TELLING IT AS IT WAS: INCORPORATING ORAL HISTORIES INTO A COMMUNITY VISIONING PROJECT

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1 ABSTRACT
As participatory practice continues to offer benefits in the community design and development process, new strategies of engagement are showing increases in participant recruitment and sustained levels of involvement in participatory activities. New process approaches centering on accessible technologies such as video, soundscape, mobile GIS and digital photography have seen increases in voluntary participation of one particular demographic: community youth. While youth participants offer a unique perspective in community planning activities, they will often turn to elders who provide valuable input by offering insights into the history of their community, its people and their landscape. This historical contextualization not only makes us aware of the past, it also helps us better understand contemporary local value systems as important determinants in design and planning outcomes. With a combined professional experience of more than thirty years, the authors have observed the challenges of broadening participant demographics first hand. This paper presents a model for motivating a typically under-represented population, namely, elders, to take part in a community-visioning project. The model we present, “eldervoice,” adapts traditionally employed oral history approaches by involving project designers in the multiple stages of a video documentary-based oral history project.

1.1 KEYWORDS
eldervoice, elder participation, participatory video, community visioning, oral history
2 INTRODUCTION

Participation is a method that solicits public input in planning and development decisions. The approach is used frequently by social scientists and education specialists but has also been used by urban planners, architects and landscape architects on projects in which an inclusive process or multiple stakeholder inputs is desirable. Participatory methods were popularized in the 1960s and have been influenced by the work of education theorist Paulo Freire. Freire maintained that education and communication are mutually beneficial activities and that only through effective dialogue can mutual understanding be achieved. Such a dialogue enables participants to gain a voice in decision-making processes and results in an increased capacity to affect change as a result. (Freire and Freire. 1994, p. 39). Participation was further popularized as a planning method by Sherry Arnstein who developed the well-known "Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation." This model describes eight levels of citizen participation ranging from "manipulation" to "citizen control." (Arnstein, 1969).

Participation has faced many challenges. A common concern of the practice and one experienced firsthand by the authors of this paper is a tendency to over-state the extent of citizen engagement particularly on projects with pre-determined outcomes. True participation, according to development practitioners, involves citizen and community member inputs in all stages of a participatory process, particularly in the ideation stage. (Bond, Thompson-Fawcett, 2007. P. 449). Another challenge of participation is with engagement itself. Soliciting initial public input can be a challenging facilitation and logistical task but sustaining engagement in project activities is all the more difficult.

We have been involved in numerous publically oriented or community-based projects that involved participatory objectives. In nearly all of these projects, participant engagement was motivated by the extrinsic rewards of monetary payments or the issuance of certificates or other awards or prizes. While these strategies may provide solutions to short-term engagement challenges, participants seldom continue to exercise their voice in planning projects after the certificate is in hand or the final payments have been made.

Another important critique of many participation projects is that while a community voice may emerge, it is seldom representative of a broader community with varied demographics and population groups, both mainstreamed and marginalized. (Forester, 1989), (Bond and Thompson-Fawcett 2007). Rarely are public or community-based projects aimed at serving the needs of a single group or a narrowly defined population within a community. Nevertheless, we have seen organizers claim too often that a narrowly defined participant demographic was an adequate representation because they were the only group motivated to participate in such activities.

Earlier studies undertaken by the primary author confronted the challenge of motivating youth involvement in participatory planning activities. These studies suggested that youth are motivated to participate in activities that not only give them a voice in community decision-making processes but also build their capacity through new skills training or are simply fun and joyful activities in which to be engaged. More specifically, these earlier studies show that the intrinsic rewards of methods employing new media enterprises such as digital video and participatory filmmaking motivates youth to join in community development projects. (Thompson and Widmer. 2010). During the course of these earlier studies, youth participants were observed consulting with older family members and community elders at distinct points in the project's development. In a project that asked participants to create narratives describing their community's attachment to its agrarian lands, youth participants turned to their elders to gather historical details about their community and its landscapes, to seek approval for their work or to gain informal endorsement of the content for the narratives they were authoring. (Thompson and Widmer. 2010).

