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THE STRATEGIC USE OF THE CHARRETTE PROCESS FOR APPLIED RESEARCH

Zeenat Kotval-K and John R. Mullin

Introduction
This chapter focuses on the use of the charrette as a particular method of undertaking applied research in an educational or practice context in the field of planning. It documents the emergence of the charrette as an alternative method for engaging stakeholders and communities in the planning process that addresses some of the limitations of more formal opportunities for citizen consultation and engagement. The wider origins and purpose of the charrette process are documented before exploring a series of working principles for the application of the charrette process. These principles are designed to help planning practitioners and planning students engage effectively with the design and management of charrettes as an applied research method, highlighting their value as both pedagogic tools and practical instruments for engaging with planning issues in practice. The concluding section of the chapter reflects on the value of the charrette but also explores some of its limitations as an applied research method.

Communicative planning through consensus building
Beginning with the great protests that spread across Europe and North America in the 1960s, continuing through the environmental and social justice movements of the seventies and eighties, and into the increasing attention on classism by the turn of the century, city and town planners have struggled to ensure that a fair, open, transparent process of decision making is inherent in their plan-making programmes. It is no easy task, for planners must meet the needs of multiple publics that reflect disparate values, interests and needs.

Consensus building in communicative planning has been recognized since the later part of the twentieth century as the avenue for the reformulation of comprehensive planning and the addressing of complex, controversial issues (Innes, 1996). Lindblom (1959) and Altshuler (1965) questioned whether comprehensive planning was the only way for planners to accomplish their responsibilities and, more importantly, challenged planners’ abilities in acquiring all the knowledge required for comprehensive planning. The thought was that it was impossible for planners to know everything that was needed to plan comprehensively, and other methods for planning were needed. Consensus building emerged as an avenue that enabled planners to take up that challenge. Drawn largely from Habermas’ (1984) work on ‘communicative rationality’,
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Consensus building involves the interaction of multiple parties in a manner such that everyone learns from each other. The basic assumption is that all parties are able and willing to communicate with each other through meaningful dialogues, rooted in information generation through diverse experiences, morals and cultural expressions, and collaborate to achieve mutually agreeable outcomes (Forster, 1989; Beauregard, 1998; Healey, 1993; Healey and Hillier, 1996). This debate is more effective when instruments of authority do not overpower these discussions, or efforts are made to constrain the exercise of instruments of authority (Hillier, 1993, p. 108). Sandercock (2000) asserts that the successful outcome of a debate is not a compromise but an understanding of each other’s perspectives. In the process, advocacy for marginalized groups and minority interests is better achieved. Creating an open and inclusive process is critical to ensure that the voices that Sandercock (1994) and Arnstein (1969) refer to as the ‘have-nots’ are heard. This group typically includes the non-voting poor, women, immigrants and migrants. Often unheard, unseen and undervalued by the larger community, their perspectives are scarcely heard within traditional planning practices.

Given this climate, many planners have endeavoured to ensure that decision making is as open as possible and that all parties have the ability to participate in an informal and meaningful manner. Through interviews, surveys, polling, use of translators and reaching out to immigrant organizations and related sections of society, they have sought to ensure that all citizens with a stake in the community have the right to knowingly influence decisions. “Will this project harm my property values?” “Will this decision mean the closing of the local school?” or “Will this project emit noise on my street?” are the types of questions commonly posed. The citizens need to hear the formal arguments, observe the physical attributes of the proposals before them and note the responses of their neighbours and advocacy groups to the issues. They also need to be able to directly respond themselves. Such meetings in one form or another have long been a tradition in local planning. Most often called ‘public hearings’ in the United States, they are embedded in law, deeply rooted in culture and are considered a critical part of the planning process. And yet, too often, the public hearing process reflects an approach in which parties overwhelmingly are required by law and tradition to take a stand on the argument in front of them. It is very much an adversarial approach. In fact, it is not uncommon that the moderator of a public hearing will begin the meeting by asking those who wish to speak or are in favour of the proposal to position themselves on one side of the room while those opposed should move to the other. These public hearings often take on all of the characteristics of local theatre. As examples, advocates for one side or the other will loudly applaud or hiss depending upon the speaker’s position, they will bring signs and placards which are waved at well-timed moments and they will practice intimidation by entering into the hall en masse with newly created tee-shirts advertising their horror at the likelihood of an action occurring. At a recent set of public hearings across the state on wind energy in Massachusetts, the opponent even went so far as to create a roving squad of citizens who were requested to stir up local anger. In another instance, not long ago, a local community in Massachusetts was holding a public hearing on the future use of a new park. The fundamental question was whether the park should be primarily for passive or active use. At a critical moment in the deliberations, the advocates brought the entire community ‘little league’, consisting of sixty very young, uniformed baseball players, to advocate for their cause. They mentioned the need for new facilities. The presence of the kids as props for the active use of the park carried the day.

