

## Claiming Open Space: Youth Identity and the Challenge of Meaningful Participation

Samuel F. Dennis, Jr., PhD

Department of Landscape Architecture, Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies,  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

### Abstract

Recent community planning projects, aimed at giving voice to youths' concerns about the communities in which they live, have received considerable attention in US planning literature (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2003; Mullahey et al, 1999; Checkoway et al, 1995). At the same time, a renewed focus on youth development has produced numerous studies on the positive outcomes of youth participation in youth-serving organizations (Benson and Pittman, 2001; Pittman and Ferber, 2001; Scales and Leffert, 1999). This paper reports on the results of a comparative case study of two youth planning projects involving so-called 'at-risk' youth in transforming public open space in their communities. Despite participants' feelings of powerlessness within the context of the project itself, the highly visible nature of their work, together with public validation of the youths' contribution to the community, contributed to youths' sense of being taken seriously and being valued by the community.

**Keywords:** Youth participation; open space; public art

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines youth participation in two open space projects undertaken in 2003. One involved inner-city youth in a project to claim vacant neighbourhood land as usable green open space. The other involved Northern Cheyenne youth in a public art project on the local tribal college campus. Although taking place in disparate contexts (urban/rural, African-American youth/Native American youth, recreation project/art project), both projects involved so-called 'at-risk' youth in highly visible open space transformations in an environment where young people are not given much of a voice or even much of a chance.

This study set out to better understand the meaning youth ascribe to their participation in projects aimed at transforming public open space in the neighbourhoods in which they live. This work is rooted in an asset-based approach to youth development (Benson 2003; Scales and Leffert 1999) that is concerned with the degree to which communities provide the opportunities and supports for positive youth development. Although many empirical studies have identified a wide variety of developmental assets at the individual, family, and community level, this study was initially more concerned with uncovering the general dimensions of meaningful participation as articulated by the youth themselves. Still, the issues that surfaced during the interviews conformed to the supports identified in the youth development literature, and included a sense of being taken seriously, collaborative work toward a common goal, and public validation for contributions to the community. Issues concerning adult authority also conformed to Hart's (1997) hierarchy of children's meaningful participation as well as the modifications suggested by Chan et al (2003). Finally, the study examined the extent to which particular programme elements contributed to youths' meaningful participation.

## **2. KidSpace, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA**

Like many formerly industrial cities in the United States, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania is experiencing the challenges of housing abandonment, violent crime, community transience and scarce economic resources. In this context, youth are often considered part of the 'problem' rather than creative, energetic and knowledgeable resources. The KidSpace project involved about 30 youth, ages seven to 14, from three after-school programmes in a collaborative planning and design project aimed at transforming one of the many neighbourhood vacant lots into a safe place to play. One of the programme goals was to involve youth in a public project where their highly visible contributions to the neighbourhood would counter prevailing community perceptions of youth.

The youth were brought together for four charrettes over a period of two months. During the first workshop the youth discussed their notions of what constitutes a good neighbourhood, using drawings, narratives and magazine images to create collages representing the components that together make up ideal neighbourhoods. In preparation for the second workshop, the youth were asked to create journals describing their neighbourhoods, including specific characteristics they liked and those they did not like. These journals were shared in small groups to highlight areas of consensus. In preparation for the third workshop, participating youth were given disposable cameras with which to document aspects of their neighbourhood that they thought should be changed and those they thought should be preserved. The youth worked in small groups during the third workshop to select one image from each category and compose an accompanying narrative describing the issue and identifying specific actions that could transform or protect the neighbourhood characteristic depicted in the photograph. For the final workshop, the youth provided ideas for specific activities that should be included in the KidSpace lot. These were used to inform a participatory design process during which the youth worked in small groups to arrange these activities on a scaled base map of the site. The final site design incorporated many, though not all, of these elements. Prior to construction, the plan was presented to the participating youth and adjustments were made based on their feedback. The project culminated in a two-day 'community build', during which some participating youth, their parents and other adult community members transformed the vacant lot into a neighbourhood green space that provided all community residents a safe place in which to play.

This research project focuses on the experiences of one of the three participating youth organizations. The SHOC Team (Students Helping Our Community) involved ten youth, ages nine to 14, in a daily after-school programme that combined tutoring and mentoring activities with community service projects. Participating youth were paid a small weekly stipend for each successfully completed day. Of the 30 or so youth that participated in the planning and design charrettes, these ten youth provided the bulk of the physical labour during the construction phase. In addition, they provided weekly weeding and trash pick-up in the green space and added flowerbeds and other elements during the summer months following its completion.

