

THE IRRESISTIBLE IDEA

DESIGNER AS MEDIATOR IN COLLABORATIVE CITYMAKING

By Kristen Moreau

A designer never spurs real urban change alone. Rather than a terminus, the design process can become an icebreaker for uncomfortable conversations between old adversaries in Chicago: the powerful gatekeepers of the city's resources, and a highly plural public. As designers, we can become liaisons between those with power and those who don't yet know they possess the power to shape their city. Transparent, direct dialogue between these diverse stakeholders fosters and supports a bottom up system of urban design.

Historically, public space has primarily reflected the will of those in charge. Many designers and architects already have the agency to intervene in this top down approach. We can ask permission from those in power through bureaucratic channels. Creatives have the potential to transcend socioeconomic boundaries through agency and cultural clout: as tastemakers, we are uniquely positioned to foster collaboration at the civic level.¹

When a vacant lot is neglected by its owner, an unsanctioned intervention by an artist may last indefinitely. However, when the site is highly valuable in a populous city center, the cooperation of powerful stakeholders, such as officials and proprietors, is essential to creating a lasting impact. So how can designers win the approval of powerful stakeholders while advancing more democratically engaged spaces?

We can begin to answer this question by recognizing that the decisions of this relatively small class of elites has the potential to profoundly impact the remainder of society. Powerful gatekeepers typically hire designers and architects when they have the funding or political support to change something in the public sphere.² If designers are already in the position of generating new ideas for the stakeholders with direct control of public spaces, then these designers are ideally poised to offer new benefits to underrepresented members of society.³

So how can ethical designers win the approval of powerful stakeholders? Seduce them. Invite them to fall in love with the sexiest idea you've ever designed. They will not know how badly they need this idea until you make it hard for them to remember how they ever managed without it. They not only feel it is a necessity: they know lust. Make them thirsty for it.

¹ Koolhaas, Rem. 1995. "Whatever Happened to Urbanism?" *S,M,L,XL*. New York: Monacelli Press.

² Whittington, Jan. 2012. "When to Partner for Public Infrastructure." *Journal of the American Planning Association*. Vol. 78. Iss. 3. pp. 269-285.

³ Sinclair, Cameron, and Kate Stohr. 2006. *Design like You Give a Damn*. London: Thames & Hudson.

At least three strategies emerge for beginning such a process of collective citymaking: strategies of sourcing and resolving multiple good ideas. Considering a relatively small-scale operation, this analysis will consider three approaches in particular [Fig. 1]:

1. **The BFF:** Ask reputable community groups what they would do via a request for proposals. Identify a key partner. Foster an authentic relationship over time. Champion them.
2. **The Media Blitz:** Crowd source interest, impulses, gestures, directions, and suggestions from a plural range of individuals. Leverage social technology as a democratic tool.
3. **Free Sample Architecture:** Physically prototype manageable components of the irresistible idea during design development. Field-test the prototypes with passersby on nearby urban sites with similar characteristics. Systematize the aggregation of local inhabitants' feedback by providing an analog method of voting or comment collection.

What fuels a bottom up public design process?

