Facilitating Community Involvement in Council–community Master Planning

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Introduction

Master plans are a common strategic planning tool in New Zealand and can help bridge the gap between non-statutory and statutory planning approaches (Reeves, 2004). Master plans are essentially a vision outlining a suitable programme to address a set of needs in a given area, incorporating grass-roots and high level institutional aspirations (CABE, 2011). Master plans have been used in a range of spatial planning and urban design contexts in New Zealand (MfE, 2005), and have also played a central role in recovery processes following natural disasters (e.g. New Orleans, post Hurricane Katrina[1]) or similarly catastrophic events such as the Manchester city bombings (Williams, 2000, 2006).

There is evidence to suggest that benefits can be gained from community involvement in planning projects in many contexts (Arnstein, 1969; Healy, 2006). This is also true for disaster recovery planning where meaningful community involvement can be integral to the success of recovery processes (Mitchell et al., 2010; Murphy, 2007; Pearce, 2003). These benefits are outlined by Vallance (2011a):

> *The benefits of effective community engagement are variously represented as identifying workable solutions to the range of problems recovery presents, sharing and delegation of duties, securing community 'buy-in' to the process, and building trust* (Vallance, 2011a).

Vallance (2011b) highlighted the temptations in recovery to *rebuild* rather than *recover*, and to focus on hard infrastructure rather than civic expertise and community involvement. However, recovery is a process where the most meaningful outcomes are associated with the health and wellbeing of communities and not infrastructure, despite the important role infrastructure may play.

The focus of this paper is to identify potential benefits of community involvement in master planning in the post-earthquake recovery context in Christchurch; and to identify considerations for planners involved in the design of master planning processes that involve the community. Findings are based on the results of an information sharing event on these topics convened by *The Habitat Project* in December 2011, and a review of the relevant literature.

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[1] http://www.nolamasterplan.org/

Community involvement in planning in the Christchurch earthquake recovery setting

Following the February 2011 earthquake, the New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI) organised a planning think tank session that was attended by over 50 planners, pre-dominantly from the greater Christchurch area. Issues covered included integrated management of the recovery process, community engagement, and best practice approaches to urban design. Questions were consistently raised around the importance of involving communities in an effective way. This was reflected in the NZPI think-tank report:

> *Community planning needs to occur from the bottom up – communities need to drive the future planning of Christchurch. It is vital that communities have a sense of ownership of the process and the outcomes* (NZPI, 2011).

Recognition of the need for a new or revised vision for an area can help to put long term social and environmental issues into perspective and result in local communities taking the lead in confronting those challenges (Irazábal & Neville, 2007). However, there is evidence of dissatisfaction with the level of community involvement provided for in Christchurch's recovery process. For example, a recent recommendation to the CER Minister from the CERA Community Forum[2] was:

> *That the Minister requests the Council empowers the community. The government should have a role in getting the various local organisations to collaborate. The dysfunction and tension between these groups is preventing good effective leadership.*

This is discussed further in the CERA Community Workshops Report with statements that criticise "faceless bureaucracy" for "low quality thinking", a lack of support for cooperative efforts and the need for "bottom-up communication" (CERA, 2011). In the master planning context, similar issues were highlighted in a discussion document presented to CCC in October 2011 by a group representing key community organisations in Lyttelton (Macpherson et al., 2011). They expressed "a significant degree of concern about the consultation process, and how the community has not been given a proper participatory role in the process".

There are also signs that governance authorities are responding to these perspectives. For example the recently released Community Board Chairpersons' Plan 2012 noted that "earthquake recovery could be better facilitated by focusing on accessing and using local level institutional knowledge" (Christchurch Community Board Chairpersons, 2012).

Community involvement in master planning: the Sumner case

Following the earthquakes the Sumner community initiated its own process of developing future aspirations for the suburb and the CCC Suburban Centres programme responded to this by committing to development of a 'community-led' master plan for Sumner[3]. This marks a departure from the Council-led master planning processes being used in other suburbs, and is currently Christchurch's only community-led master planning exercise. The commitment by Council acknowledges the high level of expertise within the Sumner community as well as the large amount of progress that has been made by Sumner residents, property and business owners.

