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Just Urban Design

The Struggle for a Public City

**Edited by: Kian Goh, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris,
Vinit Mukhija**

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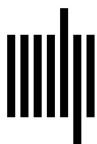
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BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY AS JUST URBAN DESIGN

LEARNING FROM SEATTLE'S CHINATOWN INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT

Jeffrey Hou

When the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States was reported outside Seattle in early 2020, the fallout was felt more than thirty miles away in the city's Chinatown International District (CID). Although no case was immediately reported, the CID neighborhood experienced a steep decline in business but growing incidents of racially motivated vandalism (Peng 2020), recalling historical episodes of racial discrimination and assaults against the community. As early as the 1860s, violent outbreaks have repeatedly occurred against Chinese immigrants in Seattle. In 1886, an anti-Chinese riot resulted in the expulsion of virtually all the Chinese civilians from the city of Seattle (Crowley 1999). As an ethnic enclave located next to the city's original skid row, the district was itself the result of racially restricted covenants enacted in many parts of Seattle against people of color, a practice that continued into the twentieth century. Despite these barriers, the district thrived and emerged as a multiethnic neighborhood with Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese immigrants sharing the same streets (Chin 2001; Abramson, Manzo, and Hou 2006).

During World War II, the community suffered another blow, as Japanese residents were uprooted and sent to the internment camps in one of the darkest moments in US history. Many Japanese American residents lost their property and never returned to the neighborhood (Takami 1998). Setbacks for the community continued after the war. Similar to

other inner-city neighborhoods in the US, the district became the site of major infrastructure projects. In the 1960s, the construction for Interstate 5 bisected the community, demolishing many apartment buildings that had been home to immigrant residents. In 1972, the construction of the Kingdome, a multipurpose stadium, began right next to the district after policymakers rejected the initial site, located in a more affluent neighborhood. This time, however, alarmed by the threats of noise, traffic, and displacement, residents and community members rebelled. Their protests led to the establishment of a special review district to protect the neighborhood's cultural and historical character and the founding of several community development organizations (Chin 2001; Santos 2002).

In the early 2000s, although racially restrictive covenants and forced relocation were considered things of the past, the community faced new challenges, including the encroachment of office and commercial development from downtown, conflicts within the community concerning priorities for local development, and debates over the identity of the neighborhood. The challenges also included limited forms of community engagement and barriers for participation, dialogue, and consensus-building in the local planning and design process (Hou 2014). It was in this context that we, as faculty and students at the University of Washington, Seattle, began a journey of neighborhood design collaboration with local community organizations in the CID. With these continued barriers and disparities in mind, we made community capacity-building a focus of our work.

This chapter is presented as a retrospective of this two-decades-long work (2002 to 2021), focusing on how community capacity-building can address the challenges of just urban design in a community faced with longstanding biases and barriers. The narrative is written from the perspective of my multiple roles as an instructor of service-learning design studios, a member of many standing committees and task forces in the community, a pro bono consultant on community-initiated projects, and a member of friends' groups for park projects. The materials presented in this chapter draw from my engagement in meetings, workshops, and other community events and activities as a participant, organizer, committee member, and instructor. The observations and reflections are based on my interactions, including formal interviews and conversations, with

community members and staff of neighborhood organizations and city departments during this extended period of time.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY-BUILDING

As US cities face the recent racial upheavals, there have been growing reflections on the built-environment professions for being complicit with “racism by design” through zoning and other planning practices (Agyeman 2020) and for being associated historically with serving the privileged (Abendroth and Bell 2016). With this as the context, how can urban design reverse its role and instead serve as a tool for equity and justice in society? Besides dismantling structural barriers and addressing the need for diversity and inclusion, it is also important for urban design to contribute to building community capacity to address longstanding social and institutional barriers as well as disparities of power and resources. But what does capacity-building entail in planning and design practice? How can community capacity bring about just urban design?

The literature in community development, education, and community health offers many definitions of *community capacity*. Dennis Poole (1997, 163) defines community capacity as “the characteristics of communities that enable them to plan, develop, implement, and maintain effective community programs.” Steve Skinner (1997, 1–2) characterizes community capacity-building as “development work that strengthens the ability of community organizations and groups to build their structure, systems, people and skills so that they are better able to define and achieve their objectives.” Building on the literature on social capital, Thomas Beckley and colleagues (2008, 60–61) define *community capacity* as “the collective ability of a group (the community) to combine various forms of capital within institutional and relational contexts to produce desired results or outcomes.”

