

Chapter 2

Working Together: Interior Architecture Creating with the Community

Marina Lommerse

Abstract Community engagement partnerships and projects have gained momentum in built environment and design fields, and the potential is great for interior architecture to engage with the community in the context of social sustainability. However, there is little knowledge in the field of how to go about it. Hence there is a need to explore suitable frameworks and methods. Using case studies and reflection on 30 years of practice, I argue that the interior architecture community, using core knowledge, can enrich and open up opportunities for other communities, and it is imperative to let communities, stakeholders, and other fields know what interior architecture can contribute to the public good. This chapter offers insights on how we may integrate community engagement into interior architecture education, internship and interior practice. And how we can take action to develop structures, methods and case studies, so that knowledge-action opportunities are built.

Keywords Interior architecture · Architecture · Planning · Community development · Social sustainability · Community engagement · Participative design · Design activism · Co-design

M. Lommerse (✉)

Marina Lommerse Consultants, Fremantle, Australia
e-mail: marina@marinalommerse.com

School of the Built Environment, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

D. Smith et al. (eds.), *Perspectives on Social Sustainability and Interior Architecture*,
DOI 10.1007/978-981-4585-39-2_2, © Springer Science+Business Media Singapore 2014



Fig. 2.1 'A community is a group of people who have something in common' (Bullock and Trombley 2000, p. 145). Tanganyika circa 1957. (Photographer Petrus G. W. A. Lommerse)

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the potential for interior architecture to engage with the community in the context of social sustainability. My objectives are: to engage the profession in taking a leadership role in the arena; to uncover ways in which interior architecture might contribute; and to let communities, stakeholders, partners, and other fields know what interior architecture can contribute.

Community engagement, and its relationship with interior architecture, has informed my most successful endeavours. The principles which evolved through my work are: firstly, to respect each person involved for what each of them can contribute, regardless of experience or education; and secondly, to create synergy between the parties, which leads to transformation (Fig. 2.1).

I define community engagement as a cooperative process of working with people to address their wellbeing, crossing disciplinary boundaries, and using multiple knowledge from inside and outside the community. Community engagement is predicated on the consent and active participation of the community whose social capital, processes or environments are being considered, thereby playing a vital role in social sustainability (Hendler-Ross and Hendler-Ross 2008). Bryan Bell argues that 'the process of creating the built environment can allow communities and individuals to improve and celebrate their lives. It can help solve their struggles by reshaping their existence' (Bell 2008, p. 15).

Community engagement has been part of my practice, research and teaching for two decades, and I have noticed a growth in its application across many fields

during that time. In a sense, we have seen a rediscovery of community, and the significance of its values and power. My purpose in this chapter is to facilitate this development of practice and discourse in the design field by presenting some ideas, frameworks and principles for community engagement. These are drawn from a review of published and unpublished case studies from those whose work is engaged with community; in addition, I reflect on how community engagement has evolved in my life and career as an interior architect and educator. This reflection suggests possible answers to questions such as: what is the value of community engagement in relation to social sustainability? How can interior architecture be meaningfully involved?

Community Engagement and Social Sustainability

An understanding of Community Engagement, its relationship to sustainability and the forces which have made it a popular notion, is required to contextualize this study. Sustainability is concerned with balancing social, economic and environmental needs, which vary from region to region, community to community and person to person. Social sustainability, as defined by the editors of this collection (see Chapter 1) refers to the human dimensions of the sustainability discourse—relationships, needs and quality of life within regions and communities. Therefore, by identifying the concerns of a community, and the contextual and cultural practices that it sustains, we can start to define what is ‘sustainable’ for that particular community.

Evolution of Community as a Central Player

Interior architecture does not operate in a vacuum. The communities we work with, and their social sustainability, are affected by policy, politics and locale. Therefore, an understanding of contemporary concerns, how these relate to community, and the effect of politics and policy is required in relation to global, national and local contexts.

