

Community Engagement: Strategies, Tools, and Lessons for the Pandemic and Beyond

Live webinar 04/21/20 at 1pm ET
Summary and Additional Resources

The Landscape Architecture Foundation's (LAF) panelists offered valuable insight and perspectives on community engagement techniques, particularly in the context of the rapid changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Resources and key points shared by panelists are captured below. The recorded conversation may be viewed [here](#). Note that resources shared here were relevant as of April 2020.

List of Virtual Engagement Platforms Mentioned by Panelists

[Polleverywhere](#): Interactive meetings host

[Mural](#): Digital workspace for community engagement

[Public Input.com](#): Community engagement toolkit

[PlaceSpeak](#): Online community engagement platform

[Engagement HQ](#): Online community engagement platform

[Social Pinpoint](#): Online community engagement platform

[Zoom](#): Web conferencing platform

[GotoMeeting](#): Web conferencing platform

[Slack](#): Business communication platform

Other Engagement Tools Mentioned by Panelists:

- Social media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr
- Self-guided virtual tours created by designers are more effective in the time of COVID-19 because people are looking to get outside and do family activities
- Smartphone videos can be produced by the project team, for example by engineers talking about green stormwater infrastructure, an artist talking about public art. These can end with requests for input
- Community input webinars can be broadcast on more accessible platforms like Facebook live
- Traditional media and mailings
- Providing phone-in options during digital public meetings that don't rely on video/computer ownership
- Interactive surveys with narration
- Creative methods in the built environment like sidewalk chalk

Engagement Methods for Students

- Journaling – for both community partners and students
- Documentary photography, published on social media to archive the time of COVID-19
- Oral history interviews to encourage intergenerational engagement with communities
- Creation of Google Story Maps to share with community partners

Websites of Panelists' Firms/Organizations

[Design Workshop](#)

[SmithGroup](#)

[site](#)

[Mithun](#)

[C.L. Bohannon, Director of the Community Engagement Lab at Virginia Tech](#)

LAF Resources Mentioned in the Introduction:

[LaFoundation.org](#)

[Deb Mitchell Research Grant](#)

[Fellowship for Innovation and Leadership](#)

[Landscape Performance Series](#)

Notes on General Themes and Takeaways from All Panelists:

COVID-19

- Don't slow down community engagement because of the COVID-19 situation. We are hesitating around waiting to do community engagement because we are used to reading people's body language. We have to adapt and find ways to do it.
- The COVID-19 crisis is affecting people differently, and it is important to acknowledge that. Engagement means meeting people where they are and using multiple methods to break down barriers intrinsic in how we do things as a society– it has never been so important to do that. Now is not the time to question that philosophy but rather to question the tools we are using.
- The digital divide, food access and other issues that we already knew were there are made more apparent with COVID-19. Whether doing in-person engagement or not, designers need to realize that there are certain structures of power that are embedded the very infrastructure and environmental, social, and economic fabric of our society. So it's hard to separate out things like health outcomes, questions of representation, whose voices count, the digital divide, hazardous siting of communities, things that LAs and other professions have played a role in but now really feel more need to do something about. It is exciting to see that landscape architects are leading the way to make our society better.
- What are the incentives for the target community to engage in public input processes? With recent unemployment going up because of COVID-19, the last thing on many peoples' minds is doing engagement on an upcoming project. There is a lot to worry about. Our world will change because of COVID-19 and it will take a long time to get out

of this, so think about what that incentive is and why someone might want to participate in engagement. Maybe it's the time for all of us to do some volunteering.

- Many clients are asking whether in-person engagement will even be valid without in-person engagement, that's valid. Many cities and clients are dealing with more pressing issues right now as well.
- COVID-19 is the time to embrace the new normal and not retreat back to the way things were. We can continue to meet people where they are and continue to engage, but it will need to be around these larger issues that matter. This situation has helped build empathy among local communities and a sense of all being in it together.
- Try to find a balance between giving partners space and crowding them with too much engagement. It's okay to do an emotional check-in. For example, to describe your mood today as a weather pattern (sunny, partly cloudy). May seem hokey but an effective way to open up.
- Checking in on your community partners should be an ongoing endeavor. Don't make assumptions about what your community partners need or don't need especially in the time of COVID-19 because those needs may have shifted.
- Continue to be disruptive in community engagement, especially in this context. Our work has to create spaces, value, and processes that will disrupt existing inequalities and injustices in our society, but our work almost must reckon with the legacy of design including landscape architecture in creating those inequalities in the built environment. We can reconcile these through community-engaged design as a model for a more equitable future for the built environment. We must articulate and test networks to sustain results and have a way to scale up our engagement from small community to large city.
- Since collectively we are doing more emotional check-ins, people are more willing to talk about issues of race and using community engagement processes to do that is that reckoning. This is one of the things we should carry forward.
- The current availability of extra time can be used to support anti-racist practice. We have to slow down, reflect, wait and see what will happen with COVID-19. Normally we don't have that luxury of time, and it's a critical time to reflect and see where collective thinking is. Making that space literally and figuratively is a fundamentally anti-racist practice. From a practical standpoint firms have loose community engagement agendas right now, there is lots of wait and see how the first one goes to plan second and third. This should be a standard practice and one that should carry forward because it is a much more community-responsive practice.
- Documenting this time of COVID-19 is really important. Firm photographers can be sent out to photograph empty streets, drones can be used. It is archival but also when we look back at history at this time it's important to understand where we are at.
- Where funds are available, consider adjusting their reach versus depth. Are funds split among many instead of just supporting an individual (e.g. in the case of supporting an artist on the project)?

