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The Practice of Community Charrettes Design in the UK (Symposium)

A report on the Symposium proceedings by Architecture and Design Scotland and University of Dundee

November 2012



**The Geddes Institute for Urban Research
School of the Environment
University of Dundee**

The Practice of Community Charrettes Design in the UK (Symposium)

Friday 26 October 2012

Organized by Dr. Husam Al Waer

A report on the Symposium
proceedings by Architecture and
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Dundee

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Introduction

This report, by Architecture and Design Scotland and University of Dundee, summarises key themes from the 2012 Symposium on 'The Practice of Community Charrettes Design in the UK'. This event built upon an earlier 'Masterplanning' symposium, for which [a summarized report is also available](#). This report is set out in four sections: the first sets the background to the event, the second summarises key issues discussed by presenters and delegates, the third derives key themes, and the fourth draws some conclusions. A video of the symposium is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poZZsXZHfnU&feature=youtu.be>

Section 1: Background

Better engagement and collaboration with local communities is fundamental to the planning and delivery of sustainable places. This recognizes that local people contribute expert knowledge about 'their place' and will ultimately have responsibility as 'owners' or 'stewards' of the eventual outcomes. This key driver of the Scottish Government's interest in Charrette style processes raises the question of what does 'meaningful engagement and collaboration' look like?

The Symposium, organized by Dr. Husam al Waer, brought together practitioners, researchers and policymakers to discuss the issue of charrettes. The abstract for the Symposium describes:

“There is broad recognition across government, practitioners and academics of the need to build community capacity and engage civil society more widely in the sustainable development agenda - particularly in the early stage of the master-planning process. We need approaches to master-planning moving away from conventional (linear) planning processes towards those which are more inclusive, iterative and community-led. It reverses the culture of fragmentation and mistrust which have bedevilled relationships between public and private players in the development sector... This symposium examines the rise of charrettes over the past five years and how they are being used in the United Kingdom.”

The symposium was opened by Rob Duck, Professor of Environmental Geoscience and Dean of the School of the Environment, following which Barbara Illsley, senior lecturer in Town and Regional Planning at University of Dundee, summarised key points from the first masterplanning symposium:

Collaboration is central to managing change through current masterplanning processes which seek to align efficiencies – of space, resources, and engagement – with a need to create conditions for improved public life which levers economic advantage. The main observations from this are:

- **Context:** people and place matter
- **Clarity:** what is the strategic intent?
- **Client:** what is the role of the end user?
- **Collaboration:** how are people involved?
- **Change:** is a constant

This raises two key issues:

- How is 'engagement by design' achieved?
- What is the status of any charrette, and its outcome/s?

In terms of the practice of community charrette design in the UK, the masterplanning process is informed by priorities identified through aligning speed and concentration of resources, with intense engagement and 'real time' decision making. However four tensions are evident:

- **Authenticity:** is this an act of 'theatre' (staged managed), or an open process?
- **Context:** is the process style driven or place driven?
- **Status:** does the process and outcome fit with statutory plan making or is it separate?
- **Impact:** Fast design, slow delivery?

Hina Hirani recently completed an MSc specializing in Charrettes, and described her research in which she interviewed 3 groups: experts/independents; those involved in delivering the project; and those directly or indirectly affected by the project. Overall, feedback was very positive for charrettes compared to conventional planning processes; however, key questions surrounded delivery post-charrette or *as some would call it 'charrette hangover'*. Five major themes were:

1. Stakeholder engagement and 'feedback loops'

Views varied according to projects, but in general, groups 1&2 believed: *'It provides an opportunity to increase stakeholders engagement and bring the community on board'*. Whereas Group 3 felt *'it's a great show; we've been listened to; but we haven't been included in the decision-making process'*.

2. Collaboration between stakeholders

Findings were very positive across all 3 groups: *'It is a vehicle for collaboration between decision-makers, communities and professionals'*. Working collaboratively helps all interested parties to understand and support a project's rationale.

3. Vision and outcomes

The charrette is considered to be a very effective and focused approach which increases probability for implementation... *'it also promotes trust between citizens and government through the building of long-term community goodwill'*.