## **3. YouthRAP, Northern Cheyenne Nation, Montana, USA**

Although the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation is located in rural Montana, Cheyenne youth are experiencing many of the same challenges faced by their inner-city counterparts. Like the youth in Harrisburg, they too live in an environment of high unemployment, high drug use and economic scarcity, and are likewise perceived as a problem to solve rather than a valuable community resource. The YouthRAP (Restoration Art Project) programme involved nine youth, ages 11 to 17, from the Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, in

a public art project exploring the contemporary meaning of Northern Cheyenne youth identity. Although the youth participated in a variety of art projects during the programme, this research focuses only on a public art installation in a courtyard on the Chief Dull Knife Memorial College campus. The courtyard design was conceived by a Northern Cheyenne artist, Bently Spang, and an urban designer from Penn State University, Michael Rios, as a place for shared stories of identity.

While the courtyard was under construction, the participating Northern Cheyenne youth spent several weeks exploring their own place within Cheyenne culture through a variety of creative workshops conducted by Spang and art educator Susanne Hackett. The installation art centred on the youths' selection of a single word that captured the essence of their identity, while also holding meaning for potential visitors to the site. Each youth chose a piece of local sandstone into which their word was etched. While the stones were being prepared, the youth visited the courtyard site and each one identified a place for the installation of their stone. On several occasions the youth were invited to spend time working on the site itself, although their participation in the construction was voluntary and only a few chose to work on any given day. After the courtyard was completed and the artwork installed, a public dedication ceremony was held in conjunction with an exhibition of the youths' photography.

#### **4. Methodology**

One of the primary goals of this research was to understand participating youths' experiences in general and, more particularly, to understand the extent to which specific programme elements contributed (or did not contribute) to their sense of being taken seriously. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted between six and eight months after participation in the programme. Interview questions asked the youth to reflect generally about their experience – what they liked, disliked and what they thought they accomplished. Other questions asked them to speculate generally on how others may have perceived their work, including peers, family members and community elders. Each youth was asked specific questions about their subsequent experiences (if any) of the public spaces, and with whom they may have spent time in the space and any conversations they may have had regarding their contributions to the community. Of the ten participants in the KidSpace project, six (n=6) were interviewed and seven (n=7) of the nine YouthRAP participants were interviewed.

#### **5. Discussion**

##### *5.1 Being taken seriously*

Overall, the youth reported a general sense of being taken seriously, even as they acknowledged that some of their ideas were not incorporated into the final project, which contributed to a vague sense of powerlessness. In the KidSpace project, for example, many of the youths' suggestions were too expensive, disallowed by local zoning or otherwise not feasible. Indeed, one of the oft-cited signals of being taken seriously was the fact that participating adults did not dismiss youth ideas out of hand, but took pains to explain the reasoning behind the decisions as well as to identify specific *external* authorities having jurisdiction over some project components.

The most important threat to being taken seriously was the perceived lack of shared decision making. In the YouthRAP project for example, several Cheyenne youths mentioned the freedom associated with the photography component of the project as the only real instance where they completely controlled the process. In the KidSpace project, there lingered some confusion about what was promised and what was delivered. For example, many of the participants wanted to install a round, concrete pad for jump-rope games (like Double-Dutch).

This element was included in the final drawings but was not built for a variety of reasons (involving materials and expertise). Participating youth interpreted this to mean that only *some* of their ideas were taken seriously. When pressed, they could not explain or could not remember why this particular element was not included in the built project.

Some of the Cheyenne youth were angry about the constraints of the public art project, particularly regarding their choice of words. One guiding criteria was that the chosen word should have potential meaning for other visitors to the site. Two of the participating youth wanted to use their own name or nickname, but were asked to choose something else instead. This produced for them a sense of disempowerment, a sense of being told what to do by the adults.

Both groups of youth received payment for their participation, either as a weekly ‘pay check’ or as a stipend payable upon completion of the project. These payments had important implications for their sense of being taken seriously. For some youth, being paid was an important signal of being valued and taken seriously – indeed, for one participant it was the most salient feature of the programme. Others, however, were more critical, suggesting that some of their peers only participated for the money and cared little for the benefits of the programme or for the open space projects.

### *5.2 Youth identity*

Participants in the KidSpace project constructed their identity, in part, in opposition to other youth in the neighbourhood. For example, when asked what other neighbourhood youth might think about the work the SHOC youth did in the KidSpace lot, one respondent said:

“They really don’t care. They are destroying a lot of property, but they don’t care because no-one is doing anything about it. They litter, they throw stuff in it [the KidSpace lot]. They don’t care. They think what we are doing is a big waste of time, because most people are throwing stuff in it. Messing up their lives. And they think just because we’re out there cleaning up, we are not cool or something. Because we’re doing something that helps the community. We’re doing something good and they’re doing something bad, but they *think* it’s good. What we do *is* good. They think most of the stuff we do is stupid, but they don’t know, because helping out the community helps you be a better person, and when you get older, you could start a programme to work and help out the community.”

