

# Participatory Design in the Development of Public Housing

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**Abstract:** Many studies have shown that participatory processes in design are important for understanding and incorporating the needs of different groups of people. However, the prevalent view of designers persists that the active involvement of users in design processes is not useful and in most cases is to be avoided. The right of users to participate in design is often ignored and even when it is accepted many obstacles, including economic deficiencies and organizational concerns, impede participation. Even when participation is politically demanded, as in the case of public housing design, the processes and outcomes of public participation are often ineffective. This paper describes participatory processes in the development of a public housing project by reviewing available official documents on public participatory processes. The outcomes of this study indicate collaboration and shared learning occurred between various interests groups. However, the act of showing up to a meeting does not necessarily mean a person is an informed contributor. At the same time, well-organized minorities do not always represent an absent majority's best interests. Participation techniques may have been insufficient at some of the meetings. Further research is necessary to investigate these issues.

**Key words:** *Participatory Design, Empowerment, Public Housing.*

## 1. Introduction

Past development patterns defended an economically efficient way of reconstruction following World War II. The outcomes and processes of planning and design were excessively ordered and top-down oriented. Involving the public during the process was not considered necessary. The pursuit of universalism, which was called "international style," applied to the design of buildings and open spaces that belonged to everyone and no one. However, urban environments are not only a matter of an economic system that makes profit and focuses on efficiency, but also a matter of a social system that supports humanity and identity [14]. These environments are not a rigid end state but a process for an integration of visions and the active collaboration between the practitioner and the public [6, 7, 8]. Today, planning and design more frequently includes the opinion of those to be affected by its outcomes [5, 9].

Many studies have shown that participatory processes in planning and design are important to understand and adjust the needs of different groups of people. Public participation is a primary right of all people potentially affected by a design. Moreover, public participation in architectural design and urban planning are more central

to design processes due to their significant development costs and life cycles. In this respect, HOPE VI<sup>1</sup>, a public housing program, encourages citizen involvement during the housing development process. One of the objectives of HOPE VI projects is forging broad-based partnerships to involve public housing residents, state and local government officials, the private sector, non-profit groups and the community at large in planning and implementing the new communities [15].

HOPE VI requires that housing authorities and developers involve the public in designing a new development [15]. While some projects have had high levels of public participation, the public has not always been sufficiently involved in designing processes [11, 12]. HOPE VI is under active examination regarding possible future reformulation by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administrators. Therefore, it is necessary to critically evaluate the outcomes of HOPE VI in relation to the public participation to create better strategies for future public housing developments. As a preliminary approach to the evaluation research, this paper describes participatory processes in HOPE VI by reviewing available official documents on public participation processes in the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project in Phoenix, Arizona, USA.

## **2. Participation in the Development of Matthew Henson HOPE VI Project**

Matthew Henson was the first public housing development in Arizona; the 372 housing units were constructed with the most modern conveniences of that time [3]. As inner-city Phoenix declined, the neighborhoods of Matthew Henson suffered more crime and blight with fewer amenities for the people who lived in the project area<sup>2</sup>. One of the goals of the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project has been to revitalize the severely distressed public housing units and its neighborhoods [2]. The City of Phoenix received its first HOPE VI grant in 2001 to revitalize Matthew Henson public housing. The project was completed in December 2008. The master developer for the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project was McCormack, Baron, Salazar, Inc. which has overseen the development process since 2002. Throughout the development process of the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project, the company encouraged input from stakeholders to help with the planning and design of the project.

Three main participation techniques used in the development of the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project were a community action team meeting, focus groups, and an advisory group. Besides these three techniques, quarterly newsletters and occasional meetings, such as move-in workshops and community garden meetings were employed as communication tools among residents and surrounding neighborhoods. LL Decker & Associates, Inc. was hired to facilitate meetings to identify planning and design strategies. The outcomes of the community

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<sup>1</sup> Public housing is one of the alternatives for housing low-income residents. However, many public housing communities are spatially and racially isolated from other communities and characterized by concentrated poverty. Practitioners and academics have worked to produce public housing structures that are designed to better the lives of the residents. One of the examples of these efforts was the federal grants program, HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere), which was developed in 1992 under the Urban Revitalization Demonstration Program of HUD [15]. The HOPE VI program is one of the models that use physical design to connect public housing development with surrounding neighborhoods.