The concept of community has evolved, particularly since the nineteenth century. A perceived loss of community was experienced during the significant transition from a rural agrarian society to an urban industrialized one, resulting in the shift from extended families living together, and longevity of residence. Overall, the advent of the information age, a global economy and increased mobility have resulted in the breaking-up of nuclear and extended families and communities. The idealized forms of pre-industrial relationships were characterized by ‘a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesions and continuity in time’ (Scott and Marshall 2009). In contrast, in the first half of the twentieth century, cultural dispossession was rife, with dominant cultures seeking to subsume the colonized ones. But within decades change was imminent: ‘... the 1960s move-

ment for social equality for minorities and indigenous people started a renaissance', implying an emerging sense of responsibility to community (Lommerse 2009, p. 3).

In the 1960s, 'participative design' became common in planning and architectural schools and practices. This generated many projects and spawned research and methods in 'community design' that form the basis for today's practices. However, '[b]y the 1980s ... most of the community design centers were purged from academia, and the style wars ... absorbed all that student energy' (Badanes 2008, p. 249).

Community as a metaphor emerged in the 1980s, used by political philosophers who became known as Communitarians. One insight of Communitarians is the recognition that all communities are different and are based on a unique set of relationships and experiences. This point is manifested in the debates on indigenous affairs, multiculturalism, and reconciliation in Australian politics. The term community implies that we need to support a wide range of communal organizations, which could include, for example, same-sex couples, religious groups, charitable organizations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. The politics of community is complex and we must recognize that these communities may often come into conflict with one another. A rise in Communitarianism in the 1990s, associated with Amitai Etzioni, a sociologist, called for the rebuilding of community to restore the health of American society (Little 2007). Bryan Bell, Cynthia E. Smith and Tony Fry, experts in the field of design and sustainability, discuss how designers can work with communities in order to create positive change (Bell 2008, p. 15; Smith 2007; Fry 2009). Case studies in the next sections flesh these ideas out, and point to ways that interior architecture can contribute to this change.

In regard to community there are different agendas in various societies. For example, Adrian Little, an expert in politics and social theory, illuminates Australia's contemporary political position:

In Australia 'community' is a central notion in political debate ... it is not unusual to see community being promoted to represent the whole of Australia: 'community renewal' is concerned with rebuilding the nation from below. This kind of model sometimes implies that certain values and principles underpin the Australian way of life ... and the idea of community embodies and reinforces them ... [A]lternative community discourses recognize the diversity of Australian society and the need to understand the multiplicity of different groups. This model of community feeds into debates on multiculturalism and, in particular, the political rights and demands of Indigenous communities. (Little 2007, p. 121)

Concepts of community have been debated by sociologists for almost a century, culminating in a reawakening to the idea in the late twentieth century, spurred by many factors, including continued social activism, expression of cultural diversity, the increase in refugees and homelessness, as well as recognition of the need for sustainability and concerns about the perceived loss of community as a cause of social disintegration. In planning and architectural schools, there is a renewed interest and involvement in community engagement and community design. The pendulum has swung back to social justice issues in architectural education; inspired by groups like Rural Studio, students are demanding that their education have meaning and a hands-on 'service component', and many other creative areas are also picking up the gauntlet to aid in issues of community (Badanes 2008).

Over the last 20 years, community has become one of the pivotal platforms of contemporary politics in westernized countries (Little 2007). A popular concept is ‘community building’, that is, practices meant to increase social justice and wellbeing and reduce the negative impacts of otherwise disconnected individuals. Community building, sometimes referred to as ‘community renewal’, looks to build both the social networks and the built environments people engage with, resulting in gentrification and renewal of neighbourhoods, which can lead to continuity, but can also destroy or manipulate people’s lifestyles and rituals (Community Renewal International n.d.).

Therefore, in reviewing how interior architecture can engage with community, two aspects need to be considered: effective ways to engage, and the benefits of engaging, associated with the purposes and outcomes defined by the community concerned.