In short, while the process enables the participant to engage and possibly influence an outcome, citizens cannot actively shape the outcome. Planners have long noted this problem and
have endeavoured to include citizens in building the plan, proposal or project before it becomes fixed and ready for formal adjudications. They have engaged in various research activities and organized neighbourhood meetings, met in kitchens, organized field visits, conducted surveys, held workshops, held public hearings, provided information flyers and written press releases to help explain the nature of the issues at hand, and yet none of these have enabled the community as a whole to come together to help build the plan or project that both meets community needs and protects their self-interests. Over time, however, the charrette has emerged as a critical tool to help overcome the limitations of traditional forms of citizen engagement in planning.

The role of charrettes in the planning process

The term ‘charrette’ has its origins in a French term that refers to a ‘cart’. Architecture and design students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the nineteenth century would submit their projects by putting them in a cart that would be circulating to collect their final drawings. Students would jump on to the cart in an attempt to make the last touches to their work and finish their work by the submission deadline (Lennertz, 2003). This describes an intense burst of activity and a last-minute fix, yet the use of the term charrette in the planning process refers to a process of collaboration, intense dialogue and deliberation between participants to promote understanding and facilitate planning activity.

Charrettes have been used by architects since the nineteenth century, but it is only during the last quarter of the twentieth century that planners adapted the techniques to plan making in any substantial manner. For planners, charrettes are typically citizen-based efforts designed to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the community from a community-level perspective. Charrettes are also designed to provide insights into potential goals, objectives and priorities. As opposed to traditional public participation efforts, alternative methods such as charrettes help all participants learn from the process (Innes and Booher, 2005). They have been shown to convert the negatives of public participation into positives, apprehension into understanding and alienation into buy-in and ownership (Al-Kodmany, 2001; Sutton and Kemp, 2006).

A fundamental question related to charrettes is where and when they should be used as part of community planning. In our experience, we have applied charrettes as part of the process for a wide range of purposes. At times, they have focused on issues as small as how best to revitalize a mill yard or to attract new businesses to a downtown. In others, we have used them for obtaining input on regulatory reform or the creation of a capital improvement programme. In most instances, however, we have found them to be most fruitful in developing 3–5-year strategic plans. These plans tend to remove the pressure and stress of immediate issues and allow citizens to reflect on how they want their communities to evolve in the future.

The charrette process

Planning charrettes involves various elements that contribute to their success. Pre-meeting planning involves sufficient background data collection on the issues at hand, determining the dates, times and location of the meeting and deciding on the participant list, agenda and exercises for the meeting. The post-meeting work involves quick formulation of plans according to the results of the meeting and a follow-up on implementation. The main component, however, is the actual meeting itself. This involves facilitating the meeting, engaging in dialogue, creating an environment for others to feel comfortable to participate in, carrying out unstructured exercises
that arise from proposed thoughts and solutions during deliberation, and obtaining the most out of an intense brainstorming session.

Charrettes must be held at convenient times and locations so that a desirable turnout is achieved. Usually held in the community itself, in community centres, schools or the like, these meetings facilitate participation by community members and stakeholders alike. One, however, has to be careful in the selection of place and space. Several communities where we have worked selected sites that are non-municipal, such as private country clubs and religious halls. These places can have stigmas to them: Would those who cannot afford club membership feel comfortable in such a place? And would people of one faith feel comfortable in another’s structure? In any case, being in close proximity to the issue at hand also provides for a better environment for deliberation. Sufficient time must be given to all participants to plan to attend the charrette. A letter inviting the participants to the meeting, telling them what to expect during the meeting, what they will be expected to do, the issue at hand and some preliminary information so that they can get themselves familiarized with the main topic is critical. As for timing, many planning charrettes are held in the evenings or on weekends so that participants can take out time from their busy work schedules and come together for a common purpose.

The agreed-upon time frame for charrettes ranges from 1.5 days (Gibson and Whittington, 2010) to four days for general issues and up to a week for more complicated issues (Lennertz, 2003; Condon, 2008). The time frame often depends on the nature of the planning project, the stage at which the charrette is conducted and the knowledge and familiarity of the participants. For example, a charrette for purposes of identifying basic planning issues in a community could last a few hours, while one that requires working sessions that allow for dialogue, design, agreement and feedback could last multiple days spread over an extensive time period. By working within a time constraint, participants are forced to abandon usual time-consuming negotiations and useless banter and to quickly start thinking ‘outside of the box’ (Lennertz, 2003). This is beneficial as this short time period keeps ideas and thoughts fresh in people’s minds, thus enabling misunderstandings to be resolved quickly and even faster buy-in to the created plans.

