



SPECIAL FILE: CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

The intrinsic relationship between the built environment and all aspects of daily life has long been studied within the intersecting boundaries of sociology, psychology, anthropology and geography. But it has never been as explicitly explored as it has been within the interdisciplinary area of environment-behavior studies. Decades of research and resultant findings in these fields have identified a complex web of relationships between social, behavioral components of contemporary communities and the spaces they occupy. Given the findings of empirical research pointing at the problems resulting from mismatches between space and people, *the* major responsibility of professionals in design and planning is to provide communities, thus end-users of the built environment with a voice in design and planning processes. The challenge for designers and planners, then, is to step out of the boundaries of normative thinking, which is strongly embedded in the current conventional educational components, revealing itself in endless replications of popular forms and ideas for any kind of use, in any community, anywhere. In other words, design and planning fields need research-based design more than ever - in a world of fast-paced information flow, thus change.

The question is, how do planners and designers go about designing based on research? After all, they do not have laboratories to conduct experiments, or, to regurgitate a cliché, "design cannot be measured (!)". One condition surrounding planning and design, however, cannot be neglected: what we are responsible for is much too expensive (literally and figuratively) to rely on trial and error. Yet we keep finding architects and planners strengthening individualism, autonomy, and self-reliance in decision-making every day. The very term "research" has been mutated in its entirety, and reduced simply to individual expressions of ideas - i.e. "criticism" - in mainstream architectural literature. Instead of conducting on-site research through participatory techniques to understand the needs and preferences of communities for which the built environment is shaped, individual expressions and personal beliefs are valued in mainstream professional practice and education. Spatial determinism is getting stronger, in an effort to create so-called communities by shaping streets and plazas according to prescriptions referred to as "codes".

Decades of research and its product, an invaluable knowledge base is simply being skipped in the education of design and planning professionals for the sake of “-ism”s, and ultimately in the practice of such professionals upon completion of their education.

Using participatory decision-making methods in design and planning (and teaching them) may form a serious alternative to the current scene, one in which millions of students around the world keep browsing the same magazines, only to find the same people (and forms) in them, on a daily basis in a quest to find inspiration. Investing in participatory design and planning will not only provide designers and planners with methods to conduct on-site, customized research for each and every single project, but also increase the clients’ sense of ownership and control over the process - hence better results in the long run for professionals and end-users. This requires one serious step on the part of design and planning professionals: recognizing the fact that the professional has a valuable, but different expertise from that of the client’s. Participation in design and planning thus needs acceptance of the expertise of “lay people” - a step that might be overly threatening for some professionals.

In this special file of METU JFA, we hope to provide some ideas and examples as to how valuable community design is, despite having its own challenges. The file features four articles and one interview, all of which are concerned with providing “lay people” with a voice in design and planning processes. Although discussed in-depth in the articles and our interview, we would like to underline at this point that the term community design, as used in this special file does *not* refer to literally designing certain environments and claiming that a community has been formed by virtue of design. The use of the term community design in this special issue is decidedly anti-determinist (spatially) and anti-autonomist (professionally). Community design, in our understanding, is a participatory decision-making process in design and planning, and it has no prescribed shape or form that can be identified visually.

This special file thus provides an overview of contemporary issues in community design. Henry Sanoff, a leader in the field, goes into the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of participatory decision-making, and its reflections on design and planning processes. David Seamon discusses whether civil discourse or the physical attributes in an urban environment define “community”. Our interview with Nabeel Hamdi reflects the current developments in community design, particularly the shifts and redefinitions necessary to identify community design itself. And finally we provide a discussion on genuine participation in design and planning, and steps towards insuring genuine participation in decision making.

Participatory decision-making is the progressive step towards equity for end-users and professionals in design and planning. We worked on this special file in hopes of contributing to the progressive spirit we associate with Middle East Technical University and its Faculty of Architecture. As professionals minted on METU campus, we are celebrating fifty years of ‘METU impact’.

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