



WHAT'S A CHARRETTE?

A funny word, sure, but what else?

The term *charrette* comes from the French, meaning “little cart.” The word’s origins are traced to an art school tradition from 19th century Paris. A cart was sent around to students’ studios to collect work to be graded by professors. Like most students, these artists and architects in training worked until the last minute and often followed the charrette through the streets making finishing touches on their work as the cart rumbled towards judgment.

The idea has been refined by architects to indicate a process on a fast-track, undertaken in the presence of their clients. New Urbanist planning teams formalized the technique, creating a multi-day format with built-in feedback opportunities for both clients and the public. Now charrettes have become the processes of choice for many planners faced with complex, controversial projects on a tight deadline.

By involving everyone who can enable or block decisions and by committing to produce actionable plans within a set timeframe, charrettes can save months – even years – of tedious back-and-forth negotiations and redesign. They also provide an experience that’s increasingly rare for most people. They get to be involved in something organized especially to listen to their ideas and to act on them immediately.

In well-organized charrettes, designers draw ideas almost as fast as participants come up with them; so there’s something immediate and tangible to react to. These feedback loops of drawing, reacting, redrawing, and reacting some more are key to making charrettes work.

Of course, all this hashing out of alternatives in public is not always the way political bodies and private-sector developers like to work. But the biggest risk connected with a charrette is not too much debate; it’s too much success.

A charrette raises expectations. It builds enthusiasm. It draws clear lines of accountability. Because everyone knows who made the plan, everyone knows who’s responsible if it goes sour.

When a developer or a government body chooses a charrette process, it means investing resources to assemble and support a team of experts through three to ten days of near round-the-clock work sessions and community discussions. It’s a leap of faith – in citizens, in the design team, in the process itself. But the potential rewards are great.

In the long run, a charrette is a money-saver. Time is money, after all, whether you’re talking about debt service on a developer’s investment or staff time for a government agency. Community buy-in that grows during a charrette accelerates a project’s path to approval and jump-starts the marketing. People don’t have to be sold after-the-fact on ideas they helped shape.

The biggest and most unexpected bonus comes from the creative energy a charrette generates. It attracts people and ideas that almost always make the project better. It’s self-correcting. Bad ideas are tossed more quickly; good ones bubble to the surface more readily. So by the time participants assemble for the final presentation it’s clear that the whole has become greater than the sum of the parts.

The pay-off is not only in terms of time and money saved but in the pleasure of partnering with an entire community on a project everyone can be proud of.

For more info: www.charretteinstitute.org.