4. Accelerated timescale for dealing with complex issues

The majority believed that 5 to 7 days was a good enough length of time to create the momentum to work collaboratively. But views were mixed due to the complex process: *'fast track process tends to miss out important issues within the time frame if pre-charrette stage is not done properly; pre- and post-charrette work need full energy, time and resources to make the process successful'*.

5. Leadership, knowledge and skill-set

Charrette-like events need a good leader: *'If we need to mainstream this approach in planning system, it requires skilled facilitator with a good leadership to run event smoothly. Plus it should be well resourced not just during the event but pre and post charrette process to make it successful'*.

Leading into the presentations, Eric Dawson from Architecture and Design Scotland highlighted three comments relating to charrettes which were raised at the previous masterplan symposium:

1. Drama / Theatre – to what extent is a charrette an orchestrated 'stage managed' process, guided by a pre-set vision and the skill sets of the facilitators?
2. Facilitator skills – to what extent can diverse and contradictory community views be resolved; does the process genuinely 'open out', or 'inhibit and manage'?
3. Hangover – what happens after the focus and spotlight has moved on?

Having set this context, two questions were posed to the delegates to initiate a discussion:

- What does pragmatic collaboration to manage change in places look like?
- What is the role of design in changing places?

The responses to these are noted in the final section of this report.

Section 2: Summary of presentations

2.1 Presentation by Sandy Robinson, Principal Architect with the Scottish Government Title - Knowledge / Dialogue / Place

Sandy started by noting the important role of 'relationships' in any consultative design process. In some cases the planning system is currently negotiated through an appeals process – which is a poor use of resources - Instead of dialogue, there is conflict!

A definition of charrettes was described as: *a series of interactive design workshops in which the public, local professionals and other stakeholders work directly with a design team to generate a masterplan*. Fundamentally, charrettes provide a method for a design-led approach based on consultation; however, it is not a 'one-size fits all' process, and needs to be seen as a tool or working method to be used at the appropriate time.

Traditionally, planning seeks responses to proposals for the future – but this can be challenging, and responses can be negative as the proposal 'doesn't relate to me'. Moreover, proposals attract 'individual' responses based on narrow interests that don't take account of the 'bigger picture'. The charrette process is not about creating a 'wish list', which tends to attract 'abstract responses'; but about asking people what they know. It is not about collecting facts; but applying knowledge.

Three important aspects of charrettes were noted:

1. Vision – a chance to pull people together around place and common interest; seeing 'your' interest as part of the bigger picture, and placing things in context
2. Engagement and energy – the process can be good fun
3. Output – a chance to demonstrate ideas graphically through drawing, sketches or doodles

Sandy described the Scottish Government's sponsored charrette series in 2010 (Ladyfield in Dumfries, Lochgelly in Fife, and Grandholme in Aberdeen), a further series in 2012 (Johnstone, Callendar and Girvan) and a forthcoming series in 2013 to be announced. The phrase "Aim high and miss! Aim low and achieve it!" was quoted. Only through being ambitious will quality improve.

Essential charrette features were described as:

- Working on site; to work with local people and understand what problems / issues are
- Operate a publicly accessible design studio; rapidly work up ideas for consideration
- Public meetings initiate dialogue; local people feed back; vote on ideas to reach consensus
- The process is iterative and involves presenting and testing ideas through challenge and review
- The charrette needs to be held over several days – 5 to 7 – in which ideas are tested and refined
- There is potential to engage people who wouldn't normally participate
- the process needs to carry on – structures need to be in place to take the project forward
- different graphic techniques convey understanding, and give an impression of what proposals look and feel like
- Pre and post charrette and post charrette activities are important - The right people need to participate; requiring publicity and raising awareness.

The intention is that Charrettes will integrate with the planning system, to assist plan making and be adopted as SPG. However, the method is a means of co-production which requires active engagement by the community. Not every action will be a physical intervention; some will require social structures and community organisations to take forward short, medium and long term actions. For example, Girvan has set up a town team, who are setting up a credit union.

Sandy finished by noting of a charrette: "You might not build it, but you should build upon it".

