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Community Activism vs. Community Design

John N. Roberts

Of the many powerful forces that influence the form and function of a city, citizen involvement in a design process is one of the most complex. Activists influence agendas that are set for the physical environment, as well as the process by which issues are aired and reconciled. Design-oriented participants often give direction for the plan itself. Individual opinions frame preferences, clarify concerns, and filter resolutions. But activism alone will not result in urban designs that fully address a community's needs.

Community design occurs when all voices, not just the loudest, are integrated into the physical resolution of a space, and when each accepts the resolution with full understanding of the choices made. An inclusive design process is essential to reaching common ground and reconciling differences while balancing the myriad factors critical to place-making.

Over the past twenty-four years, I have been an active participant in the evolution of downtown Berkeley, California, doing both voluntary and paid professional urban design work. I have been in the front lines of the struggle to improve a city in which community activism is a value and community design is both disparaged and demanded. This experience has given me an understanding of the interrelationship between community activism and community design.

Getting Hooked as a Voluntary Professional

There was a time, not so long ago, when a walk in downtown Berkeley was a frightening experience. From the late 1960s into the early 1980s, downtown became a creepy place. The sidewalks were poorly lit, dirty, and untended. Buildings stood vacant, deteriorating with neglect. Windows were boarded up out of



fear, and those fears projected back through the lifeless walls onto dreary public spaces. The few new buildings that were built were conceived as fortresses against political demonstrations and urban decay, with the perception of danger contributing to further decay. Strange confrontations, bizarre activities, violence, and hostile behavior were common on the streets, especially at night. People

gradually lost interest in downtown.

My family and I were affected. Both my children were assaulted, my wife was afraid to go downtown, and I was on edge whenever I walked the sidewalks. This was simply unacceptable, and by the mid-1980s I had had enough. But that was when I discovered that others felt the same, and I joined with various groups of citizens and city staff to carry out revitaliza-

tion activities that continue to influence downtown.

Over the years a number of projects have flowed directly from this community activism, from new City of Berkeley programs, and from widely supported professional planning efforts by such individuals as Allan Jacobs, Donlyn Lyndon, Gregory Tung, and Peter Calthorpe. Government grants and voter approval of a bond measure also indicated broad public and institutional support for this community-based planning. Outreach to the public has been essential to building consensus. Urban designers, activists, property owners, and city staff have been full collaborators in this community-design process.

Two long-term projects have evolved along different paths, offering useful lessons about consensus building. These are an arts district along a once neglected and funky block of Addison Street and improvements along Center Street, an important pedestrian corridor between the University of California, Berkeley, and the city's main transit hub.

Consensus through an Inclusive Design Process

By the early 1990s, the city's Economic Development Department had concluded that the key to economic revitalization in downtown Berkeley would be to stimulate arts and cultural activities. At that time the nationally renowned Berkeley Repertory Theater was threatening to move to Oakland. But the mayor bravely committed the city's resources to help the theater company expand by purchasing the property next door to its existing building, on Addison Street. And when the Berkeley Rep agreed to stay, discussion began about the creation of an arts district.

As a first step, Michael Caplan, the

At the 2007 workshop on "Design Activism" numerous presenters told stories of grassroots groups organizing around the world to fight powerful forces threatening their homelands, valued places, endangered species and cultures. Most employed planning and design in some phases of their efforts, but John Roberts' case of his work to reclaim his hometown, downtown Berkeley, was distinctive in that design was central to the story.

Roberts described the designer's singular capacity to turn unimagined ideas into multiple concrete visions that can be comprehended, debated and carefully evaluated via civil society. He shows how small design actions can cumulatively have major positive impact. He

champions long-term design volunteerism to improve one's civic places, but he acknowledges the awkward roles the professional designer confronts balancing "volunteer" and "for pay" work on the same project. All of these are important lessons, but Roberts' distinction between activist design and community design is most insightfully provocative. He warns that often the activism that dominates is contrary to the collective good. Just as dominant cultures or external forces often do, grassroots activists can likewise hijack civic processes and places. This is an essential warning to design activists not often sounded.

—*Randolph T. Hester*

city's newly hired downtown coordinator, convened a meeting of property owners, arts activists, city staff, and others to help brainstorm the idea. The block of Addison Street where the theater stood was identified as the logical core of the district and targeted for renovation. But the group, of which I was a member, also imagined the arts district as a place where other kinds of creativity could flourish, where art might be part of the urban fabric, and where a critical mass of cultural activities would spin off other arts-supported entities like restaurants and galleries.