Another instrumental element in this process is the facilitator, or the one who provides guidance during the entire meeting (Lennertz and Lutzenhiser, 2006). Outside consultants or facilitators are frequently brought in to the process to objectively extract information and opinions and encourage dialogue that is not biased towards any particular stakeholder’s perspective. If the charrette is not conducted by an outside consultant trained in facilitation and negotiation, it often becomes the planner’s job to act in that capacity. Indeed there is a danger of bias; however, it is incumbent upon the planner to assure the participants that his or her facilitation role is that of a neutral party. To accomplish this, the planner often needs to have this neutral role reaffirmed by political or community leaders. Another technique would be to establish a ‘bias check’ at the charrettes themselves: here, the planner at key points asks the participants if they feel that the planner’s positions are colouring their positions. The importance of planners’ roles as negotiators and mediators is critical (Susskind and Ozawa, 1984), yet, surprisingly, planners are rarely trained as negotiators as part of their education. This capability, then, gets honed with practice and experience. In essence, in order to develop a workable and successful charrette, planners require multiple skills that include politics, negotiation, facilitation, mediation, process design and meeting design (Forester, 1999). During deliberation, the facilitator or planner listens and then aims to incorporate the prioritized ideas and suggestions into the design or plan. As Forester (1999, p. 74) puts it, “If the listening does not lead to subsequent action … then such listening becomes merely condescension, wasting or manipulating others’ time”. Forester is quite right. We have had instances where the participants directly and
pointedly asked the mayor at the end of the charrette how the leader was going to embrace the words of his citizens. A failure to respond meaningfully can be met with anger and cynicism. In another, one citizen informed the community leadership that the findings of the charrette were ‘sacred’ and must be followed. In short, community leaders who ignore the findings do so at their own political peril.

To facilitate listening and incorporation of everyone’s input, smaller breakout sessions and structured and unstructured exercises are conducted. Breakout sessions facilitate discussion among smaller groups of varied backgrounds so that everyone has an equal chance and sufficient time to voice their opinions, concerns and proposed actions. Smaller groups enable the quiet and reserved participants to feel comfortable enough to talk and believe that their group members are interested in what they have to say. Facilitators walk around and make sure all groups are engaging in productive discussions and dialogues and control any heated discussions and arguments that might ensue. Smaller groups also make this job of facilitators easier, as it is easier to calm a few participants down and diverge their aggression into channels of productive discussion.

Feedback is accomplished by a session where the collaborative thoughts and ideas from all involved are compiled and displayed – for example, on boards and large sheets of paper. Participants are then asked to review the ideas, ask any lingering questions they might have and mark their preferences, thereby creating a mutually agreed list of priorities. Design charrettes make extensive use of visualization tools, such as sketches, models, maps, photographs, GIS and other computer simulations. It is not imperative that the participants be technologically savvy, as these tools are used by the facilitator’s group so as to make visualization of ideas and concepts easier for the participants. They help the community members visualize their current circumstances and assess other alternatives that might be proposed during the charrette (Sanoff, 2000). Although planning and design charrettes may have different instruments of collective visioning, their purpose and process are the same. In either case, the facilitators need to have the art to lead without leading (Condon, 2008).

**Charrettes as a tool for pedagogy and research**

From a student perspective, the charrette process can be an extremely valuable topic for both fieldwork studies and formal research. In terms of fieldwork, students have the opportunity to gain an ‘up close and personal’ look at how the planning process works. The charrette process is no longer focused on the abstract principles that they have discussed in their theory classes, but addresses how real people bring their particular thoughts, ideals and values to local planning. They can identify how roadblocks are placed in the process, how data and information can cause people to change their minds, and how the power of a charrette can contribute to the creation of a meaningful, workable plan. In our experience we have observed in several instances that student participation in charrettes has been transformational in the sense that they could typically see how important the ‘notion of compromise’ and the ‘art of the deal’ are to plan making. It is essential, however, that the students realize the importance of their work to the community. After all, their work will be a fundamental part of the plan’s development. They are informed that they are not to advocate for their own positions at the charrette itself. This point is critical. Many of our students are at a stage where they believe quite strongly in particular causes. For example, our students are overwhelmingly supportive of social justice, environmental protection, sustainability, smart growth and ‘the green movement’. They are also slow in accepting compromise or in recognizing that others are not ready to embrace their positions.
Typically, students are assigned to assist the smaller groups to prepare the group’s positions by providing them with information and data that are collected through background research conducted on the topic being discussed. They will also work with the groups to prepare concise ‘white papers’ – summaries of findings and presentational materials. At the charrette itself, the students will be assigned as reporters, scribes and note-takers at the various tables in the breakout rooms. They typically give this information over to the person reporting the findings, who, in turn, presents it to the audience as a whole. Following the end of the charrette, the students will prepare a final report on the outcomes of the process for the community in question and a summary of their thoughts and observations that are used for ‘post-charrette’ discussions back in the classroom. In sum, the charrette process is immensely valuable because the students can see theory at work, can gain a sense of how difficult it is to get to consensus in a community, and can better understand the values of citizens committed to their communities and, perhaps more importantly, how important it is for a planner to have a depth of knowledge about the community. In terms of formal research for students and faculty, charrettes can serve as a topic for dissertations, theses and formal articles. Local values, local culture, the place of learning, notions of diversity and battles over scarce resources can all be experienced in a small place, over a short period of time. It provides an immense opportunity as both a teaching and learning tool.