2.2. Presentation by Susan Parham, Head of Urbanism, Centre for Sustainable Communities, University of Hertfordshire
Title - The Practice of Community Charrettes Design - Learning lessons from Norway and Transylvania and beyond

Susan used her experience as both teacher and practitioner to speak about how the charrette process has moved from the margins to the planning mainstream. The language of engagement is at the heart of public policy and planning, and charrettes enable public participation and engagement. Engaging communities in decision making helps to achieve 'sustainable urbanism'.

Susan also described how urbanism principles underpin the charrette process; such as creating walkable neighbourhoods, ensuring good connectivity through streets and blocks, and integrating public transport.

Charrettes need to be authentic; Arnstein's ladder of participation was referred to in connection with differing levels of citizen involvement that range from 'non-participation' through 'tokenism' to 'citizen power'. Authentic (rather than cynical) participation can enable a 'bottom up' decision making process that is more democratic. However, some people may be reluctant to engage as their involvement lends legitimacy to a process and outcomes that they may disagree with.

Susan agreed with points raised during Sandy's presentation about good practice for structuring a charrette event: Locate the venue where the issue is; hold it over several days; the importance of a 3 stage process comprising preparation, the event itself and post event activity; the importance of following up actions to engage the community; the need for monitoring and feedback; encouraging wider participation and offering a 'safety net' to catch people who might not otherwise engage.

The charrette process offers a palette of different methods and techniques, dependant on design issues being faced, requiring the facilitator to have a range of skill sets: being a good listener; good designer; project manager; keeping things moving; not manipulating, but encouraging participation in an intense environment.

The charrette process deals with iterative problem solving: issues are aired 'live', and how they are dealt with needs to be transparent and audited with feedback loops. The process encourages people to think of their perspective in light of the views of others. The process was described as: consider concepts > analyse alternatives > review ideas > refine proposals > bring together in a plan.

Susan drew on personal experience in helping to facilitate charrettes to demonstrate how they can operate in a variety of contexts and scales. Norwegian projects noted the importance of walking the place to get to know it, and of communal voting to arrive at a democratic consensus. In Transylvania there was limited technology and no broadband; however, this can result in a 'no frills' approach buoyed by lots of goodwill! The charrette technique was used to consider whole settlements (large and small), detailed areas (town squares), and regional scale issues (in Hertfordshire – to consider settlement patterns to meet housing need whilst avoiding urban sprawl).

The process offers many benefits at a time when planning has constrained resources: it can save time and money; it can invite thinking about how future issues can be addressed to visualise possibilities; it can enable communities to be in a strong position to bid for funding; the views of a community can't be dismissed, and there is an expanded role for communities and 3rd sector in planning places which is traditionally top down and expert driven; proper engagement can help to produce better outcomes.

Potential 'weaknesses' were acknowledged: it is not 'one way of doing' and needs to sit as part of a broader palette of techniques; facilitator skills are critical; the process needs to be transparent and authentic, without any preconceived answers; is the process suitable to engage with large scale issues (e.g. how to deal with 'big bits of kit' - highways; nuclear power; grid networks; waste, etc?).

2.3. Presentation by David Thompson, Lead Officer - Urban Design Fife Council

Title - *Place Frameworks: Learning from Charrettes*- Place frameworks – learning from charrettes

David started by querying the need to innovate, and where there may be opportunities for improvement in the planning system. He related four aspects of planning service to equivalent private business motivations which focus on the customer, and noted that a charrette can make things happen faster, better, cheaper and more conveniently. In doing this they focus on a) Collaboration, b) Delivery and c) Outcomes.

planning	business
speed	faster
quality	better
resources	cheaper
Customer service	convenient

There is a need to identify the right questions to be addressed in creating a place brief, with issues being tackled through a shared sense of ownership; understanding there is no single solution, and awareness about the consequences of what will happen. There should not be any pre-determined answers. Instead, the process should be consensus driven; aiming to achieve the best quality for people to live their life. As with previous speakers, different levels of engagement were noted in terms of 'authenticity' (using Planning Aid for Scotland's three levels of engagement – a) giving information; b) giving information to consult and listen to views; c) giving information to consult and listen to views, to work with communities as partners, in appropriate situations).