The group's early efforts went into creating an arts district plan. We agreed it would have to be a public/private partnership. As a result, an art overlay zone now regulates ground-floor uses of private property in the district, and the city has upgraded the street while offering private develop-

ment incentives.

As part of this effort, Donn Logan, a local architect and property owner, and I developed a plan for the street that would provide a physical representation of the group's abstract ideas. After revisions to reflect broad community input, the Berkeley City Council officially endorsed it. The plan embodied a common vision of an arts district, offered a phased implementation schedule with cost estimates, and held strong support among stakeholders.

To sustain momentum and ensure that the hard-won funds allocated by the City Council would be used only for construction, ELS Architects (Logan's firm) and I prepared the first

Opposite: Looking east along Addison Street from the Berkeley Repertory Theater during the Front Row Festival in 2003.



Anticipating the installation of artworks, I refined the plans with artists, the Arts Commission, technical specialists, and public arts administrators.

A key feature of this effort was paving art. Eight local artists, out of a field of sixty applicants, none with any prior experience in public art, were chosen through a competitive Arts Commission-sponsored process to design twelve pieces of paving art to be installed in predetermined locations. Not all pieces passed the final “slip” test; in the end, two had to be mounted on walls. But Addison Street’s sidewalks are now embedded with a variety of artistic emblems: lips, root webs, critters, notations of local historic events, and other unusual work.

The new sidewalks also provided a regular pattern of two-foot square cutouts (127 of them) next to the curb to be used for poetry. Bob Hass, a local resident, University of California professor, and a former United States poet laureate, agreed to select the verses. He chose a variety of short poems spanning the cultural history of the City of Berkeley. These began with songs of the native Ohlone people (as translated by University of California professors), included Bishop Berkeley’s paeon to the westward course of empire, and ran through the protests of the Vietnam and free-speech eras to verses from the present day. The words of local Nobel Prize-winning poets, Pulitzer Prize winners, several poets laureate, songwriters, and other Berkeley writers now grace the street, and the complete compendium has been published locally as the *Addison Street Anthology*. The enameled poems, on cast-iron plaques, were installed in April 2004 and by September, the Berkeley Poetry Walk had been designated a National Poetry Landmark by the Academy of American Poets.

phase construction documents pro-bono in 1996. With these in hand, the arts district began to take physical form. Sidewalks were widened, driving and parking lanes narrowed, and placeholders were created for art works, new utilities, and street trees. Separately, the city converted a blank wall of a public parking garage into a street-front gallery that would feature displays of work by local artists,

curated by a member of the Berkeley Arts Commission. These modest investments soon attracted millions of dollars of new private development.

Passage of the bond measure a few years later allowed completion of more of the planned public work from 2001 to 2003. This included patterned paving, additional trees, pedestrian lighting, and the incorporation of artwork and poetry into the sidewalk.

The creation of the plaques, the book printing, and the installation were funded entirely by private donations.

Today the Addison Street Arts District reflects a gradual progression, with sections patched together at different times—and with more to come. Individual parts are exquisite, and the overall concept is compelling, but it is not a refined, singular statement. Despite the rough edges, it is an authentic community work, the result of collaboration by activists and designers, stakeholders, and staff who responded at each stage of the process, translating abstraction into reality. It is a deeply compelling expression of place.

The sidewalks are filled with art and poetry, the street is wired for performances, and the exhibitions in the garage's window-gallery change monthly. Other theaters have joined the Berkeley Rep on the block. So have a jazz school, a traditional music coffeehouse, a bookstore, a theater school, terrific restaurants with entertainment, and new housing. Plans are also under way for the Berkeley Art Museum to move downtown, extending the arts district across Shattuck Avenue to the edge of the university. The renewed sense of place created by the arts district as well its economic effect elsewhere downtown has been more than anyone had dreamed possible.

Conflicting Visions in an Advocacy-Based Process

A different scenario has been unfolding over the past ten years along the Center Street corridor, one of downtown Berkeley's most important public spaces and one of its most successful retail streets. In this case, an activist-driven, ideologically based proposal to open a creek channel along the corridor has been vigorously promoted independent of any city-

sponsored design process.

For years, the city has delayed committing to a public design process for the corridor despite repeated requests by the community, focusing on other priorities. All the while it has been hoping that funding for such a process will come from development fees extracted from a future hotel and conference center on Center Street. Yet, absent a design process to channel creative energies and find common ground, persistent pressure by outspoken advocacy groups has resulted only in an adversarial environment that has accentuated rather than resolved conflict.