What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement is a broadly used term, yet in my experience, within interior architecture circles, it is narrowly understood. The concept and its application can be much more powerful in interior architecture than currently conceived. For example, those who, in the course of my research, responded to my call for case studies for community engagement and interior architecture, exclusively identified projects with the following limited profile:

- design only or design–build projects
- projects for the socially disadvantaged
- community understood in terms of ‘community of location’
- pro bono, voluntary or service learning projects.

I believe we need to redefine and expand the conceptualization of community engagement and interior architecture in order to open up career paths and practice areas and to influence policy development for communities.

Community is spoken about in terms of values, such as solidarity, commitment, mutuality and trust, as well as ‘communities of location’ and ‘communities of interest’ (Cohen 1985). “[C]ommunity’ involves two related suggestions: that the members of a group have something in common with each other; and the thing held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups. Community, thus, implies both similarity and difference” (Cohen as cited in Smith 2001, n.p.).

Community organizations range from informal family or kinship networks, to more formal incorporated associations, political decision-making structures, economic enterprises, or professional associations on a local, national or international scale. Broad principles underpin engagement with them, such as:

- consensus on agenda, procedures and effectiveness
- representativeness and inclusiveness
- deliberation
- capability and social learning



Fig. 2.2 First Nations Elder speaking in front of the ‘talking wall’, which provided an inclusive and visible listening device. (Photograph by McFarland and Marceau Architects, used with permission)

- decision responsiveness
- a need for clarity of objectives, and for legal, linked and seamless processes
- transparency and enhancement of trust. (Petts and Leach 2001, as cited in The Department of Sustainability and Environment 2005, p. 12).

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs have developed the ‘Six Cs’ model; these are basic principles to guide Community Engagement. These may be seen as filters to measure the quality of the functioning of the community, as follows:

1. Capability: the members are capable of dialogue.
2. Commitment: mutual benefit beyond self interest.
3. Contribution: members volunteer and there is an environment that encourages members to ‘have a go’ or take responsibility or risks.
4. Continuity: members share or rotate roles and, as members move on, there is a transition process that sustains and maintains the community corporate memory.
5. Collaboration: reliable interdependence. A clear vision with members operating in an environment of sharing and trust.
6. Conscience: embody or invoke guiding principles/ethics of service, trust and respect that are expressed in the actions of the community. (Brown and Isaacs 1994, as cited in The Department of Sustainability and Environment 2005, p. 12).

To illustrate, for the First Nations House of Learning (University of British Columbia, Canada) a method was needed to gather appropriate material to inform all aspects of the project, and provide a way to debate and inform consensual decision-making. Over years of practice, McFarland and Marceau Architects has evolved an inclusive and visible process to collaborate and have a dialogue with the First Nations community—the ‘talking wall’ (Fig. 2.2).

A range of cross-tribal, multi-generational people, oral traditions, alternate ways of working, different languages and essential stories needed to be involved. Through a series of open meetings and the sharing of food and ceremony, a framework for gathering information was established. Each meeting focused on a topic: identity, function, site and image ... Participants explored questions like: How do we want to be seen on the campus? What is the right site for us?... Ideas related to topics were put on a card on the wall for all to see. This 'talking wall' stimulated discussion. At subsequent meetings, ideas on the new topic would build onto the existing wall. The talking wall worked because it was visual and immediate. It drew out people of diverse backgrounds and ages. (McFarland 2004, as cited in Lommerse 2009, p. 10)

Additional principles that partners in community engagement need to consider include:

- a commitment to reciprocity that includes stating what you require of the community and delivery of what you will provide in exchange
- establish what you are promising as part of the engagement process, this could include provision of information or feedback on how contributions have influenced decisions, through to implementation of stakeholder decisions
- genuineness in building relationships with community and other stakeholders
- valuing the opportunities that diversity has to offer. (Petts and Leach 2001, as cited in The Department of Sustainability and Environment 2005, p. 14)

