Can Citizen Participation Become Reasonable?
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Abstract
The Constitution of the United States of America begins with the phrase “We the people...” Today, however, decisions about planning and environmental design are too often made by an involved few, rather than by a broader group of citizens who have a stake in the outcomes. A framework for understanding and addressing this problem is offered by the Reasonable Person Model (RPM) (Kaplan & Kaplan 2003, 2009). This paper examines a traditional form of engaging with citizens in light of RPM and poses an alternative that offers considerable promise for more meaningful participation. The paper ends by considering a number of possibilities for further exploration.

We the People
The Constitution of the United States of America begins with the phrase “We the people...” This statement reflects the notion that citizen participation is the life-blood of democracy: without citizens contributing to the civic realm, there can be no democracy.

Indeed, in the USA, governments at every level have a tradition of seeking citizen involvement in issues related to civic design and planning. Citizens are asked to comment on master plans, changes to zoning codes, the development of transportation and greenway corridors, and a host of other issues. A variety of evidence demonstrates, however, that traditional methods of engaging citizens (e.g., public meetings, the use of Environmental Impact Statements) too often fail at the most basic aspects of participation. That is, citizens often do not understand the material presented (Sullivan, Kuo, & Prabhu, 1996, 1997; Gallagher and Patrick-Riley, 1989; Weiss, 1989). Without understanding, there can be no meaningful participation.

The fundamental problem with typical citizen participation processes is that most citizens have great difficulty comprehending the technical language of engineers, planners, and designers. This problem leads to reduced opportunities for exploration, and missed opportunities to tap into the wisdom and experiences of local people. A framework for understanding and addressing these problems is offered by the Reasonable Person Model (RPM) (Kaplan & Kaplan 2003, 2009).

The Reasonable Person Model
The Reasonable Person Model grows from the recognition that information is central to human effectiveness and well-being (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). RPM includes three interrelated domains that identify human needs for information (see Figure 1). Model Building, recognizes the need to make sense of the information at hand and the urge to learn more. Model Building has two components: understanding and exploration. Think of the many methods of citizen participation that leave individuals uninformed and disinterested. RPM suggests that participation processes should enhance understanding and invite exploration.

Becoming Effective, recognizes the challenge of managing the constant bombardment of information that we expose ourselves to on a daily basis. Becoming Effective includes two components: being sufficiently clear-headed to be able to respond appropriately to the information surrounding us, and a sense of
competence that comes from knowing what is possible and how to do things. RPM suggests that participation processes should provide citizens accesses to information that they can digest at their own pace. It also suggests that designers and planners seek ways to engage citizens that allow citizens to contribute in ways that tap into their competencies.

*Meaningful Action* is the third domain. It recognizes the need to be heard, to participate in the development of solutions, and to exercise one’s effectiveness in our information-rich world.

The Reasonable Person Model suggests that we structure citizen participation with understanding, exploration, effectiveness, and meaningful action in mind. There is reason to believe that doing so will benefit participants, the environment, and our democracy.

This paper explores citizen participation in light of RPM. We begin with a case study of a public meeting, offer an alternative approach to citizen participation, and conclude by considering the costs and benefits of this new approach in light of RPM.

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**A public meeting as a method for engaging citizens**

The University of Illinois intends to convert 160 acres of land at the edge of campus, currently dedicated to graduate student housing and green space, into a “vibrant, multi-purpose residential development” ([http://www.orcharddowns.uiuc.edu/index.cfm](http://www.orcharddowns.uiuc.edu/index.cfm) accessed on 1.10.2009). As part of the development process, the University hired a consultant to manage a process of citizen participation. Let’s take a look at the part of the process that involved a public meeting.

The consultants visited Urbana, conducted an analysis of the site and its surrounding uses, carried out a market assessment, and prepared some plan-view diagrams of how the 160 acres might be divided into various uses. They then invited the public to a meeting at the Urbana City Hall to present their findings and seek public input.
The public meeting was held on a Tuesday evening and an overflow crowd was there to hear about the development plan and to share their comments (see Figure 2). The consultants' opening remarks lasted about 50 minutes. During their PowerPoint presentations, they talked with considerable excitement about the possibilities the site offered and showed one possible layout for the new development. The layout, more a diagram than a plan, showed the boundaries of the development and colored swaths to indicate how the land would be divided into various uses. They then asked people to comment on their proposal.

Citizens took this opportunity to ask questions and make statements. All the comments from citizens included descriptions of what they did not want: increased traffic and noise, dense urban development, exclusion of graduate students, removal of old trees, building on green spaces. Some of the statements revealed a lack of understanding (in some cases, a clear misunderstanding) of the consultants' ideas.

The speakers provided the consultants with a great deal of information to keep track of. An older individual from a nearby neighborhood urged the consultants to keep the housing density low. A Latino woman who was a resident of graduate student housing argued that the design must accommodate children. Others talked about property taxes. One man read from what looked to be a 25-page paper. After he went on for a full ten minutes, the moderator asked him to wrap up his comments. It was not clear what point he was trying to make. A number of people, including a woman from China, did not make any comments.