<sup>2</sup> In response to excessive levels of population density and environmental pollution of the industrial cities, people have move to the outskirts of the cities. This movement resulted in deteriorated inner-cities and promoted suburban sprawl. When inner-cities deteriorate, what often remain were the low-income residents who did not have enough resources to move.

action team meeting, focus groups, and advisory group meeting was group consensus. More information on these three participation techniques in the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project is described below.

Community action team meetings have been held every month since 2002 in the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project. During the development of the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project, information from the community action team meetings was given to the master developer and the community advisory group. Once the project was completed, now the meetings are open to the public and maintain partnerships with the Phoenix Revitalization Corporation, City of Phoenix, Block Watch groups, the master developer, and other neighborhood associations. The major concerns of these meetings are protecting the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project and its surrounding neighbors from crime and blight.

A focus group is a smaller and more informal type of meeting than the community action team meeting for conducting group opinions under discussion. The group is conducted by a trained moderator who draws out participants' thought to a project [4]. Three categories of focus groups were conducted in the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project: (a) disability focus groups, (b) senior focus groups, and (c) youth focus groups. Approximately 30% of the residents in public housing developments throughout the U.S. are disabled [16]. For the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project, disability focus groups were held three times in 2004, 2005, and 2006. The intention of the disability focus groups was to provide information regarding services and opportunities rather than get resident feedback. A great portion of the meetings were composed of presentations on social security, independent living, and job searching. The meetings were not continued because of the lack of participation by disabled residents.

In the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project, 130 senior units are among the total of 612 units. To consult the residents in senior units, nine focus groups were held from 2002 to 2005, with monthly meetings occurring since August 2006. Two special senior focus group sessions identified desired community programs and housing attributes at the beginning of the master planning process. The first was held on November 26, 2002 and the second was held on February 19, 2003. The meeting results were provided to the master developer. The character of the meetings changed from focus groups to informational meetings after the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project was completed. In the informational group, seniors get information on financial and health issues and they discuss community issues when they surface. Approximately 30 participants attend each of these meetings.

Youth participation in community activities creates a sense of belonging and an opportunity to become socially productive [13]. Two youth council members of the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project participated in national HOPE VI youth leadership conferences in San Francisco, California, in 2002 to discuss topics ranging from homelessness, public space, and cultural diversity. Besides that conference, youth focus groups have been held for the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project since 2002. During the project's planning and design phases, the youth participants discussed problems of the Matthew Henson communities before the development and desired community facilities. During the development, youth have been continually informed about the process through drawings and 3D simulations. Youth representatives also attended an advisory group meeting to ask questions about the project and report comments from focus groups. Once the project was completed, the group continues

to meet every week with the meeting more focused on socialization and life-skill education. Also, the group occasionally participates in community events like graffiti busters.

An advisory group is a participation technique that includes a group of people representing various interests, viewpoints, or fields of expertise that are set up to advise on proposed plans [4]. The objectives of the advisory group meeting were: (a) to listen and comment on the proposed master plan for the Matthew Henson HOPE VI redevelopment area, (b) to provide a vehicle for people who are part of the community but who cannot attend the meetings to communicate with the master developer, the city, and each other, (c) to learn how redevelopment planning and design works, (d) to help the city make decisions and move the project forward, (e) to summarize and review the residents’ comments on the design options, and (f) to support public recommendations in the community. Community and focus groups, as well as four sub-groups of the advisory group were incorporated in the meetings. The four sub-groups were (a) community and supportive services (CSS), relocation, section 3; (b) community relations and outreach; (c) financial and economic development; and (d) planning and design. Each sub-group included residents and officials from the city of Phoenix. The advisory group continues to meet even after the project was completed.

