

Involving the Public

Donna Hinde in conversation with
Nancy Chater on the challenges of
public participation in park design
and management



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Donna Hinde (DH): I think that people have the right and responsibility to be involved in the planning and design processes for their parks. Landscape architects and other design professionals who practise in the public realm have not done a great job in the past of involving the public in ways by which they can make meaningful contributions to their projects. I've sworn that I will never do another town hall meeting or an open house again because we learned the hard way that they are not useful methods. They end up being a huge waste of time for the client. We've worked really hard in our office—and I help colleagues in other firms, as well—to design a process that allows residents and other stakeholders to be involved in each stage of decision making. We never go very far without talking to the community. We try to review work-in-progress before it's been finalized and we think very carefully about the best methods of sharing information. I've found the most productive forums for participation to be grounded in conversations, not presentations.

Nancy Chater (NC): What happens at these town hall meetings that makes them unproductive?

DH: Assuming that the project is a bit clouded in controversy, I think people are often angry when they come. Many automatic responses are, "nobody talked to me," "why am I hearing about it so late," "I didn't know that there was a meeting."

NC: If people feel excluded, right from the start, they get their backs up, and want to air grievances.

DH: Right. And at a town hall meeting, the consultant is proudly presenting the work they've done, yet that kind of presentation with question-and-answer format is not a collaborative way to engage people. Similarly, I find that with an open house, where again

Canoe Landing, a downtown park in Toronto

The Planning Partnership

Community engagement is key to successful public space.

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designs are proudly displayed, the problem is that it's been too far developed. And often the way we talk about things is practically impenetrable for the average person. We are now becoming more inventive in the way that we engage the public. There are helpful tools, such as physical or digital models, animations, precedent images of similar landscapes, cut outs or templates of facilities, that are all useful to get people to collage ideas together. We will also have people diagram with the aid of a designer to try to illustrate ideas. It's absolutely a tenet of our approach that a designer is holding the pen and is guiding the process. Members of the public sometimes feel a bit easier, though, about contributing if they too are scribbling along with the people on the design team.

NC: It sounds as if smaller groups are important, not a big room with a single speaker, but interactive, smaller groups participating in a hands-on way.

DH: Yes, and the number of participants doesn't matter. It's all about creating smaller conversations within that larger forum. Typically people are comfortable talking in a group of six to ten people, so there are often multiple conversations happening at an event. I think success in public participation depends on the venue, the props that you use to engage people, and the questions you ask them. It's a simple formula. I have learned to purposely construct any question I ask in a positive way. That simple act has real repercussions on the input.

NC: Could you give me an example of a positive approach?

DH: I never ask what people don't like about a place because I find you will learn that through conversation anyway. You have to start with what's working really well and then build on that. So I ask "what do you love about the place, what do you love about your community, what are the three things that work best about this space?" Even when you ask a positive question, people will say, "the City does not pick up garbage enough, there is too much traffic." So I say again, "now tell me the three things you really love." It takes a bit of work but it's amazing that they will switch and think about what really does work best in their

community or park or whatever the topic happens to be.

NC: How do you balance the leadership role of the designer with the problems associated with "design by committee"?

DH: This is where designers often fail in creating a process to get the input they need. You have to ask the right questions. I absolutely disagree with design by committee. You have to let the designers design. I've learned this working with our firm and other firms where I'm not acting as a designer. I am acting as the person figuring out how to get the landscape architects the information they need to design. In those kinds of forums, you ask targeted questions about the plan that will enable decisions to be made. Those questions are hard to anticipate until you understand the issues and concerns on the part of the residents and see the design and understand what the designers need input on to move forward. It's not a process of saying, "tell me all the things you want to see in the park." You have to be careful not to ask those kinds of questions because you create unrealistic expectations.

NC: What about the dynamic of meetings where one or two people, who happen to have strong views, tend to dominate?

DH: If there are 60 people, there are 60 opinions, and you want to let everybody talk and share 60 opinions. I have had some situations where people push back, saying, "no I don't want to go into small groups; I want to share my views with everybody." I will often say to those people that they are welcome to talk to me, and if others want to hear they can sit and listen to you, but otherwise please join a table and start the small group discussions. You know, 99 percent of the people will go into groups because they want to share their opinions too. The challenge is designing the format of the meeting so that you don't expose yourself to that kind of situation and waste everybody's time. We also try to construct the conversations so that you don't necessarily have to have somebody facilitating the conversation in small groups, such as a landscape architect, an architect, planner or an urban designer. I think it's even more interesting when there is not one of us leading the



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conversation in a particular way. We have to be really thoughtful about the props that are on the table, the plans or drawings we are using, and about asking the right questions so that people can have a conversation among themselves.

