Groundwork for Groundbreaking: What Matters, With Whom and When?
Ex Ante Participatory Evaluation in a Main Street Community Design Project

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When the Village of Trumansburg undertook to make its Main Street more pedestrian-friendly, a group of citizens embarked upon creating an inclusive and transparent public process for designing and implementing the project. At the onset of the endeavor, a team of village volunteers and an action researcher launched a parallel participatory evaluation inquiry to elicit information needed before, during and after the Main Street Project. Now that the Village has settled upon a design concept for this significant reconfiguring of the community’s downtown core, this paper portrays the evaluation team’s work to inform the public process by uncovering what matters, to whom, and to provide the community useful research findings when those same can serve local decision-making. The article begins with a fictionalized vignette and concludes with a brief discussion of the larger issues raised in the case, or why this matters. Appended afterwards is an evaluation case profile with on-site photographs.
Two six-year old boys are hurrying alongside the main road on their way to school on a frosty morning. Where the sidewalk pavement remains, the concrete is broken and uneven, and both boys attend to the ground beneath their feet as they walk. They are late. As the boys pass in front of an apartment complex, neither Roy nor Bill looks up at the building; it’s history as the original mill house of the settlement that became this village is thoroughly obscured by aluminum siding. Roy glances beyond the apartments to the nearby creek, at a place that was once an important crossing to hunting parties of indigenous peoples tracking bear during annual forays. Roy knows nothing about the significance of this creek side, and his mind is preoccupied with whether or not he and Bill can cover the remaining half-mile before the school crossing guard leaves her post. Bill is similarly pensive; he wonders aloud whether or not Baylor’s seeing-eye-dog will recover from having been struck in the crosswalk last week by a commercial truck. Traffic through town is picking up on this state highway beside the children as the morning rush hour begins.

The scenario above, a fictional account based on actualities, conveys the conditions a group of citizens of a small village in upstate New York sought to rectify when they applied for federal (U.S.) funds under the Transportation Enhancement Act for the Twenty-first Century, or TEA-21. The Village of Trumansburg is a community of 15,000 situated on the northwest side of Cayuga Lake in the upstate New York area known as the Finger Lakes Region. As in many small localities, the Main Street of this village was reconfigured as a state highway decades ago, and the roadway now serves a variety of uses. In seeking a grant from the U.S. federal Department of Transportation, the Village intended to reclaim some of the pedestrian quality of Main Street prior to the highway construction and to improve pedestrian safety. As stated in the grant proposal, these objectives would be addressed by: 1) refurbishing existing and extending new sidewalks, 2) reconciling hazardous street and
intersection conditions, and 3) creating new public spaces. In addition, the proposal framers also sought to make history visible via markers and representations and to create linkages and connections to area places of interest through new signage.

This is also the setting for an experiment in civic engagement process. Project framers, landscape architect Paula Horrigan and senior extensionist in labor mediation Scott Sears, felt that a project addressing basic common goods such as the village center, street life, public space and community ambiance must take a longterm view and invite civic capacity development as well. Democratic participation, transparency of process and decision-making, and grounding the built environment project in local knowledge were principles imbedded within the initial proposal. While the county’s transportation planning director enthusiastically endorsed the original project proposal, neither the village nor the surrounding township has a planning staff. Accordingly, when the proposal was accepted, a volunteer group of residents and elected officials set about the work of moving from ideas in a proposal to a live community engagement. One of the early actions taken was to invite an evaluation action researcher to facilitate a participatory inquiry. First on the agenda was the question of participation of whom?

**With, For, To Whom: Players & Stakeholders**

In terms of funding the Main Street Project, the project players include the federal source of the TEA-21 grant, the Village of Trumansburg, and local fundraising and in-kind support. In terms of human energy investment, the primary constituency responsible for launching the Main Street Project was an informal group of citizens. Now known as the Advisory Committee, the group’s consists of Village residents, including elected local government officials, and one non—resident. The Village itself was the grant applicant. Several of the Advisory Committee members are design professionals, the majority of them are affiliated with the university nearby although most of them view their many volunteer hours as personal investment in
their home community rather than as university outreach. There is, however, a formal university outreach component, in that Cornell University provided a grant to encourage public engagement in community design. Among other things, this grant was used to focus on integrating participatory evaluation with the public decision-making and design processes by funding the previously mentioned evaluation action research student.

After speaking with ‘gatekeepers’ (people with access to particular constituencies) in the community such as clergy members and parents active in the local schools a team of community volunteers coalesced to form an Evaluation Committee. Meeting in a committee member’s home once or twice a month (early in the morning before the work day began) the team undertook to design an evaluation research plan. The teams’ first task was to identify the audience and purpose of the evaluation. Preventing disjuncture between the design and those who would be living with the design was a primary goal, and facilitating communication between project planners and community residents was identified as the main objective for the evaluation.

