

DESIGN ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

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**NOLL
& TAM**
ARCHITECTS





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ABSTRACT

Public engagement, often required for public design work, has come under increasing scrutiny, as design firms (and clients) seek to create more inclusive spaces and processes. While moves towards broadening types of engagement beyond the “traditional” community presentation have been ongoing over the past decade, there remains mostly anecdotal data about the specific ways that design phase outreach actually occurs. These efforts often remain dependent on the immediate past experience and expertise of individual design professionals and clients, making it challenging for both junior staff, and less-experienced teams to conduct effective processes, or to evaluate which techniques might be appropriate for each project and phase. Further, as the pandemic has hastened the adoption of a range of new digital tools, there is a need to assess these newer virtual activities to determine if they should become part of our standard design repertoire. More broadly, a more nuanced understanding of what is involved in this type of work will allow the design community to better communicate the added value of these activities to clients and groups that might be hesitant or otherwise resistant to “engagement”.

This research seeks to develop an understanding of specific engagement methodologies employed by A+D firms during design. Our research, broadly, seeks to answer two questions with regards to engagement:

- **What are we (design professionals) doing, when we do engagement?**
- **How can an understanding of past processes inform future engagement efforts?**

Drawing on documented project experience, this research seeks to apply a rigorous and comprehensive analysis to a design process that is frequently deemed largely qualitative. We hope to identify replicable patterns and tactics that can help design teams conduct future engagement.

PROCESS

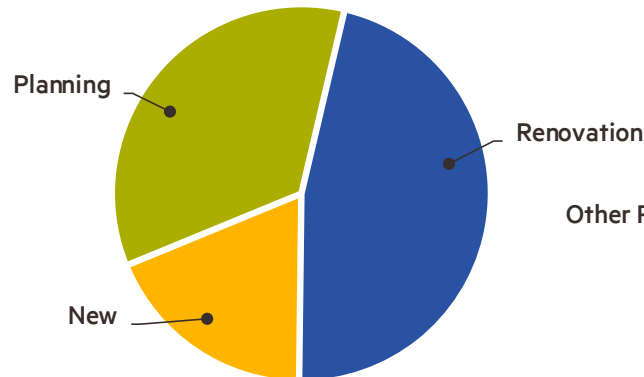
Phase 1: Quantitative Analysis

The first half of our research focused on answering the question “what are we doing?” As a public-focused design firm, in operation for over 30 years, Noll & Tam projects offer a window into the evolution of engagement within public design projects. The goal of this phase was to broadly identify patterns and trends in the actual execution of engagement activities, and to highlight specific project characteristics and variables that impact this execution.

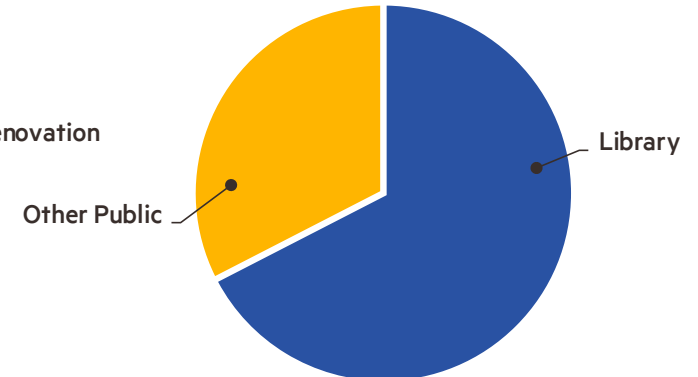
Project Data Criteria

We focused our analysis on public projects occurring within the last 10 years. For the purposes of this study, we defined “public” as projects for county or municipal governments. All of these projects require some sort of broad community approval, though the extent can be highly variable by client or jurisdiction, making them ideal for our analysis. We did not include K-12 or Higher Education projects, since they are typically implemented by independent agencies (School Districts, Community College Boards, and University Capital Planning departments), and may not involve broader public outreach.

Project Types: Scope



Project Types: Program



Of an initial project list of 70 projects fitting this criteria, we narrowed this down to 49 projects for analysis, eliminating projects with little/no substantive design work, and consolidating some multi-phase efforts into singular projects. Of the projects reviewed, just under half were renovation projects (including additions), with a much smaller subset of new building projects. This is not unsurprising given

the capital budget constraints in most cities and counties, and also reflects the reality of aging public infrastructure. As is typical for Noll & Tam’s project portfolio, a majority of projects were library projects. These projects (even small renovations), are usually quite visible within a community, since libraries are broadly used, and so engagement is especially significant.