Contemporary concepts of community building have led to the development of theories and practices for engaging communities that take on various forms in different countries. In Australia, the state governments of Queensland and Victoria, for example, have established strategies for Community Engagement and community building. The Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and other like organizations have built a body of knowledge in the field, and their publications, toolkits and online resources can aid communities and those working with them. The DSE defines the principles as follows: '... engagement' is used as a generic, inclusive term to describe the broad range of interactions between people' (DSE 2005, p. 10). Depending on the situation, 'engagement' can cover consultation, communication, education, participation or working in partnership. 'It can include a variety of approaches, such as one-way communication or information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, and empowered action in informal groups or formal partnerships' (DSE 2005, p. 10).

The word 'community' ... is ... a term used to define groups of people; whether they are stakeholders, interest groups, citizen groups, etc. A community may be a geographic location (community of place), a community of similar interest (community of practice), or a community of affiliation or identity (such as industry or sporting club).

'Community engagement' is therefore a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest or affiliation, to address issues affecting their wellbeing. (Queensland Department of Emergency Services 2001, as cited in DSE 2005, p. 10)

To illustrate, examples of 'community of location' and 'community of interest' follow. Geographic location is most commonly thought of when speaking of community, especially in built environment disciplines. Communities of location refer to a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government. It can

also refer to the district or locality in which such a group lives. Often referred to as geographic communities or communities of place, they range from the local neighbourhood, suburb, village, town or city, region or nation to the planet as a whole. Community can also refer to nations or a group of nations with a common history, or common economic or political interests (Henri and Pudelko 2003).

In contrast, a 'community of interest' refers to a group of people having common interests, for example, a professional community with the same or related occupations. Some of those members may join a professional society, making a more defined and formalized group. These are sometimes known as communities of practice. A distinct segment of society, for example the gay community, can be viewed as communities of culture or identity and can range from the local clique, subculture, ethnic group, religious, multicultural or pluralistic civilization, to the global community cultures of today. They may be included as communities of need, such as people with disabilities or homeless people (Tropman et al. 2006).

The DSE strategy document goes on to say:

Linking the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with associated implications for inclusiveness, to ensure consideration is given to the diversity that exists within any community. Community engagement can take many forms and covers a broad range of activities. (DSE 2005, p. 10)

People are striving for empowerment; this means they need to be part of the discussion, the decisions, and the building of networks and environments. Community engagement offers the vehicle through which this can be achieved. If people are to feel proud of their space they need a sense of ownership and buy-in, which engagement brings.

Key cultural theorists, hooks (cited in Stevens and Acland 1999), Hampton (1995) and Krinsky (1996) have identified important aspects in people-environment design: people need to define their own space; the lack of involvement is dehumanizing; and involvement provides a positive self-image and a sense of power. (Lommerse 2009, p. 7)

Proud and engaged people lead to thriving and sustainable communities.

Reimagining Interior Architecture and Community Engagement

The discipline of interior architecture can be described as a community of practice. Its members include interior architecture practitioners, students, educators and researchers. The professional organizations that link the interior architecture community at local, national and international levels are overviewed in Chapter 4. Interior architecture specializes in environments where people live, work and play in a diverse range of communities, as outlined earlier. Therefore, in a broad sense, due to the nature of the discipline, interior architecture is involved in working for the community at many levels.

There are numerous understandings of what community engagement means. Essentially, I am focusing on how interior architecture works 'with', not 'for' the



Fig. 2.3 Roles variously played by the different partners in a community initiative

community in order to address their values and needs. Community engagement needs to be thought of as a partnership. As such, Community engagement has the potential to ‘identify the needs—or more important the assets [social capital]—of people and communities, and consequently to develop a range of options to consider’ (Hendler-Ross and Hendler-Ross 2008, p. 13). These options may include environments, ways of working, transferable and discipline-specific skills and knowledge that are able to build the capacity of that particular community.

