

## The Charrette Handbook

### The Essential Guide for Accelerated, Collaborative Community Planning

By the National Charrette Institute, principal authors  
Bill Lennertz and Aarin Lutzenhiser

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REVIEW BY ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

For the last two decades at least, new urbanists have been conducting charrettes to create master plans for new neighborhoods, comprehensive plans for towns and cities, and strategies for redevelopments and other projects. Charrettes are wholly practical in their aim — to produce plans that are high in both quality and community support.

Charrettes are excellent theater, also. Suspense lies in how the team is going to reconcile opposing interests and viewpoints while devising a beautiful and exciting plan. Multiple pressures — political, performance and improvisation in public view, implacable deadlines — bear down on the team. When the charrette succeeds, citizens are likely to be favorably impressed and sometimes amazed. From conflicting interests to quality plans and renderings in four to seven days — how do they do it?

As in a Broadway show, the mystery is part of the magic. The drawings and creative ideas are the most visible element, but what really makes the event succeed is substantial behind-the-scenes effort and hard-won technique.

The modern community design charrette is an art and craft that has been largely refined by new urbanists rather than conventional planners. The technique has been developed through and taught by experience. Outside of those who have participated extensively in charrettes, there is little understanding of how they work. Few know the details that make the difference between success and outright embarrassment.

Finally, with *The Charrette Handbook*, someone has pulled back the curtain. That someone is a true master, Bill Lennertz, who worked with Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ) in the 1980s and helped create some of the techniques that have become commonplace in charrettes. Lennertz cofounded Lennertz Coyle and Associates, a leading new urbanist firm, now merged into HDR. In 2001 Lennertz cofounded The National Charrette Institute (NCI) — an organization dedicated to educating the world about charrettes — with Steve Coyle and coauthor Aarin Lutzenhiser.

#### CHARRETTE EVOLUTION

It is widely known that the word derives from the French word for cart. The connotation of frantic deadline pressure, which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, survived into the next century, but “charrette” did not acquire a community planning or public participation meaning until much later. Great planners of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century never used charrettes — they worked in an era when public officials were highly trusted, and public participation in the planning of communities was virtually unknown, the authors note. That is of interest — new urbanists have been accused of

nostalgia and of looking too often to the past for inspiration. Whatever the merits of that charge, new urbanists have been innovators in public process.

Precedents for charrettes include the “squatters” sessions of Caudill Rowlett Scott (CRS), a firm in College Station, Texas. CRS was having difficulty designing an elementary school in Blackwell, Oklahoma, in 1948, and out of desperation the principals put their drafting equipment in a car and drove 500 miles to the site, where they stayed until the project was approved. CRS discovered a significant benefit of working on site: clients and stakeholders could participate in the design. Urban Design Associates, a pioneering new urbanist firm in Pittsburgh, used a public participation process to enfranchise citizens starting in 1967, and the firm has continued to refine its charrette techniques during the last four decades, the authors note. In 1987 DPZ conducted its first charrette, to design a master plan and codes for a 500-acre community in Austin, Texas. That event established the basic outlines of the charrette techniques taught by NCI.

DPZ and other firms found themselves swimming against a powerful regulatory tide that carried development towards sprawl. New urbanists needed a new process to get support and approval. A system emerged that the authors define as a “multiple day collaborative design and planning workshop held on-site and inclusive of all affected stakeholders.” Charrettes became widespread in the 1990s. New urbanists must have conducted well over a thousand by now, and these have resulted in many high-profile new urban projects (many have been designed using other methods, as well). DPZ reports that it has conducted more than 300 charrettes. A couple score of firms now have expertise in new urban charrettes. A high point came in October 2005 when teams were assembled by Andres Duany, who wrote the foreword to this book, and the Congress for the New Urbanism to plan the redevelopment of 11 cities and towns on the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast of Mississippi in six days. The various firms’ mastery of the charrette process was a key to the success of the Mississippi Renewal Forum.

#### EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT CHARRETTES

*The Charrette Handbook* is a thorough analysis with step-by-step instructions. Before reading the book, I had no idea how much work takes place prior to the charrette. Suffice it to say, getting stakeholders to agree to a plan is not something that magically takes place in seven days. No detail is overlooked in the *Handbook*. There are discussions on topics such as how to build a truly comprehensive email list of stakeholders, choose the site, treat various participants, set up the room, and even how to feed the practitioners. More than 20 expert contributing authors offer pithy remarks. The case studies are excellent.

A good charrette is as carefully planned and executed as a military campaign. Its creative, political nature means that chaos and unexpected turns are built into the process. This book tells the reader what can be controlled and how, allowing the design process to run as smoothly as possible. *The Charrette Handbook* is a must read for any aspiring — or established — planner or urban designer. ♦