PHASE OCCURRING <i>When during design does this activity occur?</i>	EARLY DESIGN	pre-design	SD	DD	CD	construction & after	LATER DESIGN
ACTIVITY TYPE <i>What format is used? How is information shared?</i>	MORE FORMAL / STRUCTURED	presentation: in-person	presentation: virtual	workshop / hands-on activity	open house	virtual / asynchronous (ie, survey, etc.)	LESS FORMAL / STRUCTURED
AUDIENCE <i>Who is involved in the activity?</i>	LESS PUBLIC	leadership	staff / users	stakeholder working group	public - official body (ie City Council)	public - general audience	MORE PUBLIC
GOALS <i>What is the purpose of the activity?</i>	MORE LIMITED	approval	refinement	input / ideas	process	reporting	MORE OPEN
CONTENT <i>What topics are under discussion?</i>	CONCRETE	program	site	design	funding / budget	vision	ABSTRACT

Data Collection

For each project, we reviewed project documentation to identify “engagement activities” occurring throughout the project duration. For the purpose of this research, we defined engagement quite broadly—activities that involved the participation of groups and individuals outside of the project design and management team. This criteria excluded internal design team coordination meetings, as well as the typical regular progress meetings with client management team. It did include activities such as staff workshops, City Council meetings, and meetings with various types of stakeholders.

For each activity, we recorded the name, date and phase of the project in which it occurred. We also identified four key variables to describe the type of engagement involved. Each variable included a range of possible options associated with that variable--these are shown on the table above. We reviewed documentation for each activity (including meeting notes, agendas, presentation materials) and recorded its characteristics in relation to each variable.

Data Analysis

The data collection phase yielded 292 unique engagement activities which were categorized according to the variables above. We used Excel data analytics tools to create a series of visualizations. The first series focused on identifying broad commonalities within the whole data set. Subsequent series compared multiple variables to each other, as well as analyzing variables by project and date. The results of this analysis are described in detail in the next section.

Phase 2: Qualitative Analysis

Building on the quantitative analysis from Phase 1, we identified a smaller subset of projects for follow-up investigation, to provide a deeper context for the previously collected data on engagement activities. We selected the 12 projects with the most significant engagement processes and developed a series of questions which we posed via survey to the project team:

- What specific challenges came up in relation to engagement?
- Did the engagement process influence the project design?
If so, can you provide a specific example? If not, was there another benefit/purpose to the engagement activities that you could describe?
- In considering the overall design process, what stood out to you in terms of community/stakeholder/user engagement.

The intent of these questions was two-fold. First, to help the research team understand the project-specific characteristics (from demographics to budgetary constraints, to local politics) that shaped how the engagement process was executed. Secondly, to investigate how these processes—which are, in many ways, distinct from traditional design process—actually impacted project outcomes. This was necessarily anecdotal and qualitative, given the range of project types, scopes and timelines, but we used these responses to identify some broad themes that served as the framework for our Engagement Toolkit typology.



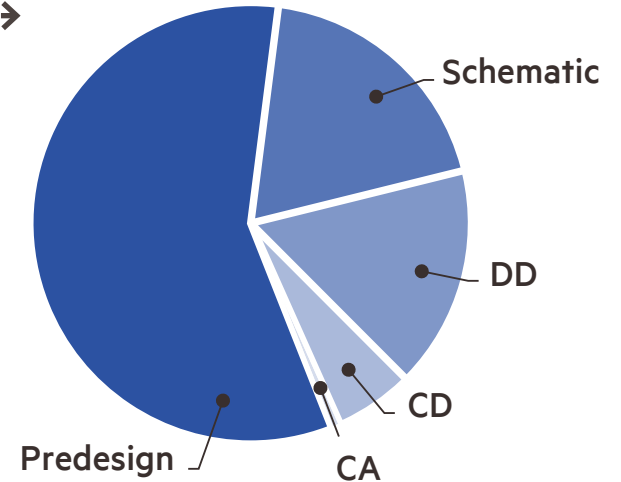
DATA SUMMARY

Overview

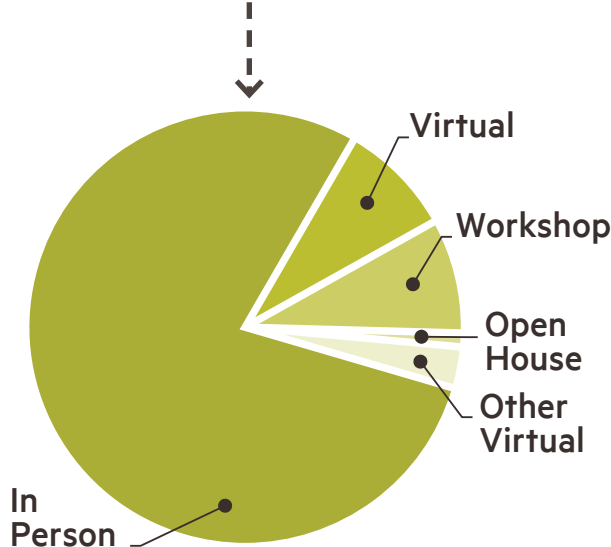
Projects had, on average, 7 unique engagement activities. However, this average includes some projects with very high quantities of engagement, as well as some projects with very minimal activity. For the project with the most engagement, we identified 21 activities, while a handful of projects (typically smaller projects) had only one or two activities.

Timeline ----->

The vast majority of engagement activities occurred during a Predesign phase—understandable, considering that significant scope decisions are often determined during this phase, and there is more opportunity for input on broad project criteria. This also suggests that considering engagement efforts during the standard project documentation phases (SD through CDs) likely requires adjustment to either approach or intent to ensure that the effort is meaningful for both the design team and the community involved.