This project seeks to deliberately involve elders in a participatory planning process. While elders might not immediately recognize the value of their experience and perspective in community development and planning work, they do see the value in sharing stories of the past. Working with a group of students enrolled in a landscape architecture Site Planning and Design studio, we asked these designers to assume central roles in the production of video-documentated oral histories. We also asked them to consider both the experience of their involvement and the oral history product itself as data that could be used to inform their design and planning outcomes.
3 BACKGROUND

The town of White Springs is a rural community situated along the banks of the Suwannee River in northern Florida’s Hamilton County. During the 1800s, thousands of health-seeking visitors from across Florida and other states came to White Springs to bath in its white sulfur springs (Woodard, 2011). With the expansion of the interstate highway system in the early 60s and new amusement and theme parks opening in central Florida shortly thereafter, the visitor attraction to White Springs quickly vanished. The successive waves of development that swept across the state for much of the twentieth-century managed to skip over White Springs leaving much of its historic fabric intact.

Today, White Springs is a town of approximately 900 people (US Census, 2004). It is home to Stephen Foster State Park which was originally built as a memorial to the great American composer whose well known works include the song “Old Folks at Home” which most people recognize as the song that starts, “Way Down Upon the Swannee Ribber.”

The Park is home to the Florida Folk Festival (one of the region’s largest) drawing thousands of visitors to White Springs in a single late August weekend. In addition to the Florida Folk Festival and other similarly-aspiring local events, White Springs’ main draw for tourists these days is its natural setting. The town is surrounded by thousands of acres of wilderness area and hundreds of miles of trails. Residents believe it is the natural splendors that surround the town that will help the area regain some of its original glory as a tourist destination.

In 2010, White Springs elected one of their newest residents, Dr. Helen Miller to office as Mayor. Recently retired and with a Ph.D. in economic development, Mayor Miller quickly recognized development opportunities for White Springs while being deeply-committed to preserving the historic and small-town character of her new home. One of the Mayor’s community development initiatives is to build a charter school on the site of the old Carver School. Located at the center of what is now known as the Carver Neighborhood (named after the black American botanist and educator, George Washington Carver), the original school was abandoned after Desegregation due to many of the area’s youth being bused to schools in neighboring cities (Woodard, 2011). When the Carver school closed, the neighborhood lost an important social center at the heart of its community.

When the Mayor invited faculty from the University of Florida’s Department of Landscape Architecture to contribute to her economic and community development planning, a site planning and design studio project was proposed. This project would explore concepts for redeveloping and expanding the existing Carver Neighborhood community produce designs for the proposed new school and school grounds. The project was conceived to be an inclusive, redeveloped neighborhood with a charter school and community center at its core. In addition to site planning concepts such as low-impact development,
conservation development, walkability, transit-oriented development, intergenerational space and urban agriculture amongst others, the studio applied concepts from theories in civic engagement, participatory planning and co-operative societies.

Community participation was identified as an important activity in the process of planning for redevelopment and designing new neighborhoods within existing communities. To facilitate this participation, plans for the eight-week project were made that included multiple visioning workshops to be held in the Town of White Springs. The intention of holding these workshops in White Springs was to provide a forum for community input and to create opportunities for a range of population groups within the White Springs community to become involved in activities that could influence the future of their town. Since the identity of the White Springs community is integrally tied to the legacy of its past, activities and workshops were planned that would solicit involvement from one demographic group in particular: the community elders.

4 APPROACH AND OBJECTIVES

Soliciting multiple groups to engage in participatory planning projects that build a representative voice is challenging enough, however, some groups are more difficult to motivate than others. Community elders can be particularly difficult to organize because they don’t always recognize the value of the contributions they make to planning initiatives. We have observed this on many occasions in the work we have done and in White Springs, Mayor Helen Miller has also found this to be the case. Elders “don’t feel they are sophisticated enough” to participate in visioning activities or don’t believe their contributions are “of any value.” (Miller, 2011). Elder community members do, however, respond enthusiastically to the opportunity to contribute to oral history projects that share stories and contribute to the preservation of community heritage. Oral histories can be directed along many different topics, including community identity, legacy and visions for the future.

In the White Springs study, eldervoice was organized with the goal of achieving three primary objectives. First, it was included in the visioning workshop activities as a means to attract the more senior members of the community. By becoming involved in the eldervoice workshop, they would incidentally be exposed to the other activities planned for the event. The second objective was to raise awareness amongst the student and youth participants of the contributions being made by the community elders. Last and perhaps most obvious, eldervoice was included as a means to capture the unique views, perspectives and memories of a local group of elders and to enable their voice to be heard throughout the process of planning for White Springs’ future. In this context, elders are not only seen as active participants in visioning activities, but their recorded stories, remembrances and opinions about the future of their community become an important reference throughout the design and planning process.