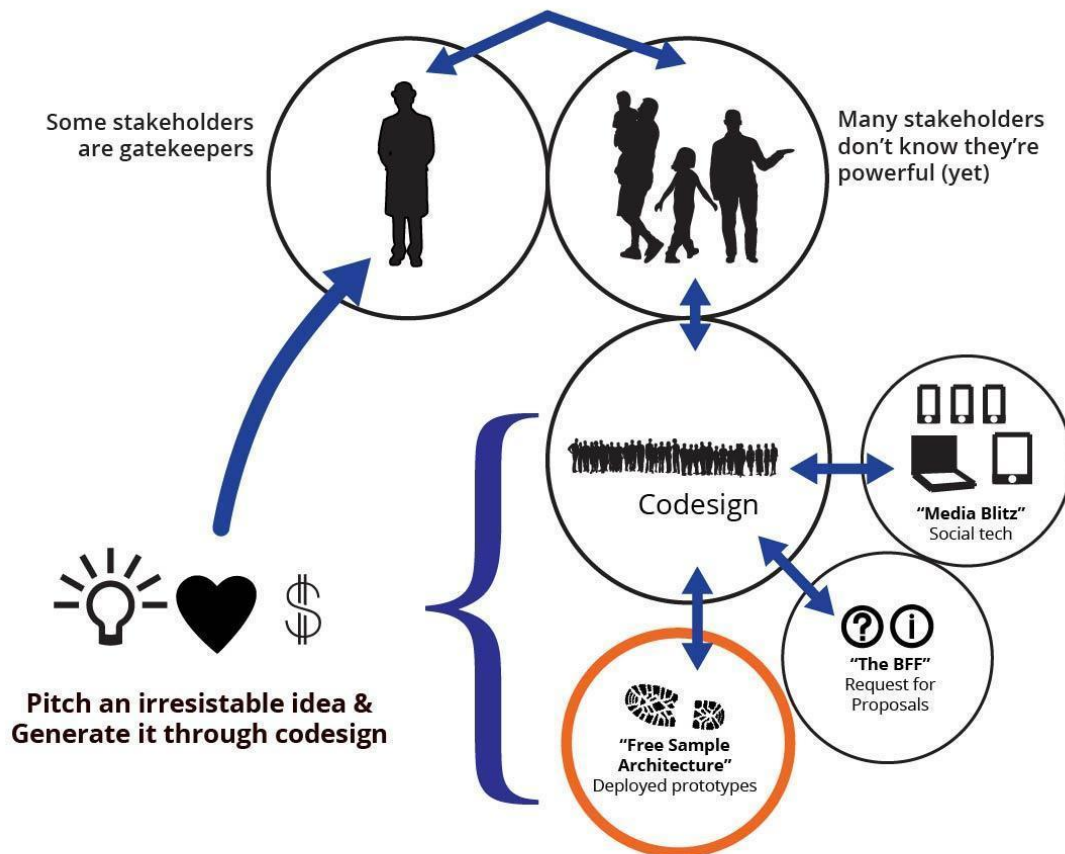


Fig. 1: Feedback loops of a codesign process

The BFF:

As designers, we are accustomed to working *for* clients although their demands may occasionally conflict with our preferences. However, we can also cultivate a lasting relationship, a “Best Friend Forever” (BFF), where designer and client are very like-minded about the project’s intended outcome.

One strategy for formulating this kind of special relationship is a Request for Proposals (RFP). An RFP is a public call to community leaders to submit their best ideas for changing the city. Through competition between proposals, we can begin to evaluate multiple valid opinions as a collective.

The framework of the selection process must reflect the values of the neighborhood in which the site is located, however diverse. Traditionally, a jury of experts and community representatives weighs the submissions. Designers can help curate a diverse and representative panel of knowledgeable individuals to objectively evaluate competing schemes.⁴



Fig. 2: Architecture for Humanity ACTIVATE Request for Proposals

The salient benefit of hosting a design competition is that internal community leaders directly shape public space. Architecture for Humanity Chicago’s ACTIVATE competition, for example, has been lauded for transforming underutilized outdoor space in disadvantaged communities with design ideas coming directly from inhabitants [Fig. 2]. The construction of the winning proposals becomes a rallying point for a community volunteer day. Each of the projects initiated by Activate continue to be utilized and cherished by their neighbors.⁵

⁴ Kimball, Lindsey Ballas. 2011. “Large-Scale Redevelopment in Challenging Times.” *Economic Development Journal*. Vol 10. Iss. 3. pp. 39-46.

⁵ Public Interest Design. 2012. “AFH Chicago Launches ACTIVATE Competition.” *Public Interest Design*. 3 Feb 2012. Web. <http://www.publicinterestdesign.org/2012/02/03/afh-chicago-launches-activate-competition/>

However, there are two major negatives to hosting an RFP: ego and exclusion. The traditional designer-client roles are inverted as potential clients compete against one another to champion their ideas to a jury which designers may have helped curate and coordinate. Are designers good listeners? Not necessarily. From hardheaded utopian Modernists to glossy contemporary starchitects, designers have a history of behaving egotistically when they are in positions of power.⁶ Designers involved in shaping an RFP must have the integrity and humility to commit to the winning design proposal. Ideally, “BFF” collaboration eases the stressors of client-designer relations through earnest and open dialogue. Furthermore, the requirements for participating in an RFP may become barriers to smaller organizations or individuals with less time and fewer resources.⁷ Within the bounds of life safety, the requirements of participating in an RFP must be as inclusive as reasonable, or the RFP will be at odds with its democratic mission.

Ultimately, the most significant upside of an RFP is the potential for long-term commitment from a passionate community organization. Through contributing to the core design idea, community leaders establish a lasting sense of ownership for the site. The project becomes inherently grounded within the community with which it serves. A space’s success relies on its ongoing activation and programming, which must be ensured by a strong community partner: the designer’s best friend.

The Media Blitz:

Social media has shifted the design landscape as a vehicle for crowd sourced ideas. We can harness big data, designing with a broad audience.