NC: It leads to them feeling empowered.

DH: Yes, it's about people taking charge. I find that people are very bright and more than capable of understanding the questions and what is expected of them. We are there to make sure that the process doesn't get stuck.

NC: Do you sometimes have trouble getting people to participate in the process or do you typically have well-attended meetings?

DH: I think that was the situation maybe ten years ago. I find that now, overwhelmingly, it's the other way around. People really feel a right and responsibility to be involved. They may be intimidated. Or there may be language barriers. For example, our firm is currently designing a new Central Park in Regent Park. There it takes a whole other set of skills because in those public consultation events there are interpreters for sometimes ten different languages. While there's a presentation, there's chatter in many different languages simultaneously due to the interpreting. In those situations, it's impossible to have people writing on a flip chart, or writing notes on a plan, because English is typically not their first language, so we tend to use a lot of imagery modeling and cut outs where people can collage images they think are representative of the kind of park they would like to see. For us the challenge is trying to understand the needs and desires as well as the

cultural references of such richly diverse stakeholders. We are intent on embedding their ideas and sensibilities into the design of the public realm.

NC: Do you find that people really love their parks, in terms of the growth of participation you have seen in the past 10 years?

DH: Yes, there is a real sense of ownership of their spaces, as there should be. In Toronto, parks are absolutely the focus of the neighbourhoods, and so I am never critical about the passion that people bring to the table. We've been involved in lots of projects where it's been tough to try and unravel the issues, to get all the competing demands to be more balanced, and get everybody talking calmly and respectfully to each other.

NC: What would be some of the typical hot button issues?

DH: We are doing a waterfront project right now in Yellowknife, and it's really interesting because it's the same issues as most waterfronts: a concern about more public access to the water's edge, clearer public access to public property, development that is compatible with public space. These are common concerns.

We did some work with PMA on Neshama Park in North Toronto and in that case it was a park that was to be redesigned with play equipment that would be universally accessible for children, and it was being funded partly through private donation. The two main issues there were interesting. Many residents were not comfortable with the fact that private money was being spent on a public park. The other issue was that playground equipment was being changed to enable children of all abilities to play. Through this kind of initiative, we hoped it would encourage a broader understanding, and acceptance, of the capabilities of all children. It was very interesting to work with groups that represented both specialized children's abilities and able-bodied children, as park users.

NC: Were you able to come to a consensus?

DH: Yes. There were 200 residents at the first workshop and 15 residents at the fourth workshop. PMA Landscape Architects is guiding the park through construction now, so that is a good sign of success. It may be too idealistic to think that everyone agrees with the final plan, but participants in the workshops are given the opportunity to understand how decisions were made through the design process. I think residents were very frustrated by an original design that went too far before they had input. Residents continue to be very involved with PMA during construction.

NC: How early on should a plan be presented?

DH: I have three benchmarks for public input during the design process. The first is a consultation event to get a common understanding of existing conditions, opportunities for change, and the fundamental principles of the design. Let's all understand first what's working really well about this place, and what are the biggest opportunities for change before plans are prepared. The second benchmark is to get a common understanding of the options. The third benchmark is to get a common understanding of the preferred plan. I find that I usually get involved in projects because the client and the team have gone right to the third stage decision-making benchmark of the plan without involving people in the earlier stages. It's a relatively easy thing for us all to change the way we involve people by involving them in those three steps.

NC: With a staged process of consultation do you find that you have the same people staying with the process or do you get new people at each meeting? Does that matter?

DH: The easiest process is when the people that came to the first meeting come to the second one. The more difficult process is when people come to the second meeting and say they don't know anything about it. You have to be ready to take those people through the first step, but not with all the participants, so there's a work table where you take anybody who's not up to speed. This has become easier with things being posted on websites.

NC: Another challenge you have identified is long-term maintenance and management of urban parks. You mentioned for example that all the waterfront projects in Toronto are being built yet there is no new management system in place.

DH: It's really very frightening that there are a lot of waterfront parks coming online and the City has no expanded capacity to take care of the parks. Sugar Beach, Sherbourne Park, and HTO are gaining world-wide recognition. We are finding that the City is stripped to the bone and there is no money for maintenance. There is no budget for horticultural maintenance, for weeding, proper mowing, or watering. And there's pressure to do maintenance quickly, with flying crews that dash in and out, so things happen like naturalized landscapes get mowed because it's the easiest way to maintain it.

I'm very fearful that the situation is not going to get better with the new political regime in Toronto. The interesting next stage will be whether or not more residents' groups take a more active role in the management of their parks. If that is the way of the future, I wonder if it may lead to people outside the neighbourhood not feeling as welcome if parks become the purview of the local neighbourhood. It's certainly the model in many American cities in that the residents' groups or associations of various types take over.

