

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## How arts and cultural strategies enhance community engagement and participation

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Community engagement is the process of public participation and involvement that promotes relationship building through learning, action, and the expression of needs and values. Community engagement can bring vibrancy and innovation to planning practice by strengthening the degree of public commitment to planning processes and making more perspectives available to decision makers. Planners and community leaders already promote engagement through a variety of traditional tools, including public surveys, visioning workshops, town halls, meetings, and public hearings. Increasingly, however, planners and community leaders are using new, creative tools as well as traditional ones.

Creative tools for community engagement include innovative visual-art techniques, storytelling, social-networking technology, exhibits, music, performance, festivals, and community gatherings. When planners use these tools, it can indicate that they are receptive to feedback, genuine in their acknowledgment of others' viewpoints, and committed to making participation and the development of relationships as easy as possible. This brief presents a specific set of creative tools based on three planning goals and provides examples of each in planning practice. Website links are provided to programs and related resources.

This brief explores how arts and culture strategies can be used by planners to engage the public in community planning processes. It makes the following key points:

### ARTS AND CULTURE BRIEFING PAPERS 04

#### KEYPOINT #1:

***Creative tools can strengthen the understanding and exploration of community values.***

#### KEYPOINT #2:

***Creative tools increase stakeholder involvement.***

#### KEYPOINT #3:

***Creative tools can better engage the public in community and urban design projects.***



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## KEYPOINTS

Planners can use arts and culture tools to expand their collection of engagement strategies as part of an appeal to diverse populations that is broader than what traditional tools alone can achieve. A multitude of available options gives community members the opportunity to find the most appropriate method of involvement for them.

Each key point is explored in greater depth below.

### KEYPOINT #1:

***Creative tools can strengthen the understanding and exploration of community values.***

Traditional tools for community engagement include public opinion surveys, visioning workshops, town halls, meetings, and public hearings. These resources are useful in relaying information to the public and receiving feedback. However, traditional tools do not always elicit ample participation and can rarely explore the values and needs of citizens thoroughly. A stronger awareness of citizen values helps connect community perspectives with planning efforts. This results in more satisfied residents and leaders alike. Creative tools promote community engagement by strengthening the process of understanding and exploring community values.

The main creative tools for exploring community values and needs are visual-art techniques and storytelling. Visual-art techniques include drawing, sculpting, modeling, graphic rendering, and painting. Visual-art techniques (such as the use of illustrations during community visioning exercises) are already being used in planning workshops and meetings. Storytelling is a tool for collective listening and communication.

As a basic visual art, rendering or illustration is a useful tool, long incorporated with planning at visioning and scenario-development workshops. To illustrate concepts, planners incorporate drawing. More recently, drawing has come to involve innovations such as digital imagery, three-dimensional modeling, and the use of physical objects, such as wooden blocks that represent buildings, infrastructure, and other aspects of the built environment. Communities can invite artists to facilitate workshops or have community members lead their own processes. An artist might develop visual aids for the community's ideas about possible futures by asking what values and needs the community has for the project, program, or design. Those values and needs can then be expressed in an image such as a drawing, rendering, or painting.

Mural art as an engagement technique can be applied in settings such as celebrations of history, commemorations, and educational events. Community members can paint in small groups, perhaps with the guidance of an artist or planner. Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program ([www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org)) is an example of a citywide program that develops partnerships with schools, grassroots organizations, city agencies, and philanthropies to create murals for community engagement.

Volunteer arts collectives can be promoted by the city through incentives and promotional material. The organization Flywheel ([www.flywheelarts.org](http://www.flywheelarts.org)) in Easthampton, Massachusetts, is an example of a non-profit, volunteer-run community arts space. Originally established as an art collective, Flywheel brings people together to make art while promoting, organizing, coordinating, and working with the community.

In Baltimore, the nonprofit organization Art on Purpose ([www.artonpurpose.org](http://www.artonpurpose.org)) provides educational, guided processes to bring people together around art and ideas. In 2008, it organized part of an exhibit at the Walters Museum of Art and conducted a symposium using visual art and storytelling to engage the community. Maps on Purpose included paintings and models that group had prepared, with the goal of catalyzing civic engagement through art making and programming.<sup>1</sup> The group conducted workshops with artists and neighborhood representatives in 23 Baltimore neighborhoods and developed a model for people to come together and, using paint and GPS technology, create maps that define and explore the experiences of multiple residents of a place. To do this, residents mapped traveling paths, favorite locations, and places in need of improvement. For Maps on Purpose, Art on Purpose also held initiatives for community leaders and stakeholders to brainstorm about how mapping, technology, and community knowledge could further build connectivity in the community. This exemplifies how a partnership among a museum, an organization, and a community can pair creative expression and technology to foster community engagement.

Another way planners can explore community values creatively is through storytelling. Storytelling allows people to present ideas about place and experience and to define their roles in those contexts. Planners can incorporate storytelling in projects such as revitalization, preservation, and redevelopment. As a creative tool, storytelling helps planners understand how people in the community are seeing, have seen, and would like to see their location. As an engagement tool, storytelling has two major points of appeal. First, it appeals to the participants because it enables them to share in their own voices. Second, it has benefits for planners because it results in personal feedback and can be conducted with minimal materials.

