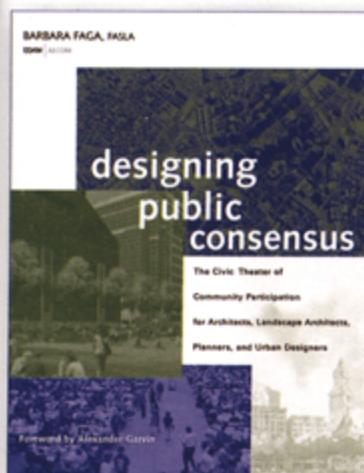


# Designing public consensus



Barbara Faga, Wiley, 2006, 288pp, h/b, £42.50, ISBN 0-471-68119-9

Barbara Faga's book is a must-read for all those trying to improve the community participation process in designing and regenerating Britain's neighbourhoods.

*Designing public consensus* documents 12 case studies of public participation in the design of regeneration/development projects in the United States, both from Faga's own professional experience as a planner and that of others. The case studies are neither exhaustive nor highly detailed on a technical level. Rather, each case study provides a framework and context for subjective commentary from both Faga and others involved in the participation process attached to the project. While each case study is satisfying in its own right, as a collection they form Faga's well-paced exploration of community participation (be it invited or provoked) and its effect on project outcomes.

With the perspective of a design professional, Faga explores the complex web of relationships involved in public participation and the complications that participation brings to the design process. If there is one clear message that emerges from the book, it is that community participation is hard work, frustrating and never the same twice. As Faga points out: 'For any project, every one

of the individuals involved – client, designer, consultant, government official, resident, business owner, naysayer, onlooker – brings his or her personal vision of what's needed, of what the outcome could be, and/or what will work best.'

Faga is brutally honest with her readers, noting that many designers, as she did, come unprepared to the public process and feel either threatened or angered by what they see as interference and belittling of their craft. However, she stresses that in today's world, community participation is a reality for the designer and something that cannot simply be sidestepped. She goes on to suggest, and indeed to document, that if taken seriously, community participation can be extremely valuable to the success of a project and to the design process itself: 'It is possible to facilitate the public process in a way that informs and elevates the design of a project.'

Though written as a resource for architects and planners, the book provides valuable lessons for everyone involved in the development or regeneration of an area, particularly to those commissioning the design and those leading the participation process. While the book offers no easy solutions to effective participation, it uses case studies to draw out common themes and issues, and outlines some fundamental principals that can and should be applied to the public participation process.

While at first glance the book, and particularly the illustrations, might seem daunting to the non-designer, the text is easy and interesting reading and includes a number of enlightening, and sometimes amusing, quotes from people who have been involved or affected by the participation processes described. The book is an organised and well-edited series of experiences that draws out the key lessons to be learned, celebrating these projects' successes and exploring the possible causes for their failings.

Perhaps one of the most interesting of the case studies refers to the extensive public participation strategy

used in the 'Listening to the City' project following the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. 'The Civic Alliance, a coalition of more than 85 civic, labour, business, environmental groups and academic institutions [came] together to ensure that the public's voice [was] included in the rebuilding decisions, and took on the gargantuan task of creating a 21st-century town hall meeting.' The programme lasted several weeks and involved over 5,000 participants. The first all-day event alone saw 4,300 participants take part, benefiting from both high-tech communication and data gathering solutions and from small discussion groups (of ten people) led by professional facilitators. While the scale of this particular process goes way beyond the budget and human resources available to

most projects, it raises some interesting points about the benefits, and indeed challenges of a transparent and inclusive participation process.

At a time when many have recognised the importance of community participation in the design of our built environment, but struggle with the process, *Designing public consensus* offers valuable insight and tips, with the benefit of hindsight from a broad range of experiences. It is not a tool kit, rather a frank exploration of the themes, issues, and complexities that are likely to emerge in any community participation process around the design of the built environment. Whatever your role in that process you will find that Faga's book is a thoroughly good read and a resource that you will return to again and again.

*Sophia de Sousa, chief executive, The Glass-House Community Led Design*

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