David spoke of his experience with the Lochgelly charrette, facilitated by Andres Duany. Leading up to the event there is a need to raise awareness and get key people involved – politicians, residents, community, schools - and 'place check' was used as a method to help people discuss their place. Common to a lot of development planning, it became evident through the charrette process that sites had been allocated without due consideration of the spatial consequences for how streets might align, or how blocks and plots would form. There is a need for a long term spatial vision that thinks holistically about how the town will grow, in order to work backwards and allocate sites.

Principles of new urbanism were evident through the Lochgelly charrette: e.g. walk bands; connectivity; overcoming blockages and barriers; connected, meaningful open space provision. The charrette also employed a range of presentation techniques to demonstrate ideas through drawings, sketches and other graphics methods. The importance of the facilitator's skills sets was again noted; as issues are tackled in 'real time' facilitators need to mediate, communicate and inspire.

David questioned whether the charrette technique is scalable and replicable, and described his work with Fife Council in relation to Development Planning where, by working with developers, positive outcomes were achieved through operating a rapid four stage process: prepare, promote, reflect, and refine. A similar approach was used in relation to Development Management where a series of four 2 hour design led workshops sought to improve the quality of a housing proposal.

Post charrette activity is important, and the formation of a 'Lochgelly Town team' was discussed, with links to Council sections and budgets; supported by a dedicated council officer, focussed on making a positive difference. Delivery is critical, and David described work to identify who takes ownership for delivering development and how a programme can be co-ordinated to align infrastructure investments. This helped to illustrate the need for integrated, joined-up collaboration.

At a time of budget cut backs, the charrette process allows a rapid method to focus on place based issues, to think about outcomes and people's lives; how they might enjoy better health, education, and employment; and how existing assets may be best utilised.

In conclusion, David applied his planning/business 'criteria' to show that a charrette can be:
Faster: Design-led, form based approaches enable collaborative processes
Better: Enables deeper & simultaneous exploration of complex issues
Cheaper: More accurate planning creates more certainty and more value from sparse resource
Convenient: More certainty creates realistic and shared expectations about delivery

Section 3: Emerging themes from the Symposium

Through a Question and Answer session, and delegate discussion, certain key points emerged:

Engagement, participation and collaboration are expected norms in public policy and planning. The charrette method allows local people to participate in decision making processes for the future of their place. However, concerns exist about authenticity (does it deliver a preconceived solution?); legitimacy (people may withhold from the process); and ownership (people come together at a charrette because they have to work together, but subsequently retrench to established positions).

The process enables a holistic approach to thinking about complex issues and the future needs of a place, where single issues can be seen as shared issues, requiring the adoption of a collaborative approach to problem solving. However, local authority structures are fragmented and divided – there is a need to join up and streamline regulatory and delivery processes.

The importance of skills was a recurring theme; facilitators must mediate and inspire, but not ‘lead’. Communities also require skills and support to take forward and develop an initiative on its own behalf - they need to be empowered to make things happen; they need to be able to act quickly to overcome red-tape and bureaucracy; they may need educated - this all requires proper resourcing.

There is a need to ensure that the ‘right people’ are involved and active in the process: those that can make things happen, and those who block decision making! Showstoppers need to be identified, and proper baseline information needs gathered. More needs to be done to promote positive dialogue and understanding - communities hate being defined by problems, and there is a need to ask the right questions to understand issues. All of this requires proper resourcing in the period leading up to any event – the pre charrette stage is therefore critical to the success of any outcomes.

The notion of Charrettes can be a difficult concept, particularly when it relates to communities. There is a sense that it is ‘window dressing’; imported from elsewhere. This is not a sole technique, and it should integrate with other approaches, such as learning from previous regeneration projects. We need to link vision back to broader programmes; to get on-site transformation and action; to talk about something real and transformative. There is a sense that ‘charrettes’ reach too far ahead; that they run too quick, and that a more critical and reflective approach is necessary which goes beyond knowledge to draw on wisdom. Clarity and discipline is required to know what is being done, and how to drive a project forward. We should not be performing a parlour game!

At the previous masterplan symposium, Professor Brian Evans stated that ‘Places that we love are rarely the product of singular or linear processes’. Masterplanning and charrette processes typically seek to provide ‘answers’ that are ‘worked out’, ‘deliverable’ with an ‘action programme’, based on physical interventions and ‘sound principles’ (perimeter blocks; active frontages; etc). However, the previous symposium also identified that things are messy (and that ‘messy’ may be desirable); that dealing with ‘people’ introduces complexity, ambiguity, contradiction; that sometimes it’s not about ‘physical’ but about enabling social (or economic) structures to evolve. This approach seeks to understand the questions and issues.