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[2] Minutes from CERA Community Forum (Nov 2011):
http://cera.govt.nz/sites/cera.govt.nz/files/common/community-forum-meeting-notes-20111103.pdf
[3]

http://www.ccc.govt.nz/thecouncil/policiesreportsstrategies/SuburbsRejuvenationProgramme/sumnervillagemasterplan.aspx

However, there is little definitive information on how community involvement is best achieved in master planning. Due to the highly contextual nature of planning settings it is likely that an effective approach would need to be customised and flexible (Forester, 1982; Petersen, 1997). Vallance (2011a) noted that participatory processes in recovery situations are difficult to design. The interface between community and government interests (local and central) can suffer from a lack of attention to the opportunities for potential benefits and how these might be achieved. If the opportunity to capitalise on community-based innovation is not recognised, the subject of how to do the planning may easily default to a 'business as usual' approach (MacCallum et al., 2009).

Recently, CCC and community leaders have been discussing ways in which they can work together to develop the Sumner Village master plan. Community involvement issues have been well considered in the Sumner planning context due to the high level of interest by both people within the community, and by practitioners working with the community. This provided an opportunity to investigate current thinking and perspectives on how master planning processes could be designed to involve the community.

Methods

An information sharing event, the "Sumner community master planning workshop", was conducted on 14th December 2011 to address a specific set of research questions. These questions were circulated to all participants in advance to enable those involved to consider and prepare their responses. The event was attended by 20 individuals representing a wide range of perspectives on the topic. Participants included academics, practitioners and community members with direct experience in master planning processes and community engagement.

The questions addressed included a set of more general questions on planning processes and the involvement of communities. These included questions on

- Practical differences between the terms 'community-based' and 'community-led' planning;
- Advantages and disadvantages of attracting community involvement in planning;
- Key elements of master planning exercises compared with other planning projects; and,
- Key outcomes signifying a successful master planning exercise.

Participants also addressed further questions specific to the design of master planning processes. These included questions on:

- The degree that communities need to be involved;
- The processes/methods that can be used to involve communities; and,
- Examples from experience of master planning processes that were effective, including the key elements of master planning process that are successful in terms of having a high level of buy in from the community.

In addition to information collected at the event, all participants were provided an opportunity to contribute further notes on any of the above topics prompted by circulation of an initial set of notes from the workshop.

A preliminary qualitative assessment of all information collected was conducted to identify key themes. These themes were then compared to findings reported in the relevant literature.

Results

Practical differences between 'community-based' versus 'community-led' planning

Little difference was identified between these two terms, both of which are common in the literature. Although the term 'community-led' may be used to refer to the initiation of a planning process within a community, in the context of council-community planning initiatives it was recognised that council 'buy in' would be needed at some stage. Both terms were regarded as adequate in conveying the essence of the community involvement aspect. Council is also a part of the community, and therefore the more substantive questions involve the detail of how community based planning is done, and by who.

Advantages and disadvantages of attracting community involvement in planning

Responses to the question on advantages and disadvantages of attracting community involvement in planning confirmed widespread support for community involvement as well as some cautions (Table 2).

Table 2. Perspectives on advantages and disadvantages of attracting community involvement in planning

Advantages	Disadvantages	Issues / Tensions
Community offers inside knowledge and creativity **Planning process benefits from better information**	Results can be biased towards retaining the status quo (e.g. 'squeaky-wheel syndrome') Good ideas can get lost or dismissed as a radical, minority perspective	**A robust collaborative framework is essential to resolve tensions around representation of interest groups and the subsequent treatment of the information gained**
Community participation can lead to better buy-in **Planning process benefits from sense of ownership** **Greater support for the results of the planning exercise**	Time and cost intensive process	**The relative strength of private versus public sector resources** **Consultation fatigue** **Poor implementation**

Crucial points identified included the role played by the framework within which community participation takes place and attention to process design and logistics. Amongst the potential issues identified were tensions around representation of interest groups and the treatment of the information gained from participative processes. Potential difficulties for integrating the vision generated by a master planning exercise with other long term council planning processes were also identified.