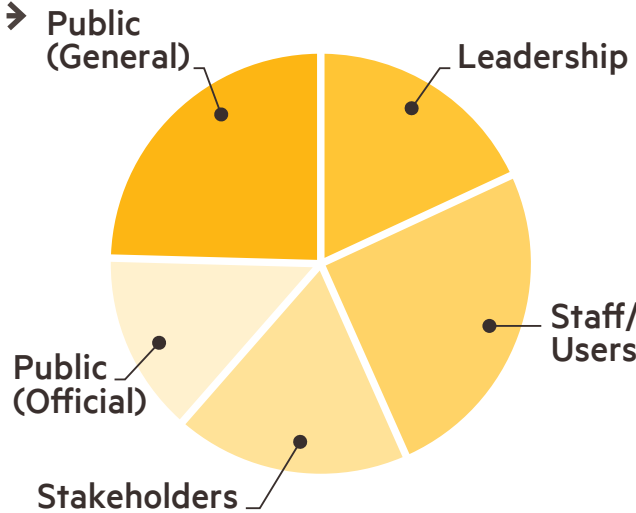
-----> Activity Type



The engagement activities are heavily dominated by in-person events, unsurprisingly, given the timeframe studied and the typical approach to architectural practice. We first see virtual events appearing in 2018, with a dramatic pivot to virtual activities in 2020 and 2021, as the profession responded to COVID. However, in addition to virtual meetings, we also documented an increase in other alternative engagement activities starting in 2021, as both designers and users became more comfortable with a wider range of digital options, and as modified in-person activities became possible. We would anticipate that future years might look more similar to 2021, as we adapt to hybrid models of work, service, and engagement.

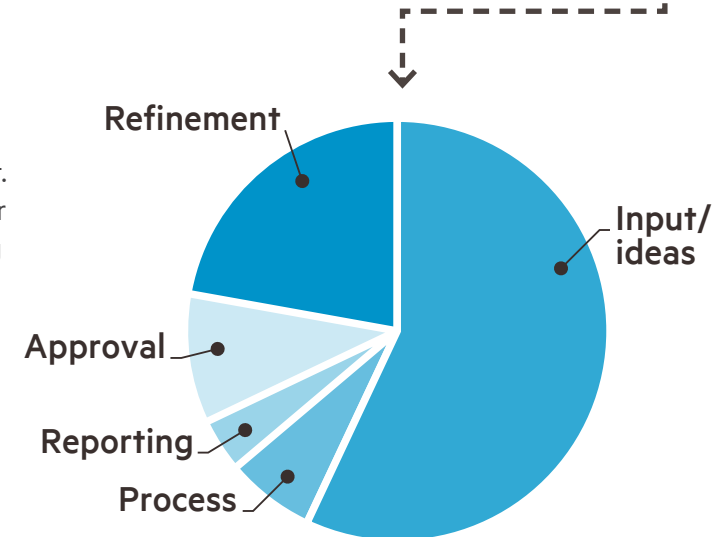
Audience

The two largest audiences for engagement are the general public and staff/users. This is partially a reflection of the fact that these two groups are likely involved in all/most projects, while the involvement of other groups (Leadership, stakeholders, public officials) may differ significantly depending on administrative and organizational structure of the client group. With regards to planning engagement, this suggests that since the two groups most frequently involved will necessarily have very different needs, interests, and levels of involvement, the nature of engagement activities conducted with each might differ significantly.



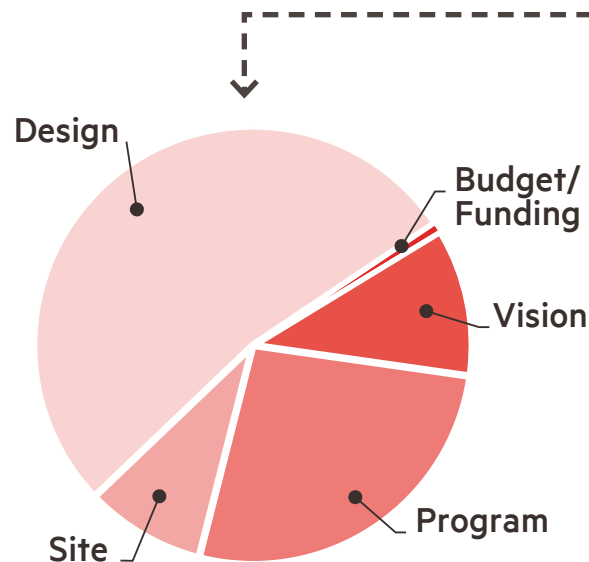
Purpose

The most frequent purpose of engagement activities is to seek input and ideas. While this is certainly representative of our team's project experience, and of the profession's typical view of engagement, we also see this as a potential area to challenge traditional expectations around these practices. Broad goals of "input" disconnected from measurable outcomes has been a criticism of some community engagement efforts, and clients seeking more control have also used this rationale to limit engagement activities. We would encourage design teams seeking input or ideas to articulate more precisely the type of feedback they are seeking as well as clear ways they intend to incorporate it into the project development.