Working principles

From our experience in developing charrettes at the community level over the past twenty years, ten integrative working principles have emerged that are designed to guide those interested in employing charrettes as a tool in the plan-making process.

The participants

1. Charrettes belong to the participants. It is a time when officials must listen. Community members have personal knowledge that is derived from experience, which lends valuable information to the goals of the charrette process. In many cases, where the goal of the charrette is to find issues that need attention and appropriate solutions, “local knowledge is far more relevant and reliable than expert opinion” (Kotval, 2006, p. 84). Since these members have a nuanced knowledge of the issues facing a community, they appreciate solutions from the experts that address this complexity (Sutton and Kemp, 2006). The leadership must be prepared to discover positions that are counter to those of people who typically control the levers of power, such as the mayor or town council. If the leadership is not prepared to accept counter positions that emerge during the process, it should not hold the charrette. The goal is to have everyone talking, deliberating, voicing concerns and coming up with a mutually agreed-upon plan of action. Generally, a consensus is reached concerning the top five priorities, as they typically have a prominent place in the plan. For the lower priorities, it is far more difficult. The strength of a charrette lies in the fact that it invites all participants to a workshop where everyone has equal standing, regardless of their background, knowledge base or beliefs. We usually spend a considerable amount of time on establishing ‘rules of the day’ at the start of the charrette. They include the following, among others:

- All participants will speak in a positive tone.
- All participants will represent themselves rather than political or advocacy groups.
• All participants must be conscious of the need for all members to participate.
• All participants should speak in sound bites rather than long-winded responses.
• All participants will be placed at tables arbitrarily such that ‘block positions’ are eliminated.
• All name tags include only a person’s first name. There are no last names, titles or affiliations placed on them.

Charrettes will succeed if there is participation from all segments of the community, including those traditionally ignored or left out of decision making. The time of day, food, child care, transportation, translation services and location are all critical elements in facilitating attendance. The purpose of charrettes is to provide a space where quiet voices can be heard alongside those eager to voice their opinions in collaborative work. Those who are usually left behind in decision-making processes are also those who have constraints on their time and attention: a lack of interest in the issue at stake, distrust of the experts and authoritative intentions, and social or financial constraints. Sufficient advance notice of the charrette can help this group of participants to adequately prepare for and commit time to the meeting.

The positions of organized advocates with specific interests must be controlled. The deliberations are supposed to be collaborative work. General citizens need to represent their own thoughts and opinions and act collectively as a community. People decide to attend meetings and workshops (or not) for different reasons. Those who attend are typically interested in the process and want to share their opinions on the important topics before them. They might do this from a personal perspective or because they want to advocate for the positions of certain groups. In all cases, they want to be able to add their thoughts to the issues and help in the formulation of solutions. Those who come with vested interests, who are ‘single-issue’ advocates or who simply have an ‘axe to grind’ are allowed to participate. However, they must follow the intent of the charrette and the rules of the day. Our experience is that very few participants ignore these rules.

Pre-charrette

The purpose of the charrette and the geographical boundaries of the area that the charrette will focus on must be clear. Agreement on physical boundaries should be discussed before the charrette begins. Participants attending these workshops need to know specifically what the intent and required outcomes will be. This will enable them to be prepared for those issues by developing their thoughts and opinions prior to the workshop. If participants show up to the workshop unprepared and uninformed, the deliberations will usually be uninformed and vague as well.