There are a growing number of examples of creative and built environment agencies seeking ways to enact social sustainability. Examples are illustrated in *The Great Good Place* by Ray Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1997), *Design for the Other 90%*, curated by Cynthia E. Smith (Smith 2007), *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, edited by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakefield (Bell and Wakefield), and *Design Futuring: Sustainability Ethics and New Practice*, by Tony Fry (2009). Additional examples follow in the second and third sections of this book: *Social Justice and Interior Architecture* and *Cultural Heritage and Interior Architecture*. A number (but not all) of the examples indicate that they used Community Engagement principles either explicitly or implicitly in the way they facilitate social sustainability.

I reviewed a number of the aforementioned examples, and what emerged is that roles are being played that are not generally attributed to interior architecture or the profession’s work with a community. These roles are being played interchangeably between designers engaging ‘with’ the community, being studied and acted on, and other partners working ‘with’ the community. The roles that emerged are: activist, educator, learner, designer, networker, strategist, fundraiser, builder (as in construction/manufacturing), leader, and champion. Figure 2.3 illustrates the roles that have been played by the various partners: the community, designers and other partners. In each initiative different partners can play different roles; these roles can be held equally by each of the partners, and/or the different partners may play only certain roles, depending on the context and the people involved. Through the lifetime of an initiative, partners may switch roles. These roles will be further explored in subsequent sections.

How Other Disciplines Engage with Community

The previous section provided an understanding of the concepts of community and engagement and their connection to social sustainability and interior architecture. This one examines how other fields tackle Community Engagement in order to address social sustainability.

Established Ways of Working ‘for’ and ‘with’ Community

Since the nineteenth century, medicine and law have established infrastructure within their professions to provide public services to those in need, including specialist education, internship and practice. Public health, for example, advocates for policy that extends community wellbeing. Additionally there are not-for-profit organizations such as the International Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières, where medical practitioners can volunteer their time for emergency and disaster relief and to assist with ongoing challenges in developing and developed countries. Law has a clear system for providing support in the public defence system (Fisher 2008).

Community development is often formally conducted by non-government organizations (NGOs), universities or government agencies to improve the social wellbeing of local, regional and, sometimes, national communities. Less formal efforts seek to empower individuals and groups of people by providing them with the skills they need to effect change in their own communities.

The social sciences have developed a large body of literature on research and practice in community engagement, with broad agreement on the basic concepts, principles and good practice approaches. Examples include: *Building Stronger Communities*, by Philip Hughes et al., and *Community Development and Partnerships: a Handbook for Building Community Partnerships*, by Florence Frank and Anne Smith (Hughes et al. 2007; Frank and Smith 2006). Table 2.1 provides a brief exploration of some of these concepts.

Medicine, law and the social sciences have developed a subset of their discipline that services community wellbeing. This raises some questions for the pedagogy of interior architecture: what might the specialization of ‘Public Interior Architecture’ look like? What would the education contain? There is a need to guide interior architecture students to look for collaborations in appropriate community service, design and built environment disciplines, and create meta-disciplines to develop vital and effective programs for social sustainability. Tony Fry explains that ‘disciplinary thinking is exclusory’, and therefore has a ‘limited ability to comprehend and engage the complexity of unsustainability and the creation of sustainment’ (Fry 2009, p. 55). He suggests that disciplines ‘need bridging by a meta-discipline that facilitates an exchange of knowledge and dialogue based on a common language of engagement, while also amassing collective knowledge in their own right’ (Fry 2009, p. 55). This thinking is not the same as in multi-disciplines or inter-disciplines.

Perspectives on Social Sustainability and Interior
Architecture

Life from the Inside

Smith, D.; Lommerse, M.; Metcalfe, P. (Eds.)

2014, XXIII, 141 p. 25 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-4585-38-5