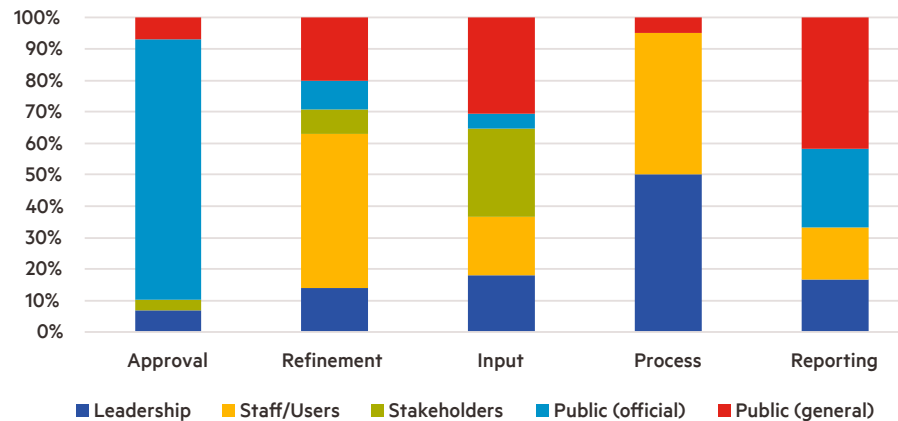


Content

Design, followed by Program, were the most common topics for engagement. This aligns with typical Predesign scope, and likely reflects the focus on these topics occurring during the phase with the most engagement. This criterion might also benefit from further and more refined analysis—in characterizing the content of engagement activities, "Design" covered everything from building materiality to furniture selection.



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS



Audience & Goals

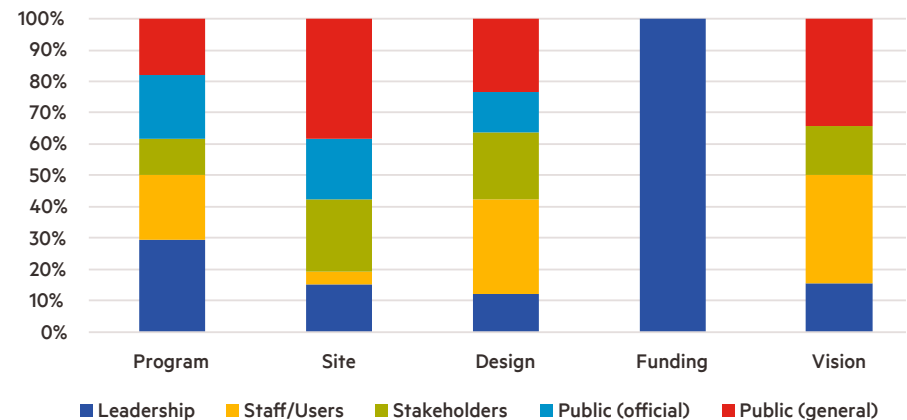
In comparing these two variables, we saw perhaps the widest variation of all the comparative analyses, representative of the wide difference in interests represented by each of the audience groups.

- Activities directed towards the general public most frequently either sought input or were reporting back. This aligns with the most traditional form of community engagement—the public meeting—which tends to be most conducive for broad, abstract content.
- The role of public officials is most typically to provide approval, somewhat less frequently to receive reporting.
- Design refinement is most frequently done in collaboration with staff & users.

Audience & Content

This variable comparison reflects the diversity of interests represented by the different audience types.

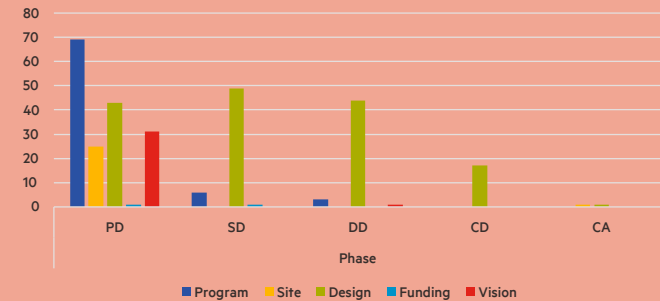
- Program related engagement included the broadest, and most evenly distributed, range of audiences.
- The general public was most involved in site-related engagement. This is often one of the most accessible elements of design, as it typically addresses content in which most people have some vested interest—traffic patterns, accessibility, visibility and views, etc.
- In contrast, staff are most heavily involved in design engagement activities, as these would typically include many of the detailed functional requirements that are most significant for regular users (ie, staff).
- Funding related engagement is dominated by leadership.



