

Recent trends in community design: the eminence of participation

Zeynep Toker, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, California State University, Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8259, USA

This paper reports a recent study asking current community design practitioners to identify the most influential people and key issue leaders in the community design field and to define the concept itself. The results of the study show that in addition to the continuing concepts such as participation, there are new concepts such as new urbanism and sustainability which are now associated with community design. The most important conclusion, however, is that community design field is in fact in search of new perspectives.

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In 1969, Sherry R. Arnstein opened the discussion on redistribution of power in her famous article ‘A Ladder of Citizen Participation’ with this sentence: ‘The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you’ (p.216). Today, I believe this observation remains relevant in the light of increasing popularisation of the term community design in the fields of architecture, urban design and planning. Many approaches (e.g. new urbanism and sustainability) and many practitioners have now adopted the term to use it as a catch phrase. Some (e.g. Comerio, 1984; Hester, 1996; Curry, 2000b) have criticised recent community design practices for their lack of reference to the original principles, such as advocating low-income and politically disadvantaged groups within a voluntary organisational structure. The purpose of this paper is to unveil the new face of community design as it is understood and practiced among its recent practitioners.

Four decades ago, community design stood for an alternative style of practice based on the idea that professional technical knowledge without moral and political content is often inadequate (Comerio, 1984). In the broadest sense, community design has been identified as a movement ‘discovering how to make it possible for people to be involved in shaping and managing their environment’ (Sanoff, 2000: i). However, representation of these ideas has changed during the four decades of practice in terms of the ideals and

Corresponding author:
Z. Toker
zeynep.toker@csun.edu



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achievements, and has become more diverse than ever. Increasing use of community design as a catch phrase especially requires attention. Therefore, current practices of community design have become not only different compared to initial ones, but also diverse and open to misinterpretation.

Since the last study asking community design practitioners about their personal approaches, values and understandings were completed in 1984 by Randolph Hester (and published in 1990), it is important to identify the new concepts community design practitioners have integrated into their practices in the last two decades.

In order to explore current practices of community design, I asked several community design practitioners to define the concept, to identify the most influential people and key issue leaders in the field, and to list references associated with these people. This paper reviews the definitions of community design in literature and historical evolution of its practices, and reports the definitions and most influential people and references provided by 15 recent practitioners. The conclusion section points out to possible future trends in community design field.

1 Definition of community design

Community design movement, related practices, and its definition have been rooted in different parts of the world with unique characteristics. Consequently, definitions and use of the term 'community design' in the literature are paradoxical.

Several attempts have been made to overcome the obscurity of terminology in this field. For example, [Sanoff \(2000: ix\)](#) states that the term 'community design' is an umbrella term covering community planning, community architecture, social architecture, community development, and community participation, all of which emphasise the involvement of local people in social and physical development of the environment they are living in. Similarly, [Francis \(1983: 14\)](#) defines 'community design' as a concept receiving different labels such as participatory design, social architecture, social design and architecture for people.

However, [Wates and Knevitt \(1987: 17\)](#) state that the term 'community architecture' embraces community planning, community design, community development and other forms of community technical aid. For them, community architecture is the name used in the UK, while social architecture is used for the same concept in the United States. For [Hatch \(1984: 7\)](#), 'social architecture' aims to create critical consciousness among citizens. Furthermore, [Hamdi \(1991: 75\)](#) claims that 'community participation' is the term covering all the scales and techniques, which refer to the processes involving professionals, families, community groups, and government officials in shaping the environment.

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