Figure 2. Participants in a public meeting held at the Urbana City Hall to discuss possible changes to the University of Illinois' graduate student housing at Orchard Downs.

**Critique of this process**

The approach taken by the consultants has a variety of problems, each of which limits effective citizen participation. The first problem concerns the limited time available to engage in the process. There was one public meeting scheduled on a Tuesday evening. Only highly motivated people who could arrange their schedule (and perhaps their childcare) attended the meeting. Those who participated in the meeting were clearly not a representative sample of local citizens. In addition, of those who did participate, there was unequal attention given to their views. Some people made their point a bit awkwardly and sat down, others spoke eloquently, and others took a great deal of time without making any point in particular.

Another limitation was that the consultants asked a very narrow question: “what do you think of our plan?” as opposed to exploring a range of development options. Thus, citizens did not have an opportunity to examine a variety of ideas or evaluate those ideas in the context of the particular place in question.

The consultants’ PowerPoint presentation left several people confused. Perhaps this is because a number of participants were not skilled at reading maps or plans. Perhaps it was because the consultants used somewhat technical language. Perhaps it was because some participants had a hard time paying attention to the presentation. Whatever the cause, it was clear that some of the
information the consultants considered important was not understood by some of the participants.

Another limit to effective citizen participation resulted from the difficulty the consultants and university officials had interpreting the comments from the citizens. Although they had a good idea of what citizens did not want, they had very little understanding of the patterns of development that citizens would support. Furthermore, it was impossible to explore the data further by examining the generalizability of the comments. Take, for instance, the Latino woman. Were her comments representative of graduate students? Of women? Of women graduate students? Of Latinos? It is impossible to tell. Finally, how should the silence from some of the participants be understood? Was the woman from China silent because she did not have an opinion or because she would be happy with any new design, or because she very much liked the consultants’ ideas, or because she was too shy to share her concerns?

In light of RPM, how well did this process work? Certainly, not well: when used to explore ideas about environmental design and planning, this meeting produced too little understanding, no opportunity for exploration, very little opportunity for local citizens to exercise the competence, and little chance to take meaningful action. In addition, the data that were produced were difficult for the designers and planners to interpret. Certainly there are more effective ways to engage citizens.

An alternative approach

An alternative to seeking citizen participation through public meetings is to use a photo-questionnaire (R. Kaplan, 1979; Kenwick, Shammin, & Sullivan, 2009). A photo-questionnaire is a survey instrument that allows individuals to rate their reaction to a range of design or planning possibilities or patterns. A photo-questionnaire typically includes between 20 to 60 photographs and a number of written items or questions to which participants respond. The photo-questionnaire might pose a question such as: “In thinking about the new design for the downtown waterfront, please indicate how appropriate you find the following images.” For each photograph, individuals rate their reaction on a 0-4 scale where 0 indicates “not at all” and 4 indicates “very much.”

The purpose is not to have citizens vote on the particular designs they like best and least, but rather to understand how citizens react to various patterns among a set of possibilities (see Figure 3). Thus, for each design idea or planning policy being considered, it is important to have multiple examples of how the design or policy would look after it were built. The value in this process comes in understanding how individuals and groups respond to various patterns rather than the particulars of specific designs. In fact, the final outcome is often not exactly the same as any single option, but edified by the results of the photo-questionnaire (Kaplan, Kaplan, & Ryan, 1998).

Let’s examine how a city-planning agency might use a photo-questionnaire to understand citizens’ reactions to the possible redevelopment of a local river corridor.

The first step is to gain information that will help guide the project. A designer working on behalf of the city will meet with public officials who have responsibility for the issues under consideration. In addition, the designer will meet with a variety of stakeholders early in this process. The outcome of these meetings will be a better understanding of the possible uses and constraints for the corridor’s redevelopment. The designer should also find additional information by consulting the literature for precedents and studies that might inform the design or plan.
The second step is to create images that depict a range of possibilities for the redevelopment. The designer begins by gathering digital images from the river corridor and from other sites that contain features that might be included in the redevelopment. Then, using image simulation software such as Photoshop®, the designer creates pictures that show a range of possibilities for the site. For each idea under consideration, it is best to include more than one example of the idea to minimize the influence of features that may be unique to that setting. So, for instance, if planners were considering changing the density of housing around the redeveloped river corridor, they would include two or three images depicting the current density, and an additional two or three different images depicting each of the various densities under consideration.

The third step is to disseminate the photo-questionnaire. There are a number of ways to deliver the photo-questionnaire to citizens. If it is important to have a representative sample of citizens, the city can create (or purchase) a randomly generated list of local citizens. The photo-questionnaires can then be printed and mailed to these citizens. Alternatively, the printed photo-questionnaire can be placed at public places (e.g., the local library, coffee houses, courthouse, childcare centers, parks near the river) and people can be encouraged to pick one up, fill it out, and return it. The photo-questionnaire can also be posted on a website and citizens can be encouraged to respond to it via the Internet.

