

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING FOR COMMUNITY GARDENS: PRACTICES THAT FOSTER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Keywords: Participatory Planning, Community Engagement, Empowerment, Community Garden, Community Development

Abstract: Community gardens are a powerful tool for improving the urban environment, and the benefits associated with them have been well recognized in both popular publications and in academia. Unfortunately, we often see community gardens fail. Literature suggests that the considerable rate of failure may be brought upon by lack of community engagement. In light of this premise, this paper aims to identify practices used in a planning process that enhance community engagement. In order to do this, this paper analyzes the case of a unique community-driven, participatory planning process developed for a community garden in Chicago, La Huerta Roots & Rays.

1. Introduction

Community gardens are a powerful tool for improving the urban environment (Ferris 2001; Lawson 2005; Shinew 2004; Yotti 2006; Twiss et al. 2003). They help revitalize communities by improving health (Alaimo, 2008; Lackey, 1998; Robinson-O'Brien, 2009), increase food access (Lackey 1998; Bleasedale et al. 2011), maintain green space, increase biodiversity and conserve wildlife habitat (Beran et al. 2012), promote social justice (Lackey 1998), reduce crime rates (Herod 2013), increase property values (Been 2006), and build social capital (Lawson 2005; Shinew 2005). Overall, community gardens are a great tool to help overcome some of our most pressing contemporary urban issues.

Unfortunately, many community gardens fail in their first few years. According to Beran et al. (2012), Kearney (2009) and Thomas (2008), lack of community engagement is one of the main reasons that community gardens fail.

With this in mind, this paper aims to identify practices that enhance engagement during the planning process, in an attempt to contribute to their longevity and success. In particular, we are interested in practices used during community planning processes that increase feelings of ownership and commitment, and foster a tangible connection between people and place.

We will do this by analyzing the community-driven, participatory planning process for *La Huerta Roots & Rays*, a community garden prized by the American Planning Association (APA-IL) for their successful community outreach initiative during the planning process and continued community involvement following implementation. We examine the collaborative nature of the planning techniques they used and detail the process from conception to implementation, extracting useful experiences and practices that may be applicable to planning in general.

The following section discusses the relevance of community gardens for urban planners and includes a literature review that establishes the importance of community engagement for the long-term sustainability of community gardens. A description of the methodology used comes next, and finally the case study itself, followed by an analysis of the findings and the conclusion.

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2. Literature Review

The notion that community gardens bring great benefits to urban areas is widely accepted (Ferris 2001; Lackey 1998; Lawson 2005; Shiness 2004; Yotti 2006; Malakoff 1995; Hancock 2001; Carney et al. 2012, Twiss et al. 2003). They benefit urban environments in multiple ways and are often praised for their positive effects on communities and on urban revitalization. Unfortunately, a large proportion of these projects fail in their early years. In order to understand why they fail and how we can increase the rate of success, it is crucial to understand the dynamics behind a successful garden. Even though the physical and logistical aspects of community gardens may seem to be a priority, - such as securing land, funding and other material resources -, a community garden is in fact, above all, more about the community that grows around it than about gardening itself (Glover et al. 2004). There are two main reasons for this. First, the motivation to establish a community garden often comes from a community's willingness to address a common problem, "notably urban decline and the criminal activity often associated with it" (Glover 2004, 143). Second, because a community garden is a relatively complex project that requires constant management and tending; it "cannot succeed with the enthusiasm of just one or two people" (Thomas 2008, 10). It needs strong community engagement, which will bring the resources the garden needs to success. In fact, having people committed to the garden project is the first step for a successful implementation (ibid).

In the same way that the presence of community involvement is fundamental for the success of a garden, the lack of community involvement usually leads to a garden's demise. As a study on community gardening in New Hampshire states, the failure of a community garden is usually caused by a failure of human relationships (Beran et al. 2012). As the authors state, "rarely was failure based on mechanical problems, lack of money, or issues concerning soil, property, or irrigation" (Beran et al. 2012, 11).

As established above, community involvement is a crucial factor for the long-term sustainability of community gardens. But how can we enhance community participation and engagement? A participatory planning process may be a powerful tool to foster community engagement. As Thomas argues, one way to avoid community garden failure is to foster a sense of ownership from the beginning of the project (Thomas 2008), and having community members plan the project together may be the ideal way to do this.