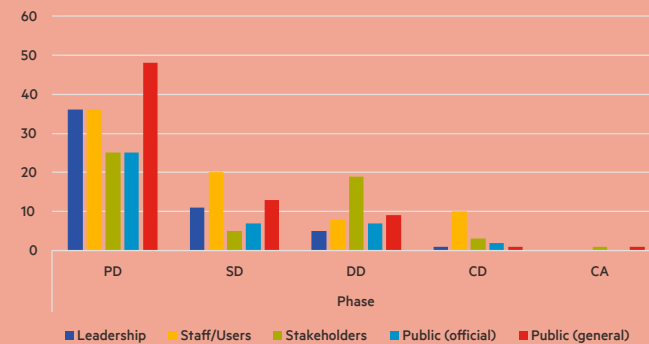
Engagement over Time

Both quantity and variety of engagement decrease over the project timeline. Early phase engagement encompasses the most different activity types, and the widest range of content and audience. Informal types of engagement (Open Houses, “Other” types) occur most heavily earlier in the process and are most frequently related to early phase topics such as programming. Outreach and engagement with the general public was also noticeably front-loaded, compared to more consistent involvement by staff and users.

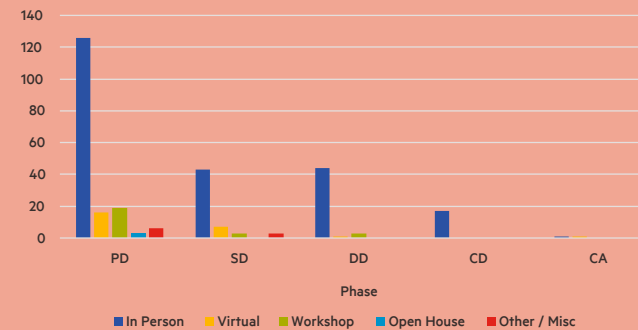
Content by Phase



Audience by Phase



Activity Type by Phase



ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Introduction

While the quantitative analysis of past engagement activities looked at the actual execution of design engagement, and helped us identify general patterns of activity and participation, we used the deeper dive questions to investigate some of the reasons behind these patterns. In reviewing responses, we aimed to categorize some common themes, as well as identifying project factors that influenced how engagement was conducted.

In this phase, we also focused more heavily on the outcomes of engagement, whether effective or challenging. A noticeable recurring theme across projects was an emphasis on setting, clarifying, and modifying expectations for participation. More than any tangible project characteristic, differences in how teams (and clients) established these desired outcomes shaped the nature of the engagement processes.

For the purposes of this toolkit, we categorized engagement activities into three typical frameworks, generally defined by the expectations established for the process. For each framework, we identified a range of typical activity types, as well as additional considerations that design & client teams might take into account when developing an engagement process of each type. Finally, case study examples illustrate how and why an actual project used these strategies.

The three frameworks are:

- **Responsive:** The project team is receiving content (opinions, information, ideas) from a broader audience, with the expectation that this will be incorporated—in some way—into the design process.
- **Informative:** The project team is sharing information with a broader audience; expectations emphasize transparency and understanding, rather than direct impact on the design.
- **Collaborative:** A broader audience becomes part of the project team, either temporarily or long-term, and design solutions are developed collectively.

It is important to note that our research—both quantitative and qualitative—did not suggest a hierarchy or ranking between the different systems. The tactics that might be desirable for one project were not necessarily applicable across the board.

Activity Examples

Display Board(s)

Similar to an online update site, a physical display board in a public setting provides an analog opportunity for community members to receive information about the project outside of scheduled and structured events.



Drop-in / Pop-up conversations

Typically unstructured conversations between community members and the project team, occurring separately from scheduled meetings and presentations. This may look like setting up a table during a local farmer's market or holding an open house at a public location. This allows for a more casual conversation, and can elicit participation from people that might not otherwise participate in official public meetings.

Feedback Boards

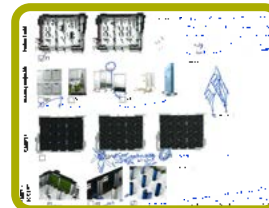
A feedback board is any kind of poster or visual aid on which community participants are asked to provide comments directly onto drawings or other imagery. Again, this can either be an online activity, taking advantage of many recent digital presentation platforms, or it can be analog, comments being written on sticky notes or directly onto a poster. This enables feedback to be given in context, a participant being able to leave a comment directly beside part of a plan their feedback refers to.



Focus Group Discussion

Typically focused presentations directed at a particular user group. These might include groups divided by age (youth, seniors, etc.) or by activity interest (sports users, neighbors, event participants). By focusing on a particular aspect of the project, the project team can elicit more detailed input about that component.

However, it is important that these focus groups include a range of subjects and that feedback is assessed within an overall project context, to avoid over-prioritizing a single perspective.



Product Review

Selection of products (most frequently finishes and furniture) are a hands-on way for an audience group to engage with design decisions. These activities might include physical testing (such as of chairs or seating elements) or the review of images, via presentation or feedback board.

Q&A Sessions

Typically conducted in combination with a presentation, Q&A sessions allow an audience to request clarification or provide input about presented content. Enabling online participation at live meetings can increase the number of people able to attend.

Small Group Meeting

Similar to focus groups, but not necessarily limited to a single interest. By limiting the audience of these engagement activities, the design team can hear more from each participant, and receive feedback from those most affected or most knowledgeable about the topic at hand.



