hypothesis have been tested, the results be made available for evaluation? Could a jury evaluate

designs that have not been tested through use, plans that have not shaped some concrete outcomes?

• If one is to look for evidence of use, what evidence should be accepted? In this respect, research winner *Healing Gardens* was noteworthy in providing numerous documented examples of not only the use of gardens but also their therapeutic benefits.

• Can one consider evidence that users have claimed and appropriated spaces in ways not intended by the designers, if the result is to invest these spaces with unexpected meaning? Could such action be viewed as an act of participation, or of empowerment? In design winner Lafayette Park, we learned, one park user was operating a shoe-repair shop out of a public rest room. Did participatory processes lead to this outcome, or did it occur independently of the process of producing the facility?

• Are participatory design and planning processes necessary to create places that promote participatory practices? This seemed to be the case in the Rosa Parks School, and the hoped-for outcome in the Portland Pedestrian Master Plan.

• Do places, whether or not their production involved participation, encourage movement towards a truly democratic society?

Misusing Participation

One hopes that user participation in the creation, use and management of a place will lead towards meaningful social and environmental change. However, in the contemporary world, participation all too often becomes an instrument for solidifying status quos and maintaining current, often asymmetrical power distributions.

This was reflected in the award submissions. Too many of them included statements such as "the public participated in a series of workshops," without ever mentioning who the "public" consisted of, what the workshops accomplished, or

whether participants had decision-making power or only offered suggestions or provided information about existing conditions.

We also need to be aware of the problem of participation essentializing the community, of seeing it as unified and homogeneous, of not allowing for conflicting goals and agendas. Participation can become the expression of and reinforce power discrepancies within heterogeneous groups of users, with those in control taking control of the process and purporting to speak for all, thus reinforcing status quos.

We should look for projects, whether they use participatory techniques or not, that address social injustices and inequities, or the misapprehensions that perpetuate such situations. For example, the winning research project, "Three Public Neighborhoods," investigated popular conceptions that public housing has failed and found that this has not been universally true and that many residents of public housing attach great meaning to their homes and communities.

Whom to Award?

Focusing participation efforts solely on the planning and design phases of a project, ironically, often treats the user as an "other," not as a subject with agency but as an object to whom participation is applied and who will benefit by taking part. But if we are to consider how participation can be part of the forging of place from space we must grant agency to users. The success of a project on these terms owes as much to the users and the narratives they create as it does to the designers. Perhaps, then, the awards program should honor not only design and planning teams but users as well.

Notes

1. The EDRA/*Places* awards criteria do not mention participation per se. Design submissions are asked to provide evidence that a place is important to its inhabitants or users, or that a project has broadened or strengthened the constituency for this place. Planning submissions are asked to describe the planning methodology, especially strategies for involving people in forming the plan and helping people understand the significance of the proposals.
2. Donlyn Lyndon, "Caring About Places," *Places* 6:1 (Fall 1989), 3.
3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984); Erica Carter, James Donald, Judith Squires (eds.), *Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London, Wishart, 1993), xii.