Crowdsourcing input will likely generate a bias skewed towards local youth and young professionals.⁸ Is this so bad? Social media may not truly garner input from everyone, but the young adults that are profoundly engaged are also historically quite voiceless in the design of public space. Young adults are important inhabitants of downtown public space, yet they are not always sufficiently involved in urban design decision-making processes due to age, access, and other factors. Embracing the inherent bias of social-media-using population helps to offset pre-existing inequalities in the design and expression of public space.

A resounding benefit of the Media Blitz is the potential for dynamic, ongoing discourse through the availability of forums and the contact information of designers and other stakeholders. Designers can openly share progress and respond to critiques at multiple stages in the development process. Interactions are fast and relatively simple.

However, significant challenges also face the Media Blitz approach to design. First, the high quantity and relative anonymity of feedback may create a lack of unity or clear identity. If online voting strategies inform direction and vision, the process is faced with the downfall of democracy at large: the minority voice is not reliably integrated into the final outcome. Another second drawback to

⁶ Lewis, Michael J. 2007. “The Rise of the ‘Starchitect.’” *New Criterion*. Vol. 26. Iss. 4. pp. 4-9.

⁷ Pringle, Heather. 2013. “The Origins of Creativity.” *Scientific American*. Vol. 308. Iss. 3. pp. 36-43.

⁸ Sheila, Allison. 2013. “Youth and the (potential) power of social media.” *Youth Studies Australia*. Vol. 32. Iss. 3. pp. 69-75.

relying on online participation is the lack of accountability for physical stewardship and ongoing program management. The design direction from tech-drive crowdsourcing does not necessarily promote a long-term relationship with the local site.

Fortunately, social media campaigns are easily combined with many approaches to public design. Online outreach is now industry standard for public projects, even many governmental ones. But language and timing are crucial to upgrading a basic sharing process into an inclusive mechanism for agency and discussion. Building a collaboration agenda and actively integrating fresh feedback is critical to hosting an effective participatory design campaign.

Free Sample Architecture:

Free Sample Architecture employs physical prototypes to test out potential solutions to a problem, in small low-risk components. Individuals who encounter the humble free sample can experience it first hand. Documenting their positive or negative reactions provides anecdotal but earnest feedback about a particular design possibility and provoke new iterations.

Identifying what people need at a site holistically and transparently has the potential to break through the limitations of observational research, transforming into a welcoming, transparent series of interactions.⁹ In many cities, individuals or marginalized groups may not presently recognize that they have a right to help shape the public spaces around them. The free sample becomes the conversational icebreaker. It is a simple physical intervention intended to spark new dialogue between strangers.

Human-scale mockups are accessible. Two-dimensional visualizations of potential designs can be obscure or distancing to newcomers.¹⁰ Working with physical prototypes attempts to supersede this barrier between the design and the intended user.

The Free Sample approach suffers similar downfalls to the Media Blitz, as well as the added ethical question of the geography of unsanctioned experimentations. The diversity of participants' responses may average out into a design without a clear identity and the passerby are not necessarily invested in the long-term success of a project. The label "free sample" connotes that the experience is intended to be harmless and temporary. However, a three-dimensional design intervention still, by definition, interrupts and intervenes in people's physical lives.

However, the overarching benefit of Free Sample design interactions, over the BFF and the Media Blitz approaches, is the equitability of access to participation. While an RFP process excludes those who lack the means to produce a proposal, and a social media campaign is inherently limited to social media users, a physical prototype is pragmatically accessible to anyone who inhabits the site, regardless of affiliation or ability. The number of participants may be relatively small compared to a social media campaign, but the designer can rapidly, effectively target a representative cross-section of people who definitively occupy the site at stake. While leaving the people who interact with the

⁹ Sassen, Saskia. 2003. "Future Cities Lab." *306090*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

¹⁰ Yoon, So-Yeon. 2008. "Understanding Usability and User Experience of 3D Graphics Technology." *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*. Vol. 24. Iss. 3. p. 288-306.

physical prototypes up to chance, randomly sampling whoever is willing to participate during a temporary installation reduces the socio-economic bias relative to other types of participatory design processes.

Pitching the Irresistible Idea:

After a design development process embedded in local collaboration, we as designers can return to the powerful stakeholders, ready to dazzle. Combine and permute participatory design processes (the BFF, the Media Blitz, and the Free Sample) to be more inclusive. Root public spaces in the desires of its ultimate inhabitants. The high profile decision becomes the no-brainer when an idea captivates a high-powered audience for external political or commercial reasons, and then they discover that the citizens and consumers of the cityscape love it too.

The irresistibility of the idea lies in its ability to legibly translate across the spectrum of urban agency. An idea becomes irresistible when it spurs frank dialogue and real action.