This raises the issue of ‘Who commissions the charrette’? Landowner or Local Authorities will seek an ‘answers’ approach – providing certainty to deliver; funders and financial backers aren’t interested in “creating conditions that allow small incremental change to evolve over time”!

What is the reality of implementing actions through a regulatory planning regime? Realistically there is a limited timescale at pre MIR stage to feed into the plan production. However, there are also other corporate planning, asset management, community and business planning exercises being conducted; how does these link, join-up and influence each other?

Section 4: Final reflections

Collaboration is in... autocratic silo mentality is out! But how do we do it?

Sam Cassels from Architecture + Design Scotland offered some overarching thoughts, and started by noting that a lot of 'place based reviews' are being carried out; but his experience was that the planning system is not have a prominent role in this. It is therefore important to see 'charrettes' in the context of other processes that are already being carried out. He summed up six key points:

Authenticity

The central question remains: what makes a charrette authentic? Is it authentic because it has a 'world renowned' facilitator? For it to be meaningful and deliver, local people need to have faith.

Drivers for change – ethical and practical

What is the driver for change? Is it because it's recognised as a fair process that gets to good outcomes? Or is it because the Scottish Government says it's a good thing to do; or because it's fast, doesn't cost much, and you can get away with it! What drives action?

'Charrette hangover'

This is critical - 'sand in the machine' - and will determine whether it's workable or not. 'It was a stunning charrette, but did it lead to emergence?' How do things proceed; what to do with the co-production model? It is essential that the charrette hangover issue is addressed.

Understand the full palette

There is a range of ways of doing; the charrette is part of a broader palette of techniques.

Within this is the need to get the right type of facilitator. Is it better to have someone from the 'outside' who is independent; or an 'insider' who has strong links, and a good understanding? This recognises there are not generic skills; there is simply the need to 'do the right thing in this place'.

Fit into longer process

The charrette does not 'start' or 'end'; it continues as part of wider processes. We need to get better at seeking the right questions, not the right answers! We need to recognise that people will give answers relative to the questions being asked; we need to be careful about prompting the right questions (as people may give answers that they expect others want to hear!).

Be honest about capacity

We need to be honest about what is needed in terms of resources, skills and knowledge... and our motives for doing! We need to recognise that similar exercises are being rolled out in other ways, e.g. through 'asset review'.

Section 5: Appendix

This section groups audience feedback in relation to the questions posed at the start of the event.

Q1: What does pragmatic collaboration to manage change in places look like?

Delegate comments were grouped under five themes:

CLARITY/PURPOSE

- Development of trust and ownership
- Democratic platform
- To collaborate with stakeholders

FUTURES

- A shared vision of where we are going
- Holistic approach
- A vision, accurate, clear and detailed
- Representations of proposal

ANALYSIS

- Happy public
- Respect
- Trust

IMPROVEMENTS?

- Could arrive with fixed ideas before the process
- Find a common language for all participants
- Timescale – too long can be counter productive, too short can be a waste of time

DELIVERY

- Positive
- Inclusive – all voices should be heard
- Equitable
- People from different backgrounds sharing ideas and experience
- Open forum

Q2: What is the role of design in changing places?

Delegate comments were grouped under four themes:

OUTPUTS

- Making better places
- Sustainable spaces
- “happy” places
- Improved quality of life
- Improved vitality of place
- More inviting places

CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNICATION

- Managing changes democratically
- Problems solving tool
- Investment of ideas
- Establishes a working structure

LEADERSHIP

- Who’s responsibility?
- Management
- Realistic and achievable vision
- Problem solving
- Investing in ideas

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROCESS

- Testing measures
- Keeping strategy together
- Monitoring and evaluating
- Impact on community, place and economy
- Flexibility and adaptation

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*The report of the Symposium is also
available on the Geddes Institute website:-*

*[http://www.dundee.ac.uk/geddesinstitute/
index.htm](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/geddesinstitute/index.htm)*



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