With this in mind, this paper aims to identify a set of practices that enhance engagement during the planning process. In particular, we are interested in practices used during community planning processes that increase feelings of ownership and commitment, and foster a tangible connection between people and place.

We will do this by analyzing the community-driven, participatory planning process for *La Huerta Roots & Rays*, a community garden in Chicago. We examine the collaborative nature of the planning techniques they used and detail the process from conception to implementation, highlighting a set of useful experiences that may be applicable to planning in general. The next section will explain the methodology used in this research.

3. Methodology

The data for this case study was collected primarily through participant observation. I had been an active member of *La Huerta Roots & Rays* since March of 2012 and acted as project manager for the remediation and redevelopment of the garden since the conception of the project through to May 2014 when the basic reconstruction was completed. This intensive participation gave me an insider's perspective of the dynamics between the garden organization and the wider community.

I recognize, however, some of the perils of participant observation – Yin (1994) states that, beyond the usual weaknesses of direct observation, participant observation may introduce “bias due to investigator’s manipulation of events” (p. 80). I understand that I have written this report playing a dual role of researcher and agent of change, and I have tried to remain objective and impartial by being reflexive about where I stand. In order to maintain objectivity, I have tried to support my arguments with evidence from what was seen on the ground.

4. The Case

4.1 Background of the Garden

La Huerta Roots & Rays is a community garden in Chicago that was founded in 2008. The garden was run by a small group of white, middle class, young American students, even though the site is located in Pilsen, an overwhelmingly Latino neighborhood. By 2013, the garden had been all but abandoned, with few members still involved.

At this time, new leadership emerged with a desire to revitalize the space and broaden the membership base. They recognized that wider participation in the garden would be a good strategy for community building through placemaking. Their intention was to expand and diversify the membership base by engaging long-term residents and involving residents of different age groups and cultural backgrounds.

Around the same time, a critical issue came to light. After completing extensive environmental tests, gardeners discovered that the soil at the site was contaminated. Even though they followed gardening best practices, levels of contaminants were so high that these precautions were not enough and the area still posed a risk to the children in the neighborhood.

An opportunity emerged to remediate the site with support from NeighborSpace (a non-profit land trust dedicated to providing long-term protection for community gardens in Chicago). The process would involve removing 3 feet of soil from roughly 30% of the garden area (approximately 400 tons of soil) and replacing it with clean soil. This meant that the garden would have to pull up all of its existing structures, essentially destroying what had been built over the past 5 years. It also meant that after the remediation the garden would have to be rebuilt from scratch. It was a huge task, both to remediate and to reconstruct the garden. The cost of the remediation alone was estimated at U\$35,000.

The garden leadership organized a meeting with the garden group in October 2013 to talk about the proposition to remediate the site. Their intention was to understand the members’ feelings regarding the remediation and necessary reconstruction of the space. After much discussion, garden members concluded that even though the remediation would come as a great inconvenience to everyone, it was their moral duty to move forward with it. Pilsen had very few green spaces, and because of the high levels of pollution all around, after remediation the garden would be one of the only clean and safe areas available for public use. The decision was made.

The opportunity to remediate the site and transform it into a clean, safe location served as a catalyst for garden leaders to jump into action. And so, with this in mind, the team started to develop a community planning process to engage the residents and transform the space.

4.2 The Planning Process

The planning process included six sessions, including an initial session, followed by four development sessions, and finally, an integration session, when they brought everything together and created the site plan.

4.2.1 Initial Planning Session

The planning team decided that the first community meeting would be dedicated to understanding the goals and objectives of the community, and they would loosely base the following sessions on their findings from that day. The session was structured around three activities: envisioning the future; feedback from the community; and determining the goals and objectives for the plan.

About 35 people attended the meeting. The first activity was a visioning exercise that encouraged participants to close their eyes and "imagine the garden if...". The results were used as the foundation for the vision statement.

The planning team identified what the community's priorities for the garden were in their second exercise. The whole group participated in a brief discussion and together they chose 12 categories to vote on. Participants then received dot stickers and were asked to vote on the categories. After voting and debating, they determined 4 priorities for the garden.