The participatory approach we call “eldervoice” borrows from traditional oral history methods as well as engagement approaches used in participatory video and photovoice. It is, fundamentally, a video-documentary-styled oral history project. Where eldervoice differs from traditional oral history recordings is how it is positioned within the context of other participatory planning activities that are organized to support a community planning and design process. Similar to participatory video and photovoice, eldervoice encourages participants to “reflect on and discern their own perspectives” (Castleden, Garvin, First Nation, 2008, 1395) and to convey information that culminate in a greater understanding of the social and spatial structures of community.

When we’ve been involved in community visioning programs in the past, the few that did include oral history interviews did not make these interviews central to the other activities of the visioning programs and workshops. Interviews were often conducted in isolation of other activities and were nearly always led by social scientists or oral historians, not landscape architects or planners. These oral histories might contain information that could be helpful in some of the design or planning decisions that were being made. However, it is important to remember that the information that is collected, interpreted and represented in the final edited volume has often been filtered multiple times by individuals with little or no training in planning and design. Designers are trained to listen and to ask questions. They are trained to think of client briefings as critical opportunities for interpreting the needs and desires of a client, for identifying the project’s program and for understanding the impacts of budgets. Designers engaged in community planning and visioning efforts also receive briefings but these are usually from individuals who have interpreted the needs of a community or public constituency. In the cases where designers do solicit input from the public or the broader community, the pool of responses again, are limited by the population of community members choosing to participate in such activities.
Eldervoice positions designers in roles that help them engage elders in a planning process and to better understand local value systems and community aspirations for their future. In our White Springs project, we asked student designers to give careful consideration to the questions that should be asked of the elders. They were encouraged to consider what historical influences might be important to the way they see White Springs today or how they might imagine its future to be. They were challenged to develop strategies for “softly steering” conversations along paths of relevance to community planning and design and they were encouraged to connect with their subjects on a personal level. While only a few student designers could be logistically involved in conducting the eldervoice interviews, all students contributed to discussions that generated the leading questions for our elder subjects.

Two community workshops were announced in town meetings and at church services in the weeks prior to the events. For the first workshop, recruitment was also through personal invitation. The Mayor, working with life-long White Springs resident and local celebrity chef Teddy Bear, identified individuals from the community to invite to attend the visioning workshop and specifically to participate in the oral history project. Teddy Bear, the Mayor and the Mayor’s husband provided transportation for community members with mobility concerns.

For the second event, fliers were posted on town bulletin boards announcing an “open house” to showcase the student’s concepts for Carver Neighborhood Redevelopment and new School plans.

The eldervoice interview sessions were organized to coincide with a charrette-type community visioning workshop with the anticipation that seniors arriving to participate in the interviews would also be exposed to the other activities of the workshop. Therefore it was important that the interview setting itself be within visual proximity of the design charrette yet removed from the impact of its activities, particularly its noise. For this study, an outdoor amphitheater was equipped to function as the interview space. Interview participants were met by a member of the eldervoice team who introduced the background of the project and its relationship to the community visioning and design workshop activities, explained the type of questions that would be asked and obtained permission and release form signatures.

Despite the simultaneously-scheduled workshop events, the clear line of sight between activity areas and direct invitations to community elders to at least walk through and see what the student community designers were doing, only three of the eldervoice participants felt comfortable engaging in the activities or mixing with the student designers.
5 RESULTS

Eldervoice interviews were conducted over two full days of workshops and generated more than fourteen hours of recorded interview content. This content was catalogued and transcoded. The first editing pass of this material reduced all erroneous footage such as lags in conversation and responses to questions meant to help subjects warm-up to the process of being interviewed. The material was then catalogued according to discussion type focusing on six key subject areas: the character of the White Springs community; historical events; local legends; stories of landscape (specifically forest, river and farm); stories specific to the Carver Neighborhood and stories specific to the original Carver School. The footage for each topic area was then edited for redundancy. The student in charge of editing made decisions about which footage to keep based on the content of the responses and the quality of narrative and images. From fourteen hours of original footage, this editing process reduced footage to just over an hour’s worth of video. This footage was then presented to the entire studio of student designers who were asked to take note of its content. In discussions following the screening, the students were asked to develop a framework for a narrative that they felt best reflected the character of the Community of White Springs as they had come to know it. They were also asked to identify key footage that expressed this character or footage that suggested the community’s collective hopes for its future. This process further reduced the extent of the footage and helped the designers identify key program elements or perspectives underscoring opinion concepts that could inform design responses in their plans.
6 DISCUSSION

Balancing demographic populations in community development workshops is challenging for many reasons. One of the more significant reasons it can be difficult to motivate older populations to participate is that many community elders do not recognize the value of their voice and they don’t understand the value of their views, perspectives and lived experiences as reflections of local values important in community planning activities. This was seen to be particularly the case in White Springs.