**3. Conclusions**

The official documents of the public participation process in development of the Matthew Henson HOPE VI project show collaborations and shared learning occurred between various interests groups. Stakeholders have been involved the project since the beginning of the development. The planning and design proposals for the projects were refined when the participants made comments (Figure 1). Even after the development was completed, people have regular meetings to maintain or improve current conditions. However, the act of showing up to a meeting does not necessarily mean a person is an informed contributor. At the same time, well-organized

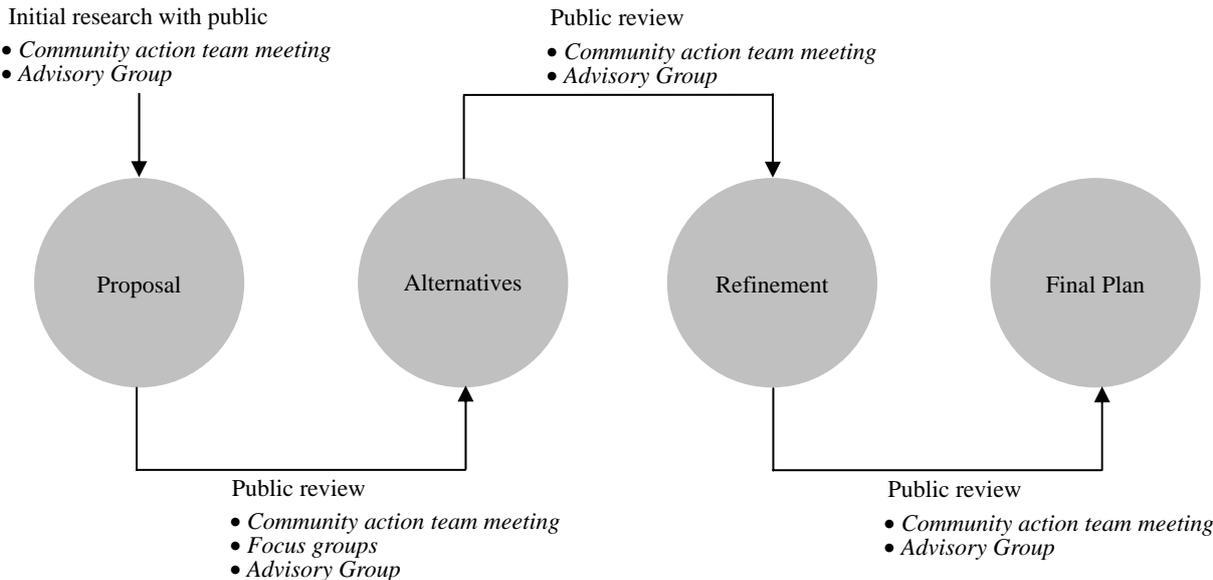


Figure. 1 Participation in the Development of Matthew Henson HOPE VI Project

minorities do not always represent an absent majority's best interests. Participation techniques may have been insufficient at some of the meetings. Further research is necessary to investigate these issues.

Public participation is the process by which government officials, professionals, and community groups and members get together to work something out. However, determinations of what serves the public interest, in a society containing many diverse interest groups, are highly contentious. Therefore, public participation seeks better solutions rather than right solutions. The best process ensures that all the responsibilities, profits, and risks are shared with all participants. The participatory process also provides a better way to collect, analyze and interpret information. The worst process is tokenism [1, 4]. Individuals who are more engaged in a public participation process are generally more tolerant than non-participants because the participatory activities result in mutual learning between stakeholders and publics [7, 10]. The development of housing is not the result of the process, but the means to it. The success or failure of public housing development in the future depends on how the plan or design is developed based on a good understanding of people and environments through public participation efforts.

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