The final exercise asked participants to write down their ideas for what they would like to see in the space. A total of 168 suggestions were made, and ranged from physical structures like raised beds to activities like classes and workshops.

The results from these three exercises combined shaped the proposed goals and objectives for the redevelopment of the garden (La Huerta Roots & Rays 2013 "*Goals and Objectives Matrix*", p. 42) and were used to structure the following planning sessions.

4.2.2 Development Sessions and Meeting Structure

The following four sessions were focused on developing the topics identified by the community in the initial planning session. Each week had one particular emphasis and each session was structured around a particular theme or goal, with activities, exercises and discussions that allowed participants to deepen their understanding around a particular matter or build consensus regarding specific issues.

They tried to be creative and make the meetings as engaging as possible and so used different media, different presenters and different settings. The activities also included a lot of moving around and props and they avoided sitting around a table for too long and letting conversations drag on. They also tried to break up the size of discussion groups; sometimes they would have large group discussions and keep track of people who wanted to speak, sometimes they would break into small groups then reconvene and have one representative from each group present their findings.

They quickly learned that their planning process was a living being, and that they had to adapt the structure of the meetings to suit the needs of the particular sessions. Sometimes this involved creating new processes from scratch. For example, one of the critical decisions they had to make was to determine how much of the growing area of the garden would be dedicated to individual, collective, or donation beds. The group was very divided about this and everyone felt very passionately about it. It was clear to them that if they tried to make a decision about this by talking it over with the whole group and trying to reach consensus, they would use up one entire 3-hour session, if not more.

They decided that they needed a process that was brief and democratic. After brainstorming, the planning team came up with a process of voting with beans, whereby each garden member would receive 10 beans, and they would use them to distribute the percentages they felt each of the three growing areas should receive. On the day of, they had a brief group discussion on the topic and then they swiftly moved on to the vote. They managed to make a decision in less than 40 minutes. Participants felt the decision was reached fairly and overall garden members were pleased with the outcome.

The planning team tried to pull in participants to present to the group as much as possible, whenever they found they could bring in a level of expertise that was missing from the conversation. Having personal knowledge about many of the participants beforehand, as they were already involved with the garden, and getting to know new participants on a personal level once they became involved, was a great advantage that allowed them to pull people deeper into the process.

For example, two participants delivered a great presentation on how the plan could incorporate elements from Mexican art and culture into the garden; another member presented on permaculture and different growing techniques. There was another participant who was a fantastic artist and could help with the designs and illustrations, but was also very shy, so they invited her to work with a few of the gardeners in small groups in situations she would feel more comfortable in.

They also invoked individuals or small teams to lead activities that they were experts in. For example one of the participants was an architect, so she led the conversations and activities regarding the development of the site plan; the session on planning with and for children was run by three other participants, a planning student, a child psychologist and a teacher's aide, who had the skills and the experience needed to structure planning activities for children.

4.2.3 Individual Projects

At the first planning session they were able to catch a glimpse of the multitude of activities that the community would like to see in the garden. Their neighbors wanted to use the space to read a book, to grill, to grow food, to play chess, to teach their children about their heritage, to compost, to train espaliers, to sunbathe, to socialize, to raise chickens ... and the list went on and on. The only way they would manage to cover everything on the wish list was to break the work down into specific projects for small teams and individuals to tackle.

After gathering feedback from the community about each individual element – 61 in total - (La Huerta Roots & Rays 2013, "*Individual and Group Projects*", p. 34), participants took the lead on different projects and developed them over the course of the planning sessions. Examples of the projects included: chess table, chicken coop, compost bin, cooking area and grill, fairy garden, bike dome, shed, hops tunnel, herb spiral, and frankentree (La Huerta Roots & Rays 2013, see index of Individual and Group Projects, p. 43).

The end result was a modest collection of original and professional quality project proposals for the items they were including in the plan. Several of the authors applied for grants through the garden and are currently implementing those same projects (for example, the chess table, the children's growing area and the grill were all ideas that were developed during the planning process and then executed by the creators during the following summer).

4.2.4 Integration Session

This final session aimed to integrate all the individual projects into a coherent plan. By the beginning of this session, they had already defined which projects and elements would be included in the redeveloped garden. Their goal then was to figure out how they would bring it all together.