Community involvement in master planning

Compared to other planning processes, workshop participants considered master plans to be holistic and strategic in nature and all agreed that master planning is meant to include collaboration with community interest groups and entities.

Knowledge that is generated independent of the Council was recognised as a potential resource for master planning exercises. Community knowledge was thought to be useful to development of the plan itself, as well as the design of performance criteria and monitoring and review methods to address implementation aspects.

However there was also the perception that Council processes may be limiting opportunities for community-led innovation within planning processes. Examples included not recognising information collected by people in the community, and lack of consultation with the community on how information relevant for planning may be collected.

Design of master planning processes that involve the community

A range of considerations for the design of master planning processes that involve the community were identified (Table 3).

Table 3: Aspects of community involvement important to the design of master planning processes

Who	• **The process is a collective responsibility requiring the cooperation of all interested agencies and sectors of the community** • **Partnership approach – requires role clarity, consistency and mutual trust** • **Awareness of those with engagement difficulties – everyone is learning** • **Anticipate engaged, unengaged and 'unengageable' audiences**
What	• Master Plan needs to work within the requirements of Council's Long Term Plan processes • Living plan (not a 'blueprint'), buy-in will evolve • Structures are needed to enable and support information flow
How	• **Connect theory and practice within the plan development process** • **Provide technical support for integration with formal (council) processes** • **Provide a process to enable existing community capital** • **Encourage ideas from the grass roots** • **Create a process to make decisions on options** • **Develop criteria to screen for feasibility and priority** • **Convert conflict into learning opportunities**

In addition, perspectives on the Sumner master planning context were recorded. Some of the perceptions identified were:

- The Sumner context is unique due the high level of existing community involvement and interest in planning;
- To best address the needs of the Sumner community may require the development of a unique master planning process relative to that used elsewhere; and,
- The current Sumner village master plan process (at the time) was perceived as not fulfilling the intention of being a community-led process.

Discussion

Enabling collaboration and community engagement

> *Civic engagement facilitates the use and understanding of the full complexity of places, and it helps to broaden the scope of answers, and the likelihood of implementation* (Albrechts, 2011).

Planning challenges such as those important to the recovery of Christchurch can provide focal points at which academics, practitioners and communities can come together to exchange ideas (Delgado & Staples, 2008). Often it is extra-ordinary circumstances such as these which invite a reconsideration of bureaucratic approaches to the skills, knowledge and resources that are external to the traditional administrative setup (Oosterlynck, Albrechts, & Van den Broeck, 2011). In the post-earthquake context, master planning and other strategic exercises are an important subset of planning needs and provide a potential tool for enabling inclusiveness and participation in the recovery process.

The use of effective methods to attract the interest and input of the community is a theme of fundamental importance to a successful council-community planning process. Examples from these results include the perception of benefits from attracting and enabling the existing community capital to contribute to the process, and encouraging ideas from the grass-roots in general. Other useful insights gained include the need to provide for those with engagement difficulties. This may require proactive outreach in order to support groups without the capacity to engage.

Empowerment of the local population is recognised as a fundamental aspect of democratic governance and the building of capacity within local systems (MacCallum et al., 2009). This may be assisted by jointly designed community engagement and planning strategies, shared decision making for meeting needs, and a focus on the assets that could be utilised (Inspiring Communities, 2010; MacCallum et al., 2009; Shaw, 1997). This is consistent with the idea that the process of planning itself can be a major source of beneficial outcomes for communities in addition to other results of planning (Forester, 1982; Irazábal & Neville, 2007).

In this study the perception that a master plan could be a living plan to which buy-in can evolve was notable. Since some of the results of a master planning exercise will become visible only in the course of time, the longevity of community buy-in may be another important aspect of a successful process. The design of iterative planning processes and the use of appropriate communications media to involve the community were identified as potentially useful techniques to address this.