The Nauck Community Heritage Project in Arlington County, Virginia, is an example of storytelling used for community engagement. As part of a project to revitalize Nauck, a historically African American neighborhood, the Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development and the Folklore and Public Art sections of the Cultural Affairs Division partnered in a creative community engagement process. Staff members contacted community leaders from local churches and organizations and worked with them to involve local residents in storytelling projects to inspire the designer and redevelopers of the Nauck Town Square Project and the Nauck Village Center.

Through community leaders, planners made contact with residents and collected stories about community life. These stories were compiled and combined to create an oral history. From this, the design partners learned about the community history and how it could influence the revitalization process. The team opted to publicize some of the stories through storyboards posted at the site and through digital media posted online.<sup>2</sup> This form of digital storytelling combines technology and voice to make storytelling collections more available to the public. The Nauck Project exemplifies how storytelling and digital publicizing can encourage engagement through the collection of community perspectives.

In a related vein, Stories for Change ([www.storiesforchange.net](http://www.storiesforchange.net)) is a digital, online storytelling resource whose primary purpose is to disseminate, connect, and share ways to prepare storytelling projects. This organization posts resources online such as digital stories, approaches, and tutorials. By heeding digital stories in which community members articulate their experiences, planners can improve their understanding of a community's needs and values.

Visual-art techniques and storytelling are two creative resources for promoting the exploration of community values. Emphasizing imagery and story, they offer specific benefits for their audiences and participants. These languages allow participants to articulate their values creatively, which can improve the community-involvement discovery process for planners.

## KEYPOINT #2:

***Creative tools can increase stakeholder involvement.***

Planning outreach and engagement is a process intended to incorporate all members of the community, including children, youth, young professionals, and working parents. All of these groups are vital parts of a community, and their

participation in planning is important. Encouraging participation can be made easier, more fun, and more effective through the use of creative tools.

Creative tools for involving stakeholders includes arts in schools, technological resources, informal and formal exhibits, performances, and gatherings. Arts in schools engage both children and youth with educational programs and planning. Technological resources can be combined with visioning workshops, informal and formal exhibits, performances, and gatherings to engage diverse populations. Informal and formal exhibits can capture multiple audiences' interest by showing planning materials in both traditional and nontraditional locations such as museums, parks, plazas, and streets—or lobbies, malls, nursing homes, and retail windows. Performances and gatherings provide opportunities for learning from, meeting with, and developing relationships among various generations and lifestyles.

Arts in schools programs encourage art teachers, other teachers, artists, and volunteers to work creativity into the classroom or school. These partnerships can have multiple benefits for students, neighborhoods, and the planning profession. For example, in Madison, Wisconsin, Hawthorne Elementary School is partnering with a mosaic artist to create a kiosk at the entryway to the school that serves as both a school and a neighborhood message board. At the same school, students worked with a quilter to create an exhibit called Our Cityscapes, which depicted their views of the community. Scenes included the school, the community center, the state capitol, and the local lakes. Upon completion, the quilt was displayed at the Hawthorne Branch public library to share the children's views with the community.

Technological resources for visioning can be incorporated into informal and formal exhibits, planning workshops, performances, and gatherings to engage a variety of nontraditional stakeholders. Resources available online include Facebook, Flickr, Digg, Twitter, and a variety of wiki sites that are useful for creative sharing and community engagement. To keep the community interested in a project, it is helpful to have simple, engaging, easily available updates. Web resources enable this possibility and can further be used to make visioning a more engaging process.

Wikipanning ([www.wikiplanning.org](http://www.wikiplanning.org)) is an example of a creative online resource for the planning process. A public input method that is both innovative and interactive, Wikipanning facilitates virtual design charrettes. Ryan Harris LLC, a landscape architecture/urban design firm headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, created this resource for actively involving residents with community projects. Deb Ryan, the firm principal, used the traditional charrette process for many years and conceived a new process for creatively engaging the public. Wikipanning can include project-specific multimedia learning sessions, message boards, online chat events, surveys, and downloadable podcasts of walking tours. This is a resource that is available to any planning team, and its ease makes it likely that its use will increase the participation of stakeholders.

Technological tools can also be combined with more overtly artistic tools and planning resources. These can even be implemented as part of an actual plan. For example, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is utilizing a variety of creative tools to involve stakeholders with the development of the region's comprehensive plan, GO TO 2040 ([www.goto2040.org](http://www.goto2040.org)). This plan will address land use, transportation, quality-of-life issues, the natural environment, economic development, housing, and human services such as education, health care, and social services. The GO TO 2040 campaign utilizes a variety of tools, available in both English and Spanish, to allow multilingual populations to contribute to the "invention of the future" of the region.