During this session they worked with four different spatial modeling techniques. The most engaging was a paper model of the site plan with accompanying miniature figurines of all the elements and projects that were to be included in the plan (61 in total). They split into groups and took turns arranging the figurines. A stop motion video of the process can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGYRO16-vLk> ("The Evolution of Our Site Plan").

4.3 The Logistics

4.3.1 Outreach

The planning team considered the outreach plan to be critical because of specific neighborhood issues. There were cultural and language barriers to cross, as well as prejudice and an unspoken hostility towards the garden group that they needed to overcome (since its conception the garden had been a place known for its "whiteness"). They thought their whole approach to the redevelopment process had to be well thought out and sensitive to these issues, and they were particularly concerned about how they were presenting the endeavor to the wider community.

The outreach plan then became a crucial tool for communication as they were trying to convey not only the incredible opportunity that they had in their hands *as a community* (and not as the garden group), but also that everyone was welcome to participate in the process. Hence, the reach of the communication plan was very important.

Once they knew their audience, they started to develop the written and print material. Every piece of written material prepared was bilingual in English and Spanish and included contact information for questions in both languages. When the print material was ready, the team went door-to-door with fliers to invite people to the first meeting. They also met with community leaders to carefully explain their intention, try to gain their support and ask for their help in spreading the word.

4.3.2 Time and Location

Just as the cultural and language barriers were significant concerns in their outreach plan, they were also key in the choice of location. They had secured two possibilities: St Pius Church and Blue1647, a co-working space that was relatively new to the neighborhood. Both organizations supported the project and offered to let them use the space for free.

Blue1647 offered the best option in terms of infrastructure. They had an enormous amount of space, including a main hall with desks and chairs, meeting rooms with projectors and white boards, computer labs and wireless internet. St Pius Church on the other hand had only one small meeting room to offer and no other amenities, but it right across the street from the garden and was very well known and respected in the community.

The planning team knew they would have a better turnout if the meetings were held at St Pius, yet they needed the infrastructure that Blue 1647 could offer. They decided to have the first meeting at St Pius, as it would be an introduction of sorts, and then, once they had connected with the participants, hold the charrettes at Blue1647.

4.3.3 Food

As the meetings were scheduled to happen around dinnertime, the planning team made an effort to always have food available. The team reached out to local stores, bars and restaurants asking for food donations and received a positive reply. They had a good line-up of food donations scheduled for all six meetings.

They found that food was also important to keep participants active. The meetings were supposed to last 3 hours but inevitably they ran long or people stayed behind afterwards to work on individual or group projects. There were also snack breaks between activities, and these extra opportunities for informal exchange provided occasions for people to develop new ideas to present when they regrouped after the breaks. They were important for the creative process and enriched the conversations.

4.3.4 Childcare

One thing that the planning team had not anticipated was the number of children that attended the first meeting at St Pius. They had not arranged childcare, they did not have toys and games available and they had not considered ways to include the children in the planning process. They found that the presence of the children impeded the parents from participating because their attention was constantly divided. The children were also bored with all of the "grown-up talk", meaning that there were constant interruptions and the meeting did not flow as well as it could have.

Offering childcare for the younger children therefore became crucial to welcome and engage families, and necessary to maintain a high level productivity in the meetings; and including the older children in the planning process would enrich everyone's experience.

The team adapted the meeting structure to make the necessary accommodations. They wanted to make sure the children were as engaged as the parents and participated whenever possible. The team divided them into age groups and organized special activities for the older ones, and provided toys, games and crayons for the younger kids, along with adult supervision.

4.3.5 Bilingual Communication

La Huerta Roots & Rays, being the multicultural space that it is, motivated the team to organize a fully bilingual planning process. Two languages, Spanish and English, were used from day one and participants were encouraged to speak in the language they felt most comfortable in. All meetings were opened with the following announcement (delivered in English and Spanish): *"This is a bilingual meeting, please speak in the language you feel most comfortable in."* All of the meetings included simultaneous interpretative translation, and multiple English-Spanish/Spanish-English dictionaries were available for participants to consult.

4.4 Final steps, Implementation and Recognition

Once the planning process was over and the group had created the planning document and the project proposals for the individual projects, they started working on fundraising, grant writing and project implementation.