Surveys / Polling

Surveys and polling can be conducted either digitally or via mail. They often provide the most widespread participation, although they are limited in the level of detail that can be included. Note that these efforts are typically managed by either client groups or specialized consultants. Limited versions of these activities might also be incorporated into other activity types, where responses would be limited to activity participants.



Town Hall Meetings

While often sharing the same audience and set-up as a traditional public meeting, this meeting type does not include a presentation component, but rather enables participants to ask questions of the project team. The unstructured character allows the content to reflect public concerns or priorities. In cases where there is community mistrust or division, this forum can identify root problems, and dispel misinformation.

“Traditional” Public Meetings

This is possibly the activity most thought of when discussing engagement. These meetings give the design team an opportunity to present their work or related project information to a large number of people. These meetings can be most effective when followed by a Q&A session or other interactive format.



Website Updates

Projects might have a website for the public to access information about the project on their own time without the active participation of the design team.



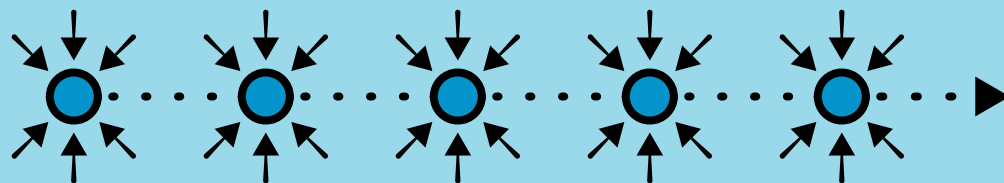
Workshop / Design Charette

A workshop generally involves a smaller group of participants, or several small groups, who work together to develop solutions to specific project/design questions. These are helpful for addressing complex project conditions that might have a range of possible solutions.



Responsive

Collecting Information / Feedback



Description

Responsive engagement is aimed at collecting information from the public. In this type of process, information flows in one direction, from the broader audience to the project team. Note that responsibility for incorporating (ie, responding) remains at the discretion of the project team. Responsive processes seek to gauge the opinions, needs and desires of a community, and requires the project team to carefully consider what questions are asked and how, in order to obtain desired and/or useful responses.

Types of Activities

- Surveys
- Feedback Boards
- Traditional Public Meetings (when conducted in conjunction with Q&A or other interactive methodology)
- Polling
- Focus Group Meetings

Considerations

Execution

- Activities such as polling & surveys can reach a very wide audience, and provide a large data set of responses. They necessarily require analysis and synthesis after the fact to make sense of a potentially broad variety of responses.
- These activities typically fall outside the scope & expertise of design teams, and are often managed by a specialist consultant to the client. This allows a polling or survey process to happen independently of the design process. While this can be helpful in providing early input to shape the project scope, it also means that the survey/poll content may be disconnected from the questions that are most significant to the project team, limiting their utility.
- Responsive activities need to be planned into the schedule with enough advance consideration that public feedback can be incorporated into the design process. This requires the project team to identify key decisions up front, and to plan opportunities for feedback in advance of these milestones. This often requires a longer design schedule.

Impact & Effectiveness

- Especially for public, community projects, ensuring that the community feels represented is important for the success of the project; activities that allow for public feedback can help develop a sense of trust in the project team, as well as community ownership of the project overall.
- It can be challenging to communicate complex design factors in the limited timeframe or length of these activities. Responses typically include a fairly low level of detail, as well. This may result in feedback that is either non-actionable or not relevant. This can actually create more problems, if the public feels like their input is being disregarded.
- For all responsive activities, the extent of outreach is a factor, both in terms of receiving useful feedback, and in terms of public perception. Many projects have struggled with low participation levels, or participation that is not representative of the overall community. While client groups often take responsibility for eliciting broader involvement, project teams can improve outreach by conducting a range of engagement activities that foster interaction with different audiences.

CASE STUDY

Cherryland Community Center

Engagement process for the Cherryland Community Center was primarily conducted through public community meetings. Each meeting included structured in-person interactive activities, as well as presentations by the design team. The main topics included program priorities, and site selection and design.

Although the workshop content was developed to solicit input about fairly concrete and specific design questions, the project team reported that the most significant benefit of the process was developing an understanding of the unique community history and identity. The workshops provided an opportunity for community members to articulate significant values that might not have otherwise been as clearly understood or incorporated into the final design.

Example:

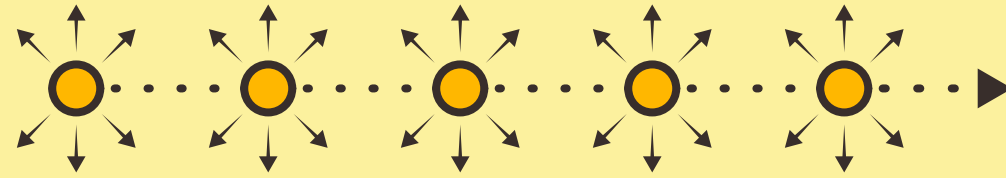
The engagement process highlighted that an adjacent historic estate was very significant to the community. An ongoing challenge was to reassure the public that the new building would reflect this significance. Through the engagement process, the team was able to develop a design response that addressed this. Rather than copy the architectural styles of the (Victorian) estate, a design feature in the new building is an exterior wall that incorporates an original historic drawing of the Estate. The community loves this, as it explicitly recalls the Meek estate, and satisfies their desire to connect to it.





