

**Designing Public  
Consensus: The Civic  
Theater of Community  
Participation for Architects,  
Landscape Architects,  
Planners, and Urban  
Designers**

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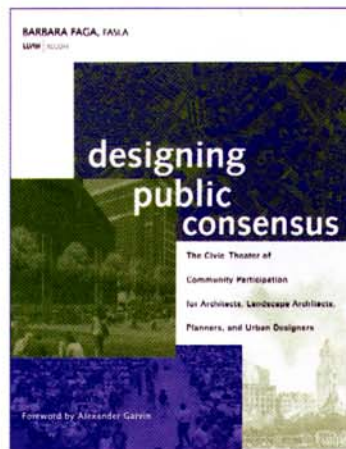
The mantra of professional dispute resolution practitioners is “trust the process.” This book by landscape architect Barbara Faga, chair of the board of the San Francisco–based international planning and design firm EDAW, elaborates on that theme for architects, landscape architects, planners, and urban designers. Drawing on her experience, as well as that of others involved in recent participatory design efforts, she illustrates key lessons on building consensus for large-scale design projects.

This is a very readable book. Its seven chapters are based on case studies where project proponents faced formidable challenges in getting agreement, resulting in both successes and failures. Each case begins with an outline of the project’s location, scope, key players, major issues, and design firms, and a project timeline illustrates the flow of events from the start of the process to its finish. Lessons learned are stated in each chapter and restated in 13 appendices, each dealing with a topic such as facilitating a discussion, media relations, and active listening.

The chosen cases make for interesting reading. In the account of the struggle to get a sophisticated Boston public to agree on the design of the new Wharf District Park atop the “Big Dig,” Faga tells how it was necessary

to use hometown architectural and public relations firms to get past the outsider stigma initially faced by her Atlanta-based firm. Even so, the project ran afoul of local turf politics and media attacks that stretched its timeline and budget. To respond to the aggressive criticism of the proposals, the original public process plan of a charrette and five public meetings morphed into a “seemingly endless” series of meetings. The plan finally got approved and built, but designers are cautioned that long and arduous public processes are not the route to cutting-edge design.

In the World Trade Center project, “Listening to the City,” more than



5,000 citizens turned out to participate in public discussions about the future of the ground zero site. The purpose was to bring people together to ponder plans to rebuild, reconnect lower Manhattan, and memorialize the loss. At an all-day megameeting in the convention center, participants sat with facilitators at small tables. Following a format developed by America Speaks, a Washington, D.C.–based nonprofit organization, their ideas were recorded on laptop computers and transmitted to staff who posted priorities and questions on large screens throughout the hall. Each participant used a wireless polling keypad to vote on the issues and results were instantly displayed.

One of their tasks was to review six concept plans prepared in advance of the meeting; they rejected them all as too commercial.

The title is misleading; as the text demonstrates, it is impossible to “design consensus.” Public participation processes can be designed (and redesigned), but a consensus outcome is never guaranteed. Some of the case studies also are misleading; e.g., the glowing tale of the high-tech World Trade Center public process, given that the ground zero design has since floundered. Only at the afterword section was there acknowledgment that the consensus had begun to unravel. In retrospect, the World Trade Center process was marred from the start by its failure to make clear to the public that decision power was retained by the property owner—a failing often found in public participation and charrette processes.

Designers and planners, as well as developers, who need to gain public consensus for their plans should buy and study this book. A much deeper appreciation of the twists and turns in the road ahead will be gained, along with advice on how to navigate them.

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## Americans and Their Land

**ANNE MACKIN**  
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Commentators on the American experience, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Frederick Jackson Turner, have noted the importance of the open frontier in shaping American social and political institutions and have speculated on how we would adapt to its inevitable closing. As planner Anne Mackin makes clear