

Vouslez Vous Charrette?

Are these intensive public design sessions called charrettes effective ways of increasing public involvement in local planning and design processes?

Well, yes and no. Yes, when they take advantage of some of the creative process lessons learned from the classic charrette process. No, or not so much, when they miss what designers have learned since the charrette's origin in the pre-Modern Beaux Arts era.

Do we architects of a certain age, who were trained in the French Beaux Arts system, support the use of stakeholder brainstorming and other inclusive group processes in our public sessions? Mais oui, but of course we do. But it's also hard to miss the irony of calling these group sessions, charrettes, since their original intent was to further the development of individual genius and the great artist, not group work.

Flashback: Every Wednesday at the UW in the late 50s, a project or task would be posted at noon and was due complete with rendered drawings twelve hours later at midnight - twelve sharp! Eager and aspiring designers sequestered themselves in their secret corners and went at it. And the clock went tick, tick, tick.

In the French version at the Ecole de Beaux Arts school of architecture in Paris, a cart would roll through town past individual students' studios at midnight to pick up their work. Would be architect-artists, struggling against the clock to finish all the required drawings, were known to jump up and continue en charrette- on the cart - as it came by.

Here in the Northwest, we just turned things in and headed down to the local tavern to unload, compare notes, and talk our circulation back to earth.

Later, the faculty would arrange the projects on the walls of a large gallery in the College of Architecture and Urban Planning in their authoritatively determined order of merit, with the best always nearest the entrance to the room. The farther you had to walk after the doors opened, the lower your heart and index of potential greatness sunk. These, of course, were the days before antidepressants.

So, what did the charrette experience teach?

- Certainly to jump right in, and to work swiftly and efficiently at generating ideas and illustrating their potential applications.
- That you had to choose and commit yourself to a set of assumptions and adopt a point of view in order to be able to develop coherent proposals - and that different programmatic assumptions led to different outcomes.
- That the conversations after those intense design experience were always unusually rich, productive and insightful. The twelve-hour immersion would pay off with a wealth of new and often unsuspected insights into the nature of the problem at hand and the possibilities for its resolution.
- That we couldn't have had that depth of discussion without the previous period of concentrated work.
- That the problem or opportunity we were handed - the way it was conceived and described - was often part of the problem. We discovered - and I think we continue to discover this over and over again today - that planning and design problems are like human relationships, much more complex and dynamic than they first appear, and always subject to substantial reconsideration, restatement and reconfiguration as they progress and as we grow in knowledge and experience.
- That one person, all by themselves, rarely uncovered or could cover all the best ideas and approaches to a problem.

- That the Beaux Arts official system of evaluation at its worst was officious, inadequate, laconic, and harsh.
- And perhaps, most usefully, the importance of loosening up, of being willing to try things, and experiment... and the lesson that “If you can’t make a mistake, you can’t make anything.”

So, what has happened to the charrette process and how has it been absorbed and transformed in professional practice in the Modern era?

- Today we commonly work in teams of creative people who bring different skills and areas of expertise to the task at hand.
- We’ve learned that the program you start with is rarely the one you end up with. It is quite usual to more thoroughly examine the charge given, since it is usually an evolved program that leads to the most satisfying outcome.
- Once is not enough. We’ve learned that one “charrette” session only gets you just so far in the design process, and that it is usually the second or third or later rounds of concentrated redesigning when the best, most satisfying and most integrative design solutions begin to appear.
- And that each new cycle of concentrated work requires and is built on the back of a vigorous and thorough evaluation of the one before.

Back to the original question: are we “charretting” effectively? I think least so when we expect that our one time public sessions can solve complex problems and that everyone is a twelve-hour designer in the old Beaux Arts sense.

We do better when public occasions are set up to help explore stakeholder points of view, examine our assumptions, expectations and conflicts, and to further evolving shared expressions of what’s wanted and needs to be done.

As Alice famously said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.”

And I think we’ve gotten flip-chart lazy, thinking that these routine recordings and feedback sessions constitute the kind of thorough evaluations that are needed for deeper and deeper rounds of community building and designing.