Informative

Disseminating Information / ideas



Description

Informative engagement focuses on disseminating knowledge to the public. In these processes, information also flows in one direction, but from the project team out to the broader audience. Informative activities might include simply reporting on the progress of a project, or can involve more detailed reporting to a stakeholder group. They are often especially helpful in developing public understanding and clarity to complex project conditions.

Types of Activities

- Traditional public meeting
- Official public meetings
- Focus group meetings
- Web page
- Display Boards
- Drop-in/Pop-up Conversations

Considerations

Execution




- Many of these activities can be effectively “unscheduled”, allowing for public participation at a pace or location that works for the individual.
- Outreach occurring in spaces that are part of daily life can be particularly effective at reaching members of the public who may not otherwise participate in more structured public meetings. (Farmers market pop-ups have been a preferred tactic, but we have also seen effective pop-ups at schools, parks, and other similar high-traffic locations.)
- While the scheduled forms of these activities (ie meetings) are typically integrated with the overall project schedule, they do not usually require building in additional design time, and can be conducted on an ongoing, or even as-needed basis.

Impact & Effectiveness

- There can be a perception that engagement is not feasible unless the audience is participating in the decision-making. This can make it challenging to incorporate engagement into projects that may have significant technical constraints (often, but not always, related to budget), or where the decision-making process is particularly codified (ie, limited to City Council or public officials). However, engagement activities that can provide transparency into this decision-making process can nonetheless serve to develop trust in the overall project.
- Like responsive activities, the project team must calibrate the complexity of the information appropriately to the audience and the scope, to most benefit from the engagement. Overly complex (or overly simplified) information can create a risk of misunderstanding, rather than clarity.
- Physical or virtual displays without additional interpretive presence don’t allow for questions, which also creates the risk of misinterpretation. However, note that over the last two years, the range of virtual media have increased, providing new options for responsiveness even in web-based content. Additionally, we’ve seen an increase in both the public and designers’ facility in using these online tools, potentially allowing some mitigation of this risk.



OPTION ANALYSIS

	Building Configuration	Adjacencies	Access, Circulation & Parking	Operations/ Phasing	Cost Factors
Swim Center site 	Least flexible site; Limited opportunities for outdoor accessory spaces	Community Center loses pond overlook; Picnic area impacted; Noise sources (picnic & Swim) remain in close proximity to Gardens	Convenient access for both public & service from parking; Consolidated vehicular access creates congestion, limited additional parking	Requires closure of swim facilities during construction Significant impact on rec programming	Limited new utilities or excavation required for pool
Comm Center site 	Most flexible site; Wide range of options for associated outdoor space	Maintains Community Center pond overlook; Allows view of pool from playground; Noise sources (picnic & swim) further from Gardens & residences	Centrally located, nearby overflow parking, and additional parking area available; Maintains key pedestrian access routes within park Consolidated vehicular access has potential for congestion & traffic	Swim Center remains open during construction; Good opportunities for construction staging; Requires closure of Community during construction Limited impact on rec programming	Requires new utilities for pool; Requires excavation for pool
Middle Park site 	Accommodates associated outdoor space; Less flexible site; Significant existing conditions to accommodate	Pond adjacency requires a buffer; Most impact to picnic area & existing parking; Blocks views of pond from street & playground	Centrally located, allows access from both existing parking areas; Additional parking area available, direct vehicular access to both service & public entries; Impedes pedestrian access routes through park	Allows operation of both existing facilities during construction; minimal impact on rec programming Challenging to provide construction access & staging (likely will add cost)	Requires all new utilities; Requires new excavation; Requires site grading

HEATHER FAHRTI PARK

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TAKE PART. SHARE IDEAS. STAY INFORMED.