After citizens have had several weeks to respond to the questionnaire, the responses are entered into a database and analyzed. To gain the most from the citizens’ input it is useful to go beyond examining how much each image was favored. It is thus best to have a person trained in statistical analyses supervise the analysis. Such people can be found, among other places, at universities, within the US Forest Service, or working for non-profit organizations. When the analysis is complete, a summary of the findings is typically prepared and shared with the stakeholders.

Compared to a public meeting, the use of the photo-questionnaire signals a fundamentally different approach to citizen engagement. Whereas the question in public meetings is often “do you like the design we have created?” the questions that photo-questionnaires seek to address focus on the range of possible development patterns and the acceptability or approval of different combinations of characteristics.
Costs and benefits

Using a photo-questionnaire as a means of facilitating citizen participation overcomes many of the limitations of the traditional public meeting. Still, it is not without costs. Some of the costs and benefits are considered here.

Costs. The costs include the additional time it takes, from start to finish, to produce and use a photo-questionnaire compared to planning for and holding a public meeting. Planning and holding a public meeting might take several weeks. The photo-questionnaire process, from gathering initial ideas to presenting the findings, can take from as little as two months to as much as a year. The length of time depends on the complexity and richness of the ideas being examined, how much time citizens have to respond to the questionnaire, and the complexity of the data analysis. In my experience, one of the major delays comes in getting approval for the photos and wording in the questionnaire from the various organizations that are involved.

Preparing a photo-questionnaire also requires the skills of a designer and someone with expertise in data analysis. The investment necessary to cover these costs, however, is typically an extremely small portion of the overall costs of the project.

Benefits. Although the costs are small, the benefits are significant and far-reaching. The benefits accrue to citizens, designers, and policy-makers.

For citizens, there are a range of benefits, not the least of which is that a photo-questionnaire takes considerably less time to fill out and return than does participating in a public meeting. Moreover, a photo-questionnaire can be completed at a convenient time, whereas a public meeting will be scheduled at a time when some people will not be able to attend.

Another benefit for citizens is that the pictures in a photo-questionnaire are almost always easier to understand and respond to than the information presented at public meetings. The photographs, moreover, often inform citizens about the range of possibilities, allowing them to think about a wider range of options or approaches than were likely to be evident. People also report that looking at pictures of possible development scenarios is engaging and effortless—they enjoy filling out the photo-questionnaire (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). It is not clear that a similar comment has ever been made about participating in a public meeting.

A final benefit to citizens is that individual reactions count as much as those from people who may be better connected, more articulate, better educated, or simply louder. The photo-questionnaire provides for a far more democratic process than a public meeting because each response is equal to any other response.

The photo-questionnaire process has benefits for designers and policy-makers too. Public meetings often provide decision-makers with a clear idea of what citizens do not want—of what they find unacceptable. But this knowledge comes from a limited number of individuals who are motivated to show up and who are willing to speak. A photo-questionnaire can provide this information too, but has the advantage of being able to identify the kind of things that citizens do want. Photo-questionnaires can also provide a better understanding for designers and policy-makers of the relative impact or level of support that various ideas receive. For instance, a recent photo-questionnaire revealed that doubling the standard amount of conservation area on a farm resulted in only a very small increase of support for such a policy (Sullivan, Anderson, & Lovell, 2004).

Designers and policy-makers will also appreciate that the photo-questionnaire process shows when various stakeholders are of different minds, or of similar minds. The process sheds light on commonalities across groups that may not have been anticipated (Kearney, et al., 2008).

Because photo-questionnaires track demographic characteristics of the participants, designers and policy-makers have a better understanding of how various groups react to the ideas under consideration.
Rather than guess how one group or another will respond to various design ideas, the results can be examined to learn about such differences (Ryan, 2002, 2006).

In summary, photo-questionnaires can lead to connecting with local people, local knowledge, and local values, thus opening participation to individuals and groups who are often excluded. There are clear costs to conducting a photo-questionnaire, but many tangible benefits as well. Photo-questionnaires produce information from citizens that is considerably easier for designers and planners to understand. Furthermore, the process need not be a burden to local folks by requiring great effort, time, or expertise.

**Future study**

Considering citizen participation in light of RPM is likely to have a variety of implications for citizen participation processes. It is also likely to open the door to a number of studies that have the potential to increase the effectiveness of such processes. Photo-questionnaires are likely to promote more understanding, exploration, competence, and effective participation than more typical forms of participation such as public meetings. An important next step is to conduct a series of studies that examine these possibilities in a variety of contexts.

**Conclusion**

When considered in light of the Reasonable Person Model, photo-questionnaires are a considerable improvement over traditional forms of citizen participation. Compared to holding a public meeting, a photo-questionnaire enhances understanding and exploration, provides easy opportunities for citizens to express their reactions to various design and planning options, and allows local citizens to exercise their effectiveness. The process also creates data that are easy to interpret.

Citizen participation is the life-blood of democracy. There may be no better opportunity for the expression of democracy than for citizens to participate in decisions regarding how their communities might evolve. Finding ways to make citizen participation more effective is likely to have important consequences for places, their inhabitants, and for our democracy.

**Citations**