Funding for remediation of the site had already been secured by NeighborSpace through OSIF funds (Open Space Impact Fee), a total of U\$35,000. However the redevelopment of the garden, including all of the construction and landscaping, still needed to be financed. They were able to secure the

remainder, (approximately USD\$45,000) in in-kind donations, store credit and cash from a variety of sources and grants, including U\$10,000 from Whole Foods, U\$15,000 from the Walton Foundation, U\$3,000 from the Christian Relief Service and U\$5,000 from Home Depot, among others. Professionals who lived in the area provided services (for example two contractors who lived by the garden built the fence and the paths²); local stores provided equipment and materials (for example Sunbelt Rentals loaned a bobcat for a whole month and Ozinga provided concrete at a massive discount). Finally, many people from the neighborhood showed up to help on the workdays as they rebuilt the site together.

By May 2014, the garden had been remediated and about 70% of the plan had been implemented. The redevelopment was overall a great success, and a detailed video of it can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7qrU7Yfc8> ("La Huerta Roots & Rays - Time lapse of remediation/redevelopment 2014").

5. Findings

In this section, we present the main findings of this study, which detail the practices through which the planning process fostered community engagement. For analytical purposes, we have divided this section into two parts: involvement with the planning process; and engagement with the goals and products of the planning process.

5.1 *Involvement with the planning process*

For a participatory planning process to be successful, people need to be truly involved. First, they need to be able to attend the meetings; they also need to feel that they are welcome; and they sometimes need to be empowered (for example, through effective facilitation). In this case study, we were able to identify several instances when these measures were taken.

5.1.1 *Careful Outreach Plan*

The planning team carefully planned and executed an outreach strategy that involved numerous stakeholders in the community. There were some particular challenges in this outreach plan that are worth mentioning: there were culture and language barriers, and there was hostility towards the original garden group's "whiteness". The outreach plan took these issues into account and acted to counteract them by seeking out the community leaders and gaining their support, and by preparing bilingual print material that was culturally relevant.

The outreach plan was a fundamental first step to bring a diverse group of people on board with the planning process. It brought various advantages to the process. First, it brought legitimacy to its participatory nature - many non-members of the garden felt that they could participate in the planning process. Second, this brought legitimacy to what the team was doing vis-à-vis the neighborhood - community members would be more prone to support decisions made during the planning process even if they did not participate since they had been encouraged to join the effort. Third, this helped the planning team tap into community resources (such as food donations) from

² The gentleman who built the paths lived across the street from the garden. He had never been involved with the garden and did not attend any of the planning sessions, but said he was working on the paths because "Now I have a reason to come here, for the grill and the picnic area. The garden is going to become an extension of my backyard".

businesses and organizations in the neighborhood that knew that the process and the garden redesign were in progress.

5.1.2 Language

As most of the residents of Pilsen were Spanish speakers, the planning team's decision to conduct a bilingual planning process was significant. Some participants did not communicate well in English, and they would not have been able to understand, let alone voice their ideas, if the process had not embraced them. Additionally, the fact that the interpretive translators were garden members ensured a closer, more personal environment that made people feel comfortable with the process.

5.1.3 Logistics

Many decisions regarding the meeting's logistics were important to increase the participatory nature of the process. The first aspect refers to time and location; the planning sessions had a good turnout because these were carefully planned around the dynamics of the neighborhood. For example, the team was sensitive to the fact that even though they had a great location with the necessary infrastructure for the planning sessions, the church was a familiar location and hence more welcoming for the community. As such, they decided to hold the first meeting at the church, and then, after bringing people on board, they continued the sessions in the second location.

Second, offering food was a good measure to increase participation and to help people connect in an informal manner. Having good, hot food available gave people energy to keep going, even when the meetings ran late. Besides, it allowed for families to participate, as they would not need to cook that evening for the family. It also worked well to have snack breaks between activities; the breaks were informal and gave people an opportunity to interact and get to know each other, forming bonds between participants.

Another relevant measure taken was offering childcare. Offering childcare for the younger children was crucial to welcome and engage families, and necessary to maintain a high level of productivity in the meetings. The fact that they also adapted the meeting structures to include planning activities specifically targeted for children is yet another example of how they were concerned with creating an inclusive and engaging process.