Case Study

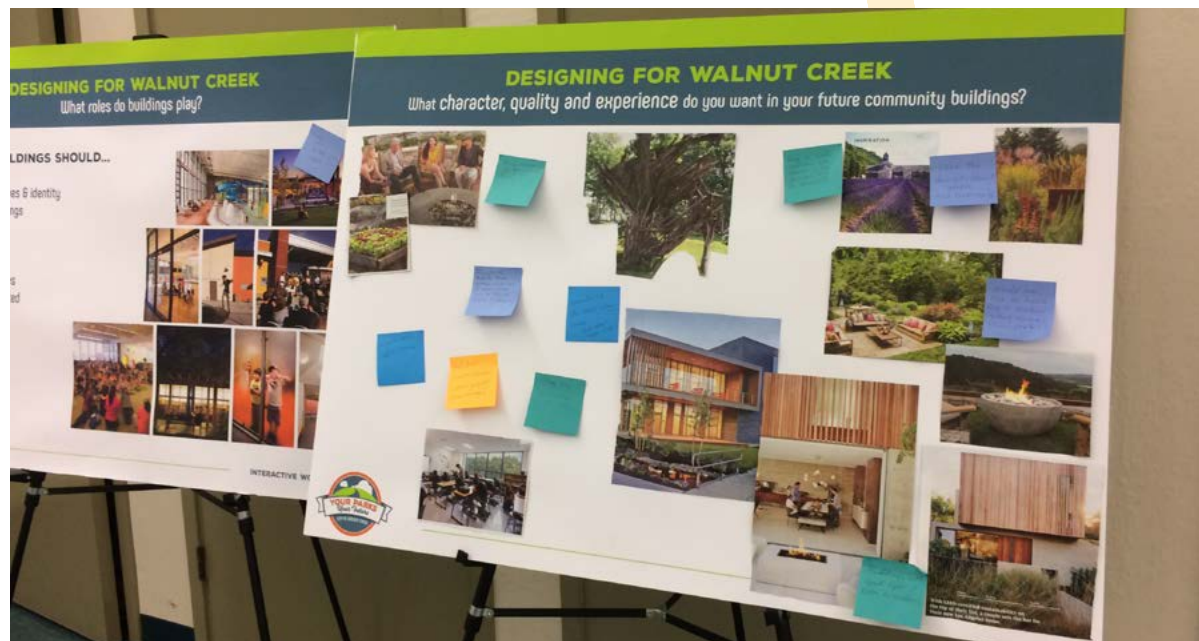
Walnut Creek Parks

Engagement process for this conceptual design project was conducted largely through stakeholder focus groups. The meetings involved both a presentation by the project team, and a structured opportunity for the stakeholders to react and ask questions.

The content of the meetings focused primarily on site conditions, with the specific goal of identifying the most appropriate site for the project, though the City Council members had the final decision-making responsibility. The focus group meetings were instrumental in ensuring that complete criteria were presented to Council, but most significantly, they served to develop support for the project.

Example

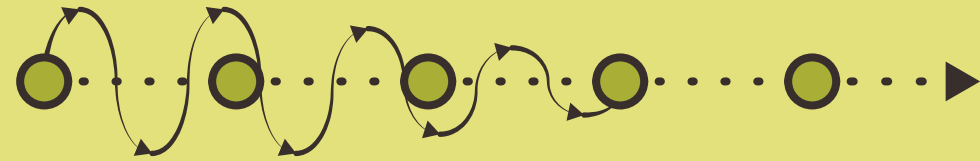
The presentation content to each focus group included explanation of site criteria that was applicable both to them specifically, and to other potential stakeholders. Some of these criteria were conflicting, or challenging to resolve. Transparency about the other factors at play allowed each group to have a better understanding of the ultimate decision.





Collaborative

Exchanging Information / Ideas



Description

Collaborative engagement aims to involve a broader audience in the creative process in a more direct and substantive form. In these processes, there is a multi-directional flow of information, as all parties participate in the project development. These engagement activities require a deeper commitment from community participants but provide the opportunity for far more detailed feedback. This type of engagement also gives the design team and community the greatest opportunity to respond to one another more immediately, in a less structured way.

Types of Activities

- Workshops
- Design Charettes
- Product Selection
- Small Group Meetings (if conducted on an ongoing basis)

Considerations

Execution

- Substantive involvement requires all participants to have a fairly detailed understanding of the project. This generally can't occur in one-off events, so collaborative engagement typically requires an ongoing commitment from all participants.
- Similarly, most of these engagement activities work best in smaller groups, where participants are able to develop longer term trust and relationships with each other. It can be challenging to develop consensus in large groups.
- It necessarily requires a greater time commitment from the project team as well, although not necessarily a longer schedule, provided that the engagement activities are effective in producing a decision.

Impact & Effectiveness

- This type of activity typically provides the most specific and detailed feedback and can therefore address more complex issues. It allows for more nuanced expression of community input, and of potential design limitations, as it occurs over time.
- Collaborative engagement often allows for a greater diversity of perspective, and the opportunity to develop design solutions that the project team alone might not have discovered.
- However, this type of effort requires significant buy-in from all parties. It requires a relinquishing of control from both designers and client representatives, so it is important that the scope of the collaboration (and any critical limitations) are clearly defined from the beginning. As with responsive activities, if the results of the engagement aren't incorporated, there is a risk that the public will lose trust in the process and the project.

Case Study

Berkeley Central Library

Engagement activities for this library renovation project included both traditional public meetings (largely informative) and a collaborative design process conducted with a Teen Working Group. Members of the Teen Working Group were teenage library users who met regularly with the design team to discuss the project.

The focus of the engagement was the fit-out of a new interior teen space, so included review of finishes, general design quality, and all furnishings. The workshops allowed the Teen Group to provide detailed input about what they liked and didn't like as the design developed. This required the Library to allow the Teen Groups to make real and substantive decisions about the project, without major revision or alteration. Associated public community meetings, held concurrently with the Teen engagement process, served to keep the broader public informed of the project, but did not seek specific input on the design.

Example

All the furnishings, including bookstacks, in the renovated Teen space are mobile, which was a direct response to the preferences of the Teen Group.