The Cheyenne youth, on the other hand, spoke much more about their internal relationships, expressing particularly strong bonds with their adult leaders, speaking of them as “parents”, friends and “someone I can really talk to”. Many of the Cheyenne youth complained of the short duration of the project (about three weeks), wondering why it did not last throughout the summer. Several of the respondents named this as the worst aspect of the programme and many of them expressed hopes that the same people would return the following summer for another art installation project.

### *5.3 The role of the public site*

In both cases, visiting the sites was often difficult. On the reservation, lack of transportation was a problem as the site was 20 miles from one of the villages where several of the participating youths lived. Although distances were not a problem in Harrisburg, many young people were not allowed to play at the site due to concerns over an adjacent bar and fear of crime more generally. As one participating youth described:

“Most kids don’t want to play over there because it’s right across the street from a bar and a lot of things happen in bars. That’s why most kids won’t play there. And also kids get scared because there’s gunshots and it’s probably not near their house, so they get scared and they won’t know where to go.”

Still, the highly visible nature of both projects provided opportunities for participating youth to hear comments from family, friends and other adults from their respective communities. When asked to think about the permanent public aspects of their participation, almost every respondent expressed a strong sense of pride in their accomplishments. Most of them had visited the site for the purpose of showing their work to family and friends. When asked what they liked most about the YouthRAP project, one participant responded:

“The finished product! It made me happy cause it was something *we* did, but I didn’t like working for the community cause we couldn’t choose the words we wanted.”

When asked how friends responded to the art installation, another youth said:

“They liked it when I told them it was my rock. I was actually proud of it! Even though it doesn’t have my name on it.”

For participating youth, their sense of being taken seriously was almost entirely construed within the dynamics of the programme itself; that is, in their negotiations with their adult facilitators, rather than in their relationship to the community as a whole. This was much more pronounced in the YouthRAP, rather than in the KidSpace project. Youth identity, at least for the KidSpace participants, was constructed in relation to other youth and adult members of the community. Finally, despite the lack of shared decision making and a vague sense of powerlessness, participating youth in both projects shared a sense of accomplishment and felt genuine pride in the spaces they helped transform. Many of the youth expressed sadness when talking about the end of the project, while also sharing the hope that the programme would continue in years to come. Many of the KidSpace youth spoke of their plans to start similar projects when they reach adulthood.

### **Key Concluding Points**

- Youth in both programmes constructed their identity, in part, through their collective efforts to transform a portion of the public landscape. The Harrisburg youth set themselves apart from both non-participating youth and other adults in the community, separating themselves from “bad” people in the neighbourhood. The Northern Cheyenne youth were more concerned with the internal dynamic between themselves and the adult leaders, identifying themselves as a “family” and the two adult leaders as “mother” and “father”.
- The highly visible nature of the two public open space projects provided an opportunity for participating youth to receive positive feedback from family, friends and other adults. These affirmations overcame the youths’ concerns over shared decision making and comprised the most salient memories of their participation.

## References

- Benson, P.L. (2003) Developmental assets and asset-building community: Conceptual and empirical foundations, in Lerner, R.M. and Benson, P.L. (eds.) *Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy and Practice*. New York: Kluwer, pp. 19-43.
- Benson, P.L. and Pittman, K. (2001) Moving the youth development message: Turning a vague idea into a moral imperative, in Benson, P. and Pittman, K. (eds.) *Trends in Youth Development: Visions, Realities and Challenges*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishing, pp. vii-xii.
- Chan, B., Carlson, M., Trickett, B. and Earls, F. (2003) Youth participation: A critical element of research on child well-being, in Lerner, R.M. and Benson, P.L. (eds.) *Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy and Practice*. New York: Kluwer, pp. 65-96.
- Checkoway, B., Pothukuchi, K. and Finn, J. (1995) 'Youth participation in community planning: What are the benefits?' in *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, **14**, 134-139.
- Hart, R. (1997) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: International Child Development Centre (UNICEF).
- Lerner, R.M. and Benson, P.L., eds. (2003) *Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy and Practice*. New York: Kluwer.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2003) 'Children's common grounds: A study of intergroup relations among children in public settings,' in *Journal of the American Planning Association* **69**(2), 130-143.
- Mullahey, R. Susskind, Y. and Checkoway, B. (1999) *Youth Participation in Community Planning*. Chicago, IL: American Planning Association.
- Pittman, K., Irby, M. and Ferber, T. (2001) Unfinished business: Further reflections of a decade of promoting youth development, in Benson, P. and Pittman, K. (eds.) *Trends in Youth Development: Visions, Realities and Challenges*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishing, pp. 3-50.
- Scales, P.C. and Leffert, N. (1999) *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.