5.1.4 Making the process interesting, relevant and fun

The planning team made a conscious effort to make the process interesting and fun for participants. Activities included a lot of moving around and props, and they avoided making people sit around a table for too long and letting conversations drag on. This constant shifting of gears was important to keep such a diverse group of people engaged. They also adopted creative ways of doing things, customized for their particular context. For instance, voting was performed in a variety of ways, using dot stickers, beans, runoff method and more.

The final session was dedicated to the charrette of the site plan, which was perhaps the most engaging activity. This was a great exercise for two reasons. First, the dynamic nature of the exercise demanded constant negotiation between participants, and in the end they had reached a consensus about the layout. This really brought participants together. Second, it allowed everyone to visualize what they had been working towards for the past several weeks, giving participants a great sense of accomplishment, pride and satisfaction. This was crucial, as it motivated them to move forward the

next steps in the process (fundraising and implementation of the plan) and to remain engaged with the garden.

5.2 Engagement with the goals and products of the planning process

As this study proposes, the first step to guarantee future community engagement with a project is to involve people in the planning process. The second step is to conduct the planning process in such a way that its practices will induce people to develop a sense of ownership with that which is being planned.

La Huerta Roots & Rays' planning process was successful because it promoted many practices that gave people ownership of the project; and ultimately making people feel emotionally attached to the garden and connected to other garden members motivated them to stay involved.

5.2.1 Democratic decision-making

Every decision made was either by consensus or by vote. Even the most crucial decisions of the project were made democratically. For instance, even though the decision to remediate the (contaminated) land seemed obvious, the garden leadership still called a meeting with garden members to understand their positions and feelings about it. It also ensured that the decision was made by the group as a whole, giving everyone ownership of this important decision and increasing the likelihood that they would remain engaged throughout the entire planning process.

Another example of this was the first session, in which everyone could propose the goals and objectives for the garden. All goals and wishes of the community were included in a "goals and objectives matrix", which served as a guide throughout the whole planning process. All of the ideas that were suggested in that first meeting were included in the plan.

5.2.2 Individual projects

Perhaps the activity that most fostered engagement was the individual projects. As explained before, participants proposed ideas of elements to include in the garden (a grill, a picnic table, an apple tree, etc.) and were tasked with developing a one-page professional-grade summary of it. The act of proposing an idea was already an act of cognitive engagement: most people proposed projects that had personal significance. For example, one garden member was part of the Pilsen Chess Club and so he proposed a chess table, another one was a teacher and she suggested bird feeders that she would make with her students, and so on.

The individual projects connected people with the garden at the individual level, making the sense of ownership a concrete, rather than abstract, idea. There was indeed a part of the garden that existed due to them, and it was now, above all, their job (and the community's) to implement and sustain it.

5.2.3 Skill sharing and empowerment

Another manner of fostering engagement and a feeling of empowerment was by assigning participants with special roles and functions throughout the process. Every session included presentations and activities led by different participants, often designed for participants to showcase special skills and expertise. For example, one of the garden members was an architect, and she helped with the site plan. Another was a child psychologist and she worked with the younger

participants. Another member was a master gardener, and she prepared a presentation on gardening techniques. This made participants feel valued and appreciated, as they all had something special to contribute to the process.

6. Conclusion

Community gardens are unlike any other public spaces in that the responsibility for their maintenance lies upon the community that surrounds it. Very few cities provide resources and services to upkeep publicly owned spaces like urban gardens, and when they do they are minimal. This means that *one of the most important aspects of planning a garden is engaging with its potential users to make sure the space is kept alive and well maintained.*

In order for people to care for the space, they need to feel connected to it. A basic premise of planning a community garden therefore is *developing a community that will grow around the space.* The people involved need to be engaged in a way that they naturally take ownership of it.

The goal of this paper was to identify practices in the planning process that enhance community engagement and increase feelings of ownership and commitment. The case of *La Huerta Roots & Rays* demonstrated that a powerful bond may be established between a community and a physical space through a process that uses a participatory and collaborative approach. Our findings highlighted the specific practices used during their planning process that mobilized participants and fostered a sense of community and ownership towards the space.

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