Although background information is important, no one will read great amounts of material. What’s more, this material must be free of technical language. This background information serves two purposes. First, it challenges the perception that citizens will not have anything substantial to contribute to the process because they do not understand it. Second, it helps the participants prepare and formulate their thoughts on the topic with greater clarity.
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During the charrette

6 The charrette is usually non-judgmental and intended to be non-confrontational. Whenever there is a gathering of people from varied background and interests, there is bound to be some argument and confrontation. Listening to others' viewpoints and understanding different approaches are hard for many people, if not all of us. The charrette process should aim at understanding these varied perceptions, removing negative ones and focusing on those that are positive. It is not necessary for everyone to agree on everything – the idea is to listen and hopefully understand another person's point of view.

7 From time to time, there are groups that will boycott charrettes. Most commonly, they do this because they wish to make a political statement in opposition to the actions of those organizing the charrettes, because they believe the process is flawed or that their members were not invited directly to participate. It is critical that boycotts should be avoided at all costs. While there are no fixed means of preventing boycotts, we have found two techniques that work. First, if the leading political figure of the community approaches them and personally asks their help, more often than not they will participate. Secondly, if the organizers assure them that their positions will be fairly heard then they frequently quit the boycott.

8 Charrettes need to be forward-looking: commentary on past planning efforts must be controlled. It is easy to delve into the past and discuss how things went wrong. Although learning from past experiences is the natural way of thinking about issues that have cropped up before, the major focus should be to visualize and prioritize what we want the future to look like.

Post-charrette

9 The documentation of findings must be widely shared. Once the process is over, it is useful for everyone to see what they have collectively produced and how their own opinions framed those results. Not only does this inform the participants of the collective power of the community, but also it boosts their own morale and confidence that their voices were heard and given equal attention to that of any other participant. Since charrettes are aimed at gathering information, not all questions will be answered during the process of the charrette, and those that remain must be researched thoroughly and publicly answered. However, it is imperative that the planner(s) respond to those findings as the process of plan making occurs. This should occur in four ways. First, the charrette organizers must send a summary of the charrette and future steps back to all participants so that they have the opportunity to reflect on the findings. Secondly, the findings must be sent to the committee responsible for creating the plan such that they will have knowledge of the participants' views. Thirdly, the planner should send the summary to all municipal officials so that they, too, can reflect and act on the findings. Fourthly, the planner should be prepared, as the plan develops, to show where the findings have been incorporated into the plan or to explain why they have been rejected.

10 Charrettes must be integrated with other data collection techniques. Charrettes are similar to a research project, where the goal is to brainstorm and participate in a dialogue so
that everyone learns more about the issues at hand and, in turn, is able to understand or agree upon a set of solutions. As is the case with any type of research, charrettes must be accompanied by other techniques for data collection. Too often the information generated in this process is more than scientific in nature; it comes from the experiences of the participants as well, and can lead to changed attitudes, better informed decisions and creative solutions (Healey, 1993; Innes, 1998).

**Conclusion**

The shift in accepted theoretical frameworks in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in the inclusion of marginalized groups as participants in planning and decision-making processes and recognized that these groups could provide valuable insights into planning theory. This shift involved different forms of knowledge – both expert and experiential – and emphasized learning during the planning process through storytelling, listening, interpreting and understanding (Sandercock, 1995). Charrettes are one way of attaining citizen participation in the planning process. Although it is a guided process, it is creative as unique ideas are developed collaboratively, something that cannot be achieved through a step-by-step, routine procedure (Innes and Booher, 2005).

The charrette process must be carefully applied for there are limitations in its use. The first limitation occurs when the charrette is seen as a legal or procedural requirement of citizen participation that must be satisfied. The second occurs when the participants are self-serving and work as strong advocates for their specific causes rather than for those of the community as a whole. The third occurs when the topic at hand is presented in such a technical manner that it is not understood. We have noted this recently in charrettes dealing with the placement of biomass facilities and wind energy structures. Finally, there is also the general notion that communicative planning pays insufficient attention to the power-laden atmosphere that planning operates in (McGuirk, 2001). In that sense, it is difficult to extract the planning process from the “political realities of what is likely to happen” (McGuirk, 2001, p. 214) simply by turning to communicative planning through consensus building.

Planning is not the only field where charrettes are useful. ‘Research charrettes’ provide industries a forum for intense data collection and deliberation among industry leaders and stakeholders (Gibson and Whittington, 2010). Similarly, Sutton and Kemp (2006) show how academia and community involvement was bridged through the use of charrettes. The personal knowledge of the community members and the expert knowledge of the academics and planners make for an environment of mutual learning and collaboration. Whether used in the planning process or as an educative tool, the increased knowledge base with the inclusion of a varied number of participants makes the results that much more meaningful.

**References**


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