**What Matters**
The evaluation team began the process of shaping a research design by asking itself and others, “What do we want to know before, during and after the Main Street Project?” After a systematic process of clustering, ranking and weighing potential information needs in light of project priorities, the team settled upon three research questions:

1. How successful is the Main Street Project in uncovering and addressing concerns of the diverse community in the service of: a) building participation, and b) identifying issues to be taken into account in the design?
2. To what extent does the community exercise ownership of the Main Street Project?

3. How does the Main Street Project understand and incorporate community conceptions of Trumansburg spirit, identity, place attachment and the roles of Main Street in the resulting design and in its modes of operation?

The team elected to begin focusing on the first and third question immediately, reasoning that community ownership, the theme of question two, could best monitored as the project took shape. Local priorities and understandings of community spirit and sense of place, however, needed to be educed early on, so that information could be considered during design development. Among the many data collection activities were interviews with business owners, civic organizations and clergy; a residents’ questionnaire; a youth forum and a youth web-based questionnaire; and a on-site reactions to a full scale design demonstration. From the wealth of information garnered from participatory public sessions, the data collection actions mentioned and others, the evaluation team was able to compile a thorough portrait of local preferences and to help interpret the same into design parameters.

When Does It Matter?
For the initial project stage, the period from project launch to deciding upon a foundational project concept, the evaluation work was to elicit ‘what mattered’ with respect to design. In the course of listening to local opinions, it became clear that there were numerous areas of agreement, a smaller range of apparent disagreements and some areas of strong contradiction among the values, preferences and priorities relevant to design intentions for the Mains Street Project. In public forums, the evaluation team presented back to the community a portrait of the range and relative weights found among preference patterns. Taking an attitude of ‘isn’t-it-
interesting,’ the contradictions that comprise who we are as a community,’ the evaluation team was able to hold up a mirror in a nonjudgmental way. It was at the close of one of these public meetings that the assembled body decided how the choice of basic design concept would be made.

The temporal immediacy of that particular evaluation presentation and the creation of a decision-making process was the most dramatic illustration of research use in the Main Street Project to date, but a more important aspect of the timing of evaluation results has much less flair. The periodic reporting of findings on an ongoing basis not only served to inform the project operations, but also helped to catalyze and foster the community conversation over an 18-month period from the public grant announcement to the design decision.

**Why Do Cases Such as This Matter?**
What gets built is greatly a matter of what gets imagined, funded and acted upon. Within the realm of the structurally feasible, configurations of the built space are largely shaped by the limitations of vision, financial resources and will. More often than not, there are discernable winners and losers in the placement of concrete.

In conventional architectural and engineering practice, evaluation is not an integral component of many built environment projects. Like a stone skipped across the design process, evaluation may be employed at the beginning, in the form of feasibility studies, and then again to compare and contrast “design alternatives” and then perhaps at the end of a construction, as a “post occupancy evaluation.” Bump, bump, bump, the stone skips, lighting down at most three times over the intense and demanding enterprise that begins with eliciting the values and intentions a project is to serve, translating the intentions into design parameters and priorities, conceptualizing the program a design will promote and embody—all of this before any drawings are made. It would seem that the venture of uncovering and shaping
the narrative the design is to serve is work very well suited for the strengths and assets of evaluative thinking, and yet evaluation is not generally employed for these purposes. Cases such as the Main Street Project, which set about to reframe the relationship of design and evaluation by incorporating evaluative inquiry before and throughout the project, are important learning grounds for finding better ways of creating spaces that work for the people who live with them.

Most especially in the case of designing public place and shared space, much is at stake. Just as design reflects human imagination of how space can be organized and ordered, design also serves envisioned purposes and parameters for what kinds of activities and interactions are accommodated in a location. How we configure shared space then not only conveys an existing sense of what is desirable, but also influences what is possible from then forward. For these reasons, the process of making public place is one with far-reaching implications for democratic ideals and concepts such public goods and the public sphere. Evaluation, particularly participatory evaluation, has important contributions to make before and during all stages of placemaking the commons.

Appendix: Evaluation Case Profile

Trumansburg Participatory Evaluation Action Research

Case Context
Inquiry in conjunction with a community-based built environment project to increase pedestrian safety in Village through sidewalk improvement & extension, roadway modification, creation of new public spaces, and making visible linkages through new signage.
What was the evaluation engagement?
T-burg PEAR (Phase One) consisted of a collaborative framing of a research design, implementation of the same, and use of both the inquiry processes and products in facilitating public dialog and project decision-making.