Potential learning opportunities

> *It is crucial in these dynamic times of significant transition to remember we are all learning how to do community engagement[4]*

The potential learning opportunities that may be generated through community engagement with a strategic planning exercise is one of the aspects to consider. The importance of embracing learning opportunities and creating space for necessary dialogue in difficult times was discussed by Owens et al. (2004). This extends to the decision makers and designers of the planning process itself and is aptly illustrated by Albrechts (2011):

> *Transformative practices take decision-makers, planners, institutions and citizens out of their comfort zones and compel them to confront their key beliefs, to challenge conventional wisdom, and to look at the prospects of new ideas (Albrechts, 2011)*

Design issues for facilitating a community-based master planning process

> *If planners ignore those in power, they assure their own powerlessness. Alternatively, if planners understand how relations of power work to structure the planning process, they can improve the quality of their analyses and empower citizen and community action as well* (Forester, 1982).

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[4] Quote from the Sumner Community Master Planning Workshop, December 2011

The requirement for expert facilitation was one of the strongest themes in these results. The facilitation function must oversee the objective of integrating the necessary levels of communication, including within and amongst all formal and informal organisations and the wider community that are involved in the master planning exercise. Importantly, these facilitation requirements must be enabled in the design of the planning process.

One of the key suggestions for addressing this was the role of a partnership structure created to support the planning process. A partnership approach was considered a 'must have' for council-community planning exercises to develop collaboration and cooperation on a community scale in addition to the property-to-property level. Needs generated internally by formal agencies can constrain the design of a planning process such that it fails to address needs defined by the community.

The use of a Council-community partnership structure to not only inform the planning exercise, but to also consider aspects of its design, provides a potential method of addressing these issues and could further exemplify a community-based philosophy at work. There needs to be trust in the community to know what is good for them, but ensure the necessary procedural support is available (i.e. from 'higher up') so the formulation of options is a robust, transparent and accountable process. Options to address this include *collectively designing* the planning process, which can generate buy-in for the process itself, and offer opportunities for improved process design.

In this study, collaboration at the process design stage was identified as an often overlooked aspect of the potential partnership. Although the collective design approach may require some technical expertise on the subject of community-based planning being available within the community, the key point is to extend the design of the planning process into the community realm. In the context of a master planning exercise this function could be delivered by the make-up of the project team itself, a technical advisory group working alongside that team, or by other means to specifically attract community input on the suitability of the proposed planning process.

There is a need to manage the expectations of interest groups while finding a process that is also inclusive of the wider community. To achieve this it may be more important that the project team can design a process which facilitates the representation and cooperation of all interested parties, rather than the interested parties seeking representation within the project team itself.

Conclusions and implications for planning practice
This paper highlights some of the specific steps that planners can take if they want to address or provide for the potential benefits of community involvement in master planning practice. These considerations may assist planners to walk the talk in terms of adding value to the communities they serve (Miller, 2007; Sager, 2011).

It is important to recognise that the delivery of value ultimately relates to the achievement of good outcomes from the investment made by communities in professional planning services on their behalf. Such investment can benefit from opportunities to work both for and with the community to produce the best results possible from the resources available. In this respect there is much to be learned from cooperative and community based approaches to planning.

The design of the planning process is crucial to its ability to facilitate community involvement in a meaningful way. Key elements identified here are commitment to a

partnership approach and attention to how the potential of that partnership can best be realised. These matters extend beyond just selection of the community engagement methods to be used. Other aspects include how the ideas are taken forward and how improved buy-in for the plan may be generated, both of which have a bearing on the success of the planning exercise.

Our results indicate that important topics for the partnership structure to consider include:

- Design of a process that supports the cooperation of all interested agencies and sectors of the community;
- A process to make robust, transparent and accountable decisions on options which may involve criteria to screen for feasibility and priority; and
- Technical support and transparency concerning integration with formal (council) processes.

A major aspect of community-based planning is the need for facilitation expertise either within the project team or accessible to it. Attention to the make-up of the project team to lead the planning process is an important aspect and opportunities for collective design of the planning process are another area of potential benefit. To realise the potential of community-based planning may require some adjustment to status quo planning structures. Achieving this involves better use of existing energy and resources and a focus on enabling communities to participate in their own self-determination.

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