According to Mayor Helen Miller,

If I talk about planning, they say: ‘just keep it up, do what you’re doing.’ Most feel planning is complicated and that they are not sophisticated enough to really contribute to the process. If I invited them to a planning meeting, they would not show up. But, asking them to tell their story is a different matter. Most really do want to talk to someone who really seems to care, that their lives really have mattered and that after they are gone, there will be some record of their struggles and their contributions.


At the same time however, elders are enthusiastic about contributing to initiatives that preserve the heritage of their towns or that underscore the cultural identity of their communities. This sentiment was echoed by the families of some of the participants in this study. According to one family member who attended the open house, "She wanted to come out. She wanted to tell her stories – she has lots of stories about this place….but she don’t care too much about that other stuff. What you doin up there anyway? Drawin maps?” (Visioning Workshop Participant #12. 2011). While participants may not be any faster in recognizing their contributions to visioning processes, that their voice has been heard at all represents a significant step in the direction towards a more inclusionary planning process.

Although many of the student designers could not be directly involved in the eldervoice interviews during the workshop, they were very much aware that the interviews were being conducting. Several students mentioned being impressed by the stream of participants heading to the eldervoice interviews and by the energy and endurance of its participants. After realizing the duration of a typical interview, one student shared this observation:
I saw that guy coming in. He kind of wandered through – Ed (the Mayor’s husband) was with him so I knew he must have been with the project. He walked around and asked what we were doing and we kinda told him about our site analysis work – turns out he had gone to school at the Carver School….anyway, I just went out back…. and saw he’s still down there. Has he been down there that whole time? I mean, he’s been talking for hours. Must have a lot to say.

- Student participant #15. 2011

Figure 5. Elder knowledge informs design outcomes. Here a community nature reserve is provided to allow residents to continue to harvest forest herbs. 2011. Photo: Second Author.

Student illustrated plan.

Another student involved with the design charrette expressed an eagerness to hear what the elders had to say about White springs. During a workshop critique, they shared:

I just want to go down there and hear what they're saying. I mean, here we are, designing their town for them. I really want to know what they see as the problems with the way it is and to understand what sorts of things they would like us to consider in our plans. Will we get a chance to see all that video they're shooting down there?

- Student participant #3. 2011

While eldervoice motivates involvement from community seniors and while the value of that involvement is recognized by other participants of community planning activities, eldervoice also accomplishes another very important objective: it adds unique insight and perspective to the knowledge base from which visions emerge and plans derive. Students developing plans set program priorities that included community gardens, a “produce-swap” space, an edible forest reserve where residents can continue to harvest deer tongue plant (Liatris odoratissima) and palmetto berries (Serenoa repens). Students designed shared, semi-private community spaces with fire pits similar to the vacant lots with burn barrels common in the Carver neighborhood and they developed plans that resisted boundaries between “improved” and “unimproved,” “redeveloped” and “original.” This was particularly important in a community who identified that “not everyone wants change,” and that change can be incremental, implemented “a little bit here and a little bit there <over time>>.
The value of the elder’s contributions to a planning process was also recognized by other members of the community who attended the open house presentations. When asked what they thought of the idea of including the video interviews in a community planning project, one young community member offered:

I think it’s a good idea (conducting an oral history project) because these folks, they know a lot about this area. We’ve heard some of the stories but there’re lots of stories, some we ain’t never heard before. It’s important to know about the history of the place because so many things happened before and lots of things change. People around here, they know each other and they like the way things is. They’re not going to like things changin all that much.

- Visioning Workshop Participant #7. 2011

Eldervoice is itself a new cultural document. Such a document may bring immediate benefits in working towards the objectives of a community planning workshop, or it may have longer-term benefits by contributing to the historical record of a place and its community. This point did not escape the notice of another community member who did not personally participate in the eldervoice study but was there to assist in its logistics:

They’s a lot a stories in this town, stories about how folks get by, bout how they help each other out. You know, times are tough for a lot of folks in these parts but we always do alright cause we help each other out (underlined to reflect spoken emphasis) you know what I’m sayin? When it gets cold, we always make sure everyone has fuel. A lot of folks still heat with fire so we make sure everyone has wood, you know what I’m sayin? And us older folks know all these stories. But the kids, they don’t know this stuff. They should though cause that what this community all about, helpin each other out.