Through MetroQuest's Invent 2040 website, residents can visualize aspects of life in 2040, which depicts what the future could hold if current growth patterns continue and how the region could plan for new development and transportation. After a short video, participants are prompted to imagine and develop an individualized scenario of the Chicago region in 2040 by making choices related to development density and location, as well as policies governing the road network, transit, and resources. The effects of these choices are computed and displayed graphically for viewers so they can see how their choices (1) affect land consumption, home locations, commute time, energy use, water use, government costs, and household costs; and (2) compare to other scenarios and current development patterns. Individual scenarios can then be shared with coworkers, friends, and family members via email, Facebook, Twitter, Digg, or other online media.

In addition, participants are encouraged to provide their input at fairs and festivals and at GO TO 2040 kiosks located in Millennium Park downtown, in Metra stations, in libraries, and at other sites. Feedback from the campaign will help CMAP develop a "preferred scenario that will best reflect the region's desired future." Residents are also encouraged to view or share photos through Flickr, post ideas and comments through the GO TO 2040 blog and Facebook page, and follow the GO TO 2040 campaign on Twitter.<sup>3</sup>

Creative tools make planning more accessible and inviting, which can help attract stakeholders to workshops, meetings, and events. Furthermore, as a part of daily life, creative tools promote greater engagement with activities besides meetings and workshops. For example, planners can use creative tools to promote community gatherings for dance, theater, music, and general festivity. Attendance at such events creates bonds between planners and residents of all ages. A vibrant, engaged community is more likely to be safer, healthier, more environmentally sustainable, and economically stronger. A community whose members are engaged with life, education, and one another is more likely to come together to address issues that are relevant to the planning process.<sup>4</sup>

### KEYPOINT #3:

***Creative tools can better engage people in community and urban design projects.***

Community and urban design is concerned with the arrangement, aesthetics, and social usefulness of a place—particularly public spaces like walkways, plazas, street space, and gathering areas. Engaging community in the design of public space can help con-

nect the spaces of everyday activities with their users. Creative tools make it easier to design with and for the public. The main tools for creative engagement with urban design are sketching or art contests, public design workshops, outdoor projections of visions, and the public revitalization of space (including painting, gardening, outdoor furniture creation, music, performance, and other arts). These techniques strengthen engagement with community and urban design, introducing opportunities for more involvement and diversifying the tools available to related programs. By involving the public directly, creative programs become more grounded in the community.

Sketching or art contests can involve the public in urban design. Because urban design can encompass a broad range of elements (including street furniture, signage, entryways, parks, and plazas), it can be helpful to call for sketches and art ideas from the public for a specific project type. For example, public ideas for street furniture designs can be used as inspirations prior to or during the contracting of private firms, artists, or public organizations for urban design projects. Submissions could include simple pencil sketches, color renderings, paintings, collaged imagery of ideas, or written pieces that speak to the space. These pieces can be displayed for still more public input.

Public design workshops are prime opportunities to engage the public in community and urban design. In North Carolina, intense development in and around the Triangle region has inspired creative thinking by students, residents, and planning and design professionals. To balance equity, ecology, and economy, participants at the University of North Carolina have developed creative ways to propose, analyze, revise, finalize, and reflect upon designs that work. Students and teachers are using mapping, photography, user observation, archival research, and interviews to analyze sites.

With these tools, students and teachers creatively involve the public in interactive design and problem-solving workshops. One early approach was to look at site analysis as a game board and explore different density assumptions as game pieces. This allows participants to explore physical design elements, shapes, layouts, or financial investments. The purpose of using the game board and pieces is to explore trade-offs playfully. Planners can incorporate this technique as a way to counteract the numbing effects of excessive discussion, simplify complex decision-making processes, and receive information from the public.

Outdoor projections can capture an unexpected audience with engaging imagery. With a simple film projector and an outdoor space, such as the side of a building or a public wall, planners can present imagery related to community visions for a space. PowerPoint presentations can be used to prepare a simple outdoor display projecting images and videos related to potential planning projects. This imagery engages passersby without requiring a time commitment. Observers can provide feedback through social-networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and wikis.



Public revitalization of space is an active approach to engagement with urban design. In this approach, the public physically creates or actively designs street and other outdoor urban-design elements. In Toronto, the Design Exchange partnered with the city to convene two street-furniture design charrettes. These partners were able to engage diverse groups directly in the design of urban elements. Design specialists, stakeholder groups, and representatives of the city participated in team exercises where members developed site scenarios for fixed, flexible, and customizable urban-design elements such as garbage boxes, bicycle kiosks, transit shelters, and benches.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Paint the Pavement ([www.paintthepavement.org](http://www.paintthepavement.org)) is an organization in St. Paul, Minnesota, that coordinates placemaking through neighborhood art. It works with neighbor groups to organize the creation of public murals on low-traffic residential streets. Neighbors collaborate to design, paint, and celebrate their community squares.

By combining creative techniques with events such as public revitalization, workshops, outdoor projections, and sketching or design contests, planners can creatively improve the level of public participation in urban design. Urban design is a particularly useful front for community engagement as it has such direct relations with public spaces used by community members. Infusing the development of public space with elements of art and creativity can strengthen and improve planning efforts in these areas.

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