When
October 2001-December 2002 [Phase One]

Who comprised the evaluation team?
The core evaluation team was composed of six members: five community volunteers and one non-resident graduate student. Of the six, there were four women and two men, ranging in age from mid-thirties to early seventies. Four were native to the NY Finger Lakes area, but none were born within the one-mile square that constitutes the Village. With regard to occupation, the original membership reflected:

- a horticulture extensionist
- a mediation extensionist/trainer
- a landscape architect
- a social worker/homemaker
- a retired farmer
- a graduate student with a background in community development

All of the members of the initial core team were parents, college-educated, white and heterosexual—not a very diverse group. At the end of the first year, our farmer member left the committee and an early childhood researcher came on to the team.
What was Evaluation Team’s Committee Charge?

- To supply relevant information to the Advisory Committee for the design, implementation and assessment of the Main St Project.

- To provide findings in a timely manner to the Advisory Committee so that the information may be utilized when needed.

- To monitor how the Main St. Project is “playing”, i.e., being received/embraced, in the community.

- To provide information to the community so that residents might be informed, active participants in the design, implementation and assessment of the Main St Project.

- To initiate or invite reflection on the part of stakeholders for periodic documentation of learning.

- To initiate or invite reflection on the part of stakeholders for purposes of clarification when the inquiry processes identifies contradictions, hanging issues or matters needing resolution.

- To attend to our own learning as an inquiry group.

- To specifically seek out youth voices in evaluation inquiry activities.

What were the primary research questions?

There were three core questions:

1. How successful is the Main St. Project Team in uncovering and addressing concerns of the diverse community [in the service of: a) building participation, and b) identifying issues to be taken into account in the design]?

2. To what extent does the community exercise ownership of the Main St. project?

3. How does the MSP understand and incorporate community conceptions of T-burg spirit, identity, place attachment and the roles of Main St in the resulting design and in its modes of operation?
### What were the data collection activities?

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<th>Data Collection Activity &amp; Products</th>
<th>Who collected data</th>
<th>#s of responders</th>
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| 1. July 2001 Public Meeting at Firehouse Hall  
  Recorded public comments  
  Concept map of themes heard in commentary | Evaluation team members | Attendance: 20 |
| 2. Late winter 2001-02  
  Interviews with Main Street businesses, churches and organizations on location at place of business or worship, etc. | Ad hoc Committee of community volunteers | Out of 74 asked, 46 interviews completed  
  Nov. 2001-Jan 2002  
  62% return |
| **Summary of responses (& concerns of specific addresses) to participants, to community** | | |
| 3. March 14  
  Community Meeting at Elementary School. Recorded public comments. | Evaluation Committee | Attendance: 54 |
| 4. March 14  
  Participatory youth forum at elementary school  
  Themes and youth’s prioritization of issues | Evaluation Committee member plus two University extensionists | Youth attendance: 14 |
| **Summary to Architectural & Engineering (A & E) firm, to community, to participants** | | |
| 4. Main St. residents questionnaire via mail  
  Instrument, Summary of responses and design concerns of specific addresses | Eval Cmte | Out of 76 questionnaires mailed, 24 respondents  
  32% return rate |
| 5. May 1 DesignFest at Conservatory  
  Small groups doing design work on specific areas of project  
  Drawings and notes from small group reports | Eval Cmte  
  Design Cmte | Attendance: 117  
  Adults & youth |
| 6. May-June  
  Photo reconnaissance of “before” sidewalk conditions | Ad hoc community volunteers | |
| 7. Design Day at Presbyterian church  
  Documentation of community assessing, revising concept drawings  
  Perspective drawings, revised drawings and video of session | Eval Cmte  
  Design Cmte | Attendance: 27 adults |
| **Synthesis of design implications and sketches to volunteers, to A & E,** | | |
| 8. Youth civic web questionnaire via cyberspace & at middle school  
  Instrument, Compilation of replies | Evaluation Committee  
  Plus Extensionist | Respondents = 183  
  (Census data 2000, pop of 5-14 year olds = 254; 72%.  Pop. Of 5-19 year olds = 383; 48%) |
9. Sept. 14
Demonstration of Village Green
Response questionnaires & comment flips on site
Compilations of responses and comments
Evaluation Committee
Design Committee
Number of respondents filling out written evaluations = 75
Number of people adding comments to input boards = 21

10. Oct. 16
Community Data & Design Presentation
Design reactions recorded
Evaluation Committee
Design Committee
Attendance: 70

Nov 14 Community Design Meeting
Document public problem solving
Results of straw poll
Straw poll respondents, 116. One concept selected over another.

How was the data analyzed?
For both qualitative and quantitative data, our process followed this general pattern.
- Raw tallies
- Analysis by item
- Themes
- Interpretation into design parameters
- Highlights needing further deliberation
One or two members take the lead, then sense-making by whole committee

How were the findings used?
Informally, on an ongoing basis because of overlap between project Advisory Committee and the Evaluation Team; for instance, Evaluation Team asking Adv Committee to prioritize project objectives so the evaluation group could narrow down research questions.

Formally, to inform public dialog and to convey design priorities and concepts to contracted Architectural and Engineering professionals.