- Visioning Workshop Participant #9. 2011

Eldervoice rallies participation. As word of the activity spread throughout the town it caused a flurry of interest from other community members wanting to participate. While it may not be within the domain of every project to continue conducting eldervoice interviews after the event, the requests for involvement certainly suggests that the method is capturing attention. According to the Mayor in the days immediately following the eldervoice sessions “the town is buzzing over the oral history project – everyone wants to participate.” (H. Miller, personal correspondence).

That buzz apparently continued. Attendance levels at the final presentation of the student’s work and the first public screening of the eldervoice interviews, reached staggering proportions. According to the Mayor, the viewing of the eldervoice presentation drew:

The largest gathering we’ve seen yet, and the largest group of black and white community members together in one place. This project has meant a lot to so many people. (a contributing

Figure 6. Elders shared many stories related to the tradition of community gardening, “swapping vegetables” and giving food they produced to residents in need. 2011. Student perspective.
community member)’s attitude has taken a 180 degree turn. He was always a bit skeptical and cautious about what we’ve been trying to do. He was literally on his way to Tallahassee when I called him, and he turned around and drove all the way back here to participate in the interviews. For him to open up this place (his home) to you like this is very unusual. The project has obviously touched a nerve.

- Mayor Helen Miller. 2011

Figure 7. Eldervoice compelled elder involvement in activities they wouldn’t have engaged in otherwise. Here, Teddy Bear Marshall responds to a student plan that integrates a community fire pit into the Carver neighborhood redevelopment plans. 2011. Photo: First Author.

Eldervoice offers distinct benefits to community planning processes, but all good things come at a price. Including activities that are tailored to specific populations within a community adds complexity to the process of organizing events. Scheduling can be challenging when groups lead different lives and follow different schedule. Senior populations in particular commonly face additional challenges, like mobility, that require special accommodation. More specific to eldervoice however, are the unique technical demands that come with the process of conducting video interviews. While there is recognized advantage in positioning the eldervoice activity within the same context as the other workshop activities, the noise generated by most charrette activities poses a serious problem in the production of often softly-spoken interviews. Quiet space must be found for the interview environment. It must be a space that can be equipped for production yet comfortable enough for the participants to spend upwards of three hours in at a time.

Video interviewing also requires specialist skills. Someone with technical training needs to set-up and maintain operation of video cameras and microphones and be skilled in editing and post-production techniques. Editing and post-production can also be very labor intensive. In the White Springs eldervoice study, the team conducted interviews that ran for a total of just two days. With two cameras, the team captured approximately fourteen hours of video all of which requires cataloguing and transcoding. Even simple processing can be a labor-intensive effort. Hard decisions need to be made about which content gets carried-forward into whatever production mode has been established for the project. Furthermore, decisions have to be made about how the finished product will be used. While it is not essential that
eldervoice leads to a tangible “product” such as an edited oral history video for instance, participants need to understand how and in what manner their contribution will be used in the planning process and beyond. Finally, there are special skills required in conducting interviews. Interviewers need to be friendly and sociable and able to readily establish a trusting report with their interviewees. They need to understand the objectives of the interviews and they need to be adept in their ability to “softly steer” conversations along topically specific conversations in order to meet the objectives identified for the project.

7 CONCLUSION

There are several challenges to an inclusionary planning process including motivating and sustaining citizen engagement and participation and organizing a project that generates a representative voice. Community elders are reluctant to participate in planning projects because they don’t recognize the value of their contributions. They do, however, recognize the value of their contributions to projects that attempt to preserve community heritage or the cultural legacy of their past.

Eldervoice adapts traditional oral history approaches by directing interviews along topics concerning issues relevant to community planning and design. It also positions designers into the role of deciding what questions are asked and what responses come forward through the editing process. Students involved in this eldervoice study felt that the approach made them better designers and changed the way they think about their work. In reflection discussions, students said that rather than designing “for” the community, they felt like the community was being designed “through” them. This sense was further reinforced during final presentations made to the community. In their design boards, students were encouraged to identify statements or quotes from the eldervoice footage that inspired their visions for the project. In an informal, poster session-type presentation, students expressed great pleasure in presenting their work to the community members who participated in the eldervoice process and rejoiced in the personal connections that are made when a designer satisfies a client need or desire.

Eldervoice motivated elder involvement in a study that explores the potential and options for White Springs’ future. In ways they never imagined, community elders took an important lead in that initiative. In ways the students hadn’t foreseen, they felt that through the personal connections they had established and the satisfaction they experienced by meeting the needs of this unique client group, that they had achieved “real good” for a “real client.”

8 REFERENCES


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