The loudest and most politically effective voice for the transformation of Center Street has been that of a group led by Richard Register's "Ecocity Builders" and Citizens for Strawberry Creek. This association of creek advocates has focused on the "daylighting" and "restoration" of Strawberry Creek within the Center Street right-of-way (i.e., uncovering it within a new natural channel). They chose Center Street as a demonstration project because of its size and visibility. But presently the culverted creek is not even within Center Street's right-of-way, and there is no evidence that a natural creek ever flowed in the proposed location. Their dramatic and somewhat arbitrary proposal would replace a street that is well used by vehicles in the heart of downtown with an excavated artificial water feature and pedestrian precinct. Achieving this passionately held vision would not only be technically challenging but would raise complex issues for successful retail outlets there.

The creek proposal is on the city's agenda because of the political skills of its advocates. As evidence of this skill, the city's general plan supports creek "daylighting" on public property.

The possibility of an open channel on Center Street has also been endorsed by the Mayor's Hotel Task Force, a citizen group appointed to advise the city on plans for the hotel and conference center. Furthermore, the Downtown Area Plan Advisory Committee (DAPAC), a City Council-appointed group overseeing development of a new downtown plan, recommended funding only that design option for Center Street that will be vehicle-free and accommodate a maximum feasible creek—although that conclusion is being challenged by the Berkeley Planning Commission.

The citizen effort so far has been one of effective advocacy, but it has not been one of community design. A design process is essential to exploring ramifications of the actions being promoted, in order to clarify and balance competing interests. The process might also create a place that reflects a full range of community values.

The overall vision of an ecologically based, pedestrian-friendly downtown environment is generally shared, but many community members have legitimate questions about the efficacy of and rationale for a creek channel along Center Street. Flexibility in the street design is a high priority for merchants, property owners, and other interested citizens, who worry about the effects of an excavated channel in the confined right-of-way. Many also consider vehicles desirable, perhaps on a reconfigured plaza-like "slow street," and they argue that cars could be phased out if pedestrian activities increase.

Skeptics further question whether pedestrian use would support total street closure and whether the open

Opposite: Plaques set in the sidewalk provide an anthology of Berkeley poetry.



creek would actually attract more people than an alternative design. And they have pointed out how failed pedestrian malls elsewhere are now being converted to “slow streets.” Finally, in more practical terms, they have raised concern about cost, maintenance, retail vitality, safety, customer access, emergency access, daily services, and effects on the larger context.

In the face of relentless pressure to transform the street and conflicting visions for the space, citizens and stakeholders alike have become increasingly frustrated that city government has been able neither to create a more effective forum in which legitimate alternatives for the corridor can be explored, nor to turn the advocacy from a political act into a place-making tool.

Above: Center Street, downtown Berkeley, on a summer evening.

The Importance of a Design Process to Consensus Building

Anxious to promote their own vision for the corridor and to jump-start a design process, the creek advocates hired local landscape designer Walter Hood to prepare plans for Center Street. Hood spent some time with stakeholders listening to concerns about the corridor, and made an effort to respond to a broader range of community input than that of his sponsors alone.

At a recent event catered by the famed Berkeley restaurateur Alice Waters, he presented with great fanfare a wide range of urban patterns for the corridor. The twenty-one schemes balanced ecology and urbanism with stimulating variety. The apparent preferred scheme of the sponsors was an open creek channel, with water diverted from an upstream impoundment of Strawberry Creek.

The richness of patterns revealed to the community that a pedestrian

street with a water feature could take many forms while satisfying common goals. However, the work, no matter how intriguing, did not emerge from a community process in which stakeholders frame and hone a design in concert with a designer. Instead, it reflected a personal response to the place, based on a program framed by specific interests. In reality, it is advocacy planning that reinforces its sponsors’ points of view, despite the designer’s interest in the commons.

Hood was charged with creating a visionary plan, not a community-based design. The goal of his sponsors is to persuade the community of the wisdom of their vision—to help it see the light with the help of an esteemed professional. The real goal of community design, however, is to discover the wisdom within the common vision, with the community guiding the development of the commons. These are fundamentally different approaches to place-making.

There is currently no public framework for an inclusive design process for Center Street, or for developing consensus around a particular plan. Visionary planning can be useful to a community design process. Ultimately, Hood’s visions will enrich the community-wide discussion about Center Street. But Berkeley’s history indicates that, for the community to truly embrace a plan for its commons, the design must flow from a process that includes full participation of all stakeholders and interested parties.

All images courtesy of the author.