NC: Right, like a conservancy—a new model for Toronto. Do you think that it's viable to have neighbourhood stewardship, in terms of consistency, reliability, knowing what to do?

DH: I think that is a viable solution. Neighbourhood groups do have to become more involved. It's not unlike some of the BIAs where the BIAs are taking over construction and maintenance and management of their landscapes and streetscapes, such as the Yorkville BIA and the Bloor Street project in Toronto.

NC: It's complicated, though, by issues related to unions. You run up against pitting volunteers against unionized City workers, and the City workers are understandably not thrilled to have their work

being done for free, while at the same time they recognize that they don't have the person-power or the budget.

I wonder if a solution would be for neighbourhood groups to get into political advocacy, to push the local governing bodies to increase the budget or allocate more money?

DH: They can try, but they are going to be told that the pie is only so big.

NC: Is there an opportunity to put in a budget line item for maintenance costs, especially for the first couple of years, right up front within the overall cost of the park?

DH: That's a very interesting idea. Here's a relevant analogy: in greenfields what happens is that the developer typically pays for the capital costs of the park construction up front in an emerging neighbourhood, and he or she will get paid back that capital cost over time by the municipality as the neighbourhood starts to get built out. The point that I want to make is that the developer also commits to maintaining that park—to address your point—for the first three years and then turns it over to the municipality. They do it because they want to make sure that the park looks great, so they can sell more new homes, but it's an interesting model. There is something in that model to learn for downtown parks—building in a maintenance budget that is carried in the capital cost.

NC: It seems that the thinking behind the design and planning for new parks is ahead of the systems in place to support them. We are taking a new direction by building the parks first, and then building the neighbourhoods around them because they become a catalyst for community development and also increase property values if they are done well. That's very forward thinking, but it seems other departments in the City have not caught up.

While there is a great vision of what the parks can do for the new neighbourhoods, with Waterfront Toronto locating these parks as central to community development, the vision is ahead of the curve the City is on. Yet there are various newer models, such as public private partnerships, such as developers having to maintain the park for the first few years to get it up and running, and then maybe community stewardship kicks in after that. Another phase of maintenance might be established after that.

DH: The question is: How can landscape architects facilitate that enhanced awareness and the ensuing conversation at the municipal level and how can they help realize the opportunity to come in and help neighbourhoods improve their park, and give them the tools they need to do that?

NC: This may be more of a suburban situation, but when people get street trees planted on their road allowance land in front, they get information about watering the street tree. Maybe we need more private donors for public parks?

DH: People go crazy about that. Going back to my example of

Neshama Park, some residents were really frightened that the private sector was paying for most of the work.

NC: What about the foundation model? Toronto could go with the American foundation model. Donors give to the foundation, the foundation is administered by the City, and so it is publicly controlled.

Another challenge you identified was the heavy influence of the demands of the municipal recreation program for active sports fields in park design. Sports groups have very strong influence in most communities.

DH: I think we're becoming a little better at balancing the demands of active sports with the demands of the people who want passive places. We are finding that because there is such an inadequate supply of sports fields, especially in the built-up areas of the city, the recreation departments are understandably anxious to build more baseball diamonds and soccer fields or some other sports facilities in parks. This pushes out the other users because they aren't represented by an association like the sports teams are. Again the conversations that we have with all the representatives of the client—in order to get everybody to understand the competing demands on the park—are important. If people understand the challenges of design, if you take those challenges out of your office and into those working sessions, and you engage those representatives to help you solve the problem—don't just tell me what the problem is, help me solve the problem—a different level of understanding is created about the limits and capacity of the space.

We find this challenge particularly in emerging neighbourhoods when we are trying to create a green space that has a more urban character. The municipality has an eye on that green space for football fields, or soccer fields, whereas our intention is to create a park with a more urban character. I think it's changing, slowly, and everybody is gradually gaining a renewed understanding of how that green space has to function. It's about balancing a wide spectrum of needs and not just specific sports interests.

I think that we've got some great models of new urban parks in Toronto. The City is interested in a more balanced approach to design now. For example, Central Park in Regent Park has a large open green where all kinds of sports can be played and community events can happen. It isn't necessarily dedicated to one sport, but it can easily morph into a soccer field, or a place you can throw a baseball around, or you host a community event, a movie night, or whatever. This is important, because of the broad, culturally diverse neighbourhoods we have; that is, the people who live in the neighbourhoods don't necessarily play baseball and football.

As designers, we have to be really good listeners to figure out how communities want to use their parks.

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