- The pandemic has thrown our conceptions of public space out the window. What will it look like now? Will people move back out to the suburbs, will there be a white flight of 2020? Will people flee the city because they want to be away from each other? The National Parks will be inundated with people trying to go to parks to get away from each other. What will that do for the parks that have already been lacking with deferred maintenance? It's a new time. How we communicate with each other and how we engage with each other will be very important because it's about rebuilding that trust with each other.

TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

- Engagement can be an extractive practice. Prioritize the needs of diverse populations, challenge dominant narratives. Give space for voices to be heard, allow for local knowledge to be at the forefront in terms of engaged processes.
- Our engagement processes should never have been completely reliant on in-person contact, and now is the time to continue to target engagement especially from groups that haven't been heard. Designers should be hyper-local in engaging with the target community already, and now is the time to lean even more on existing networks, local foundations, neighborhood groups, and others.
- Ensure that members of the community group have a seat at the leadership table. This is key for building trust. Engagement should offer a leadership opportunity for community members. There are opportunities for workforce development programs, shared prosperity models.
- The issues facing the community are design issues. Acknowledge the knowledge that should show up in the processes and the products.
- Even when not working directly with marginalized and vulnerable groups on projects, designers are affecting those groups with our projects, so we have to ask those questions at the beginning of projects even if we're just asking them internally and not bringing them up with clients. Can change choices within our own internal processes. Who is benefitting and who is burdened through our decisions? This must be asked when starting a project and throughout.
- Start by asking questions: who should be involved and how can we best get them involved? Understand how people actually want to be engaged and who wants to be engaged in what way. Build at the very upfront who the stakeholders need to be to help connect designers to the communities. Let people share in their own way, everyone communicates differently. Be open and flexible enough to hear them in their own way and their own time is important.
- Explicitly show participants how community input makes a difference in the outcome. Walk the talk.
- Understand if you actually need to have a meeting and why. In a time where professionals are having more meeting fatigue than ever, be intentional and don't meet unnecessarily.

TECHNOLOGY, TOOLS, AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

- Try all tools. Test them all and see what works best. Layer in varied options for engagement.
- Collaboration can be synchronous or asynchronous, and as designers we should do both. All community engagement doesn't all have to fit into a one-hour timeframe.
- Use different tools for different size groups.
- Technology can help to break down barriers in some areas, or it can present new barriers. It's important to know where it is an appropriate tool and where it is not (see Barriers).
- Prepare, prepare, prepare. Simple things like testing sound, accounting for additional time to set up, visuals step-by-step explanations of things with basic instructions to allow all abilities to engage, keep things simple and concise. Do as many meetings as needed to get to the people we need to.
- Use tech as a launch point to get people outdoors (e.g. a cell phone scavenger hunt) so that it's not all about screen time.
- For designers as hosts for digital community engagement, roles and responsibilities must be clear. Someone has to be moderating the panel, someone is engaging with stakeholders, someone is monitoring the chat box, etc.
- Even if using a webinar format, figure out how to make it interactive with polling questions and clear labeling to help participants be aware of who is in the room.
- It's not about the tool, it's about the outcome. What are you trying to achieve with it and who are you trying to reach?

BARRIERS

- How do we break down power dynamics in any kind of engagement, including digital?
- Recognize that digital divide is real for vulnerable populations including the elderly.
- Language and culture play a major role in who participates in community engagement. Immigrant and ESL (English as a second language) communities are sometimes least likely to attend outreach due to fears of not being understood or heard.
- Find partners to help you break down those barriers. One example is that Black religious leaders are key voices in their communities and they can help break down barriers to participation.
- There are several pitfalls of using technology e.g. "Zoom bombing," creation of echo chambers and difficulty in bringing out individual voices (e.g. when participants are tentative about sharing for fear of interrupting others). A variety of strategies can avoid these pitfalls or mitigate them.

Other Resources

ASLA's The Dirt: "[How Can We Design with Communities While Apart?](#)" by Deb Guenther

SmithGroup: "[Equitable Community Engagement During a Global Pandemic & Beyond](#)" by Michael Johnson, Janet Attarian, and Kathleen Duffy

Civic Tech Field Guide: [Public input and engagement tools](#)

[Kresge Foundation](#)