Specific types or domains of community capacity have been a focus in the literature. Ronald Labonte and Glenn Laverack (2001), for instance, present nine capacity-building domains, each acting as individual building blocks: community participation, leadership, organizational structure, resource mobilization (the ability of a community to mobilize resources

both from within and beyond itself), external linkages, problem assessment, project management, critical assessment, and outside agents. Similarly, Selma Liberato and colleagues (2011) identify nine domains for assessing community capacity-building: learning opportunities and skills development, resource mobilization, partnership/linkages/networking, leadership, participatory decision making, assets-based approach, sense of community, communication, and development pathway. Natalie Mountjoy and colleagues (2014) propose five primary types of capital-based capacity: human capital, social capital, organizational capital, economic capital, and natural capital. In a similar vein, Robert Chaskin (2001, 318) suggests that community capacity resides in the community's individuals, formal organizations, and the networks that tie them "to each other and to the broader systems of which they are a part."

Community capacity has been associated with many benefits. Through a multicase study of citizen planning academies, programs that seek to build knowledge, skills, networks, norms, and trust for citizens to be engaged in urban planning, Lynn Mandarano (2015, 174) finds that the model of public outreach and education programming can lead to "improvements in individual human and social capitals that translate into effective community engagement measured as actions taken by participants to improve community conditions." Capacity-building and the formation of social capital are seen as important in achieving more effective, sustained, and democratic participatory processes at the local level (Docherty, Goodlad, and Paddison 2001) and in meeting community needs (Flora and Flora 2007; Green and Haines 2008). Capacity-building has been recognized for serving a variety of purposes—improving responses to climate change (Archer and Dodman 2015); as a prerequisite for neighborhood regeneration (Banks and Shenton 2001); urban policy, regeneration, and social development worldwide (Craig 2007); and for health and education (Beckley et al. 2008).

While capacity-building is broadly considered valuable (Simmons, Reynolds, and Swinburn 2011), the concept also has its share of criticisms. For instance, Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh (2004, 59) suggest that capacity-building is often seen as expecting people lacking in resources "to pull themselves up by their collective bootstraps." Capacity-building can also be seen as shifting the responsibility of the government to the

community or civil society (Shirlow and Murtagh 2004). It has been criticized for building on a deficit model of communities that “fails to engage properly with their own skills, knowledge, and interests” (Chaskin 2001, 335) and assuming communities as “empty buckets that need to be filled with human and social capital and capacities for collective action” (Fallov 2010, 795). Furthermore, capacity-building has been seen as obscuring “structural reasons for poverty and inequality” (Chaskin 2001, 335). To address these concerns, Chaskin (2001, 295) suggests the need to leverage existing assets and resources within a community to “solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community.”

As evident above, the capacity-building processes are complex, expansive, and nuanced. Keeping track of all the associated domains and parameters can be a challenge in adopting a capacity-building approach to urban design. In the following, I take a cue from a question posed by Beckley and colleagues (2008, 56) in their research: “The capacity to do what?” I will focus on three areas of our work in Seattle’s Chinatown International District: *capacity to participate*, *capacity to organize*, and *capacity to collaborate*. Short of a longitudinal analysis, I will focus on capacity outcomes as a way of assessing community capacity-building.

CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE

As a liberal West Coast city, Seattle is known for its abundance of community processes under what Carmen Sirianni (2007) describes as an ambitious and successful policy design for collaborative planning. But when I began working in the CID in 2002, I was taken aback by practices that did not consider the culture of the immigrant community. Most community meetings at the time consisted of one or more formal presentations followed by audience response. A few vocal individuals would almost always dominate the discussion. It was hard to gauge how the information was received by most of the audience—let alone know how representative the audience was. Later, as the city began a planning process to increase density in South Downtown (including CID), there were many more community meetings, sometimes with top city officials and even the mayor present at the meetings, but surprisingly without language interpretation for the immigrant residents.

In 2002, I was invited by the InterIm Community Development Association (ICDA), based in the CID, to run a design studio in conjunction with an urban design master plan project they were leading. Through the initial meetings, I realized right away the complexity of the neighborhood, including its diverse demographics, multiple cultural identities, and entrenched local politics, as we met with each of the community organizations and their staff and volunteers to solicit their feedback. Specifically, the community was divided on many fronts, including different perspectives on local economic development, territorial boundaries, and development priorities (Abramson, Manzo, and Hou 2006). Because of these differences, the master plan project was stalled for months.

Learning from our experience in the earlier meetings, it occurred to me that a better way to go about community engagement and to build capacity was to initially focus on smaller-scale projects with a limited scope. These smaller-scale projects would provide us with opportunities to work with specific organizations with a subset of stakeholders on focused issues and to build community capacity for them. This approach became an outcome of the urban design master plan project—a series of pilot projects to improve the neighborhood and to recognize its diverse cultural identities. Some of these projects became the focus of our subsequent design studios, as well as projects that involved student interns and me on a pro bono basis. In each of the subsequent projects, we first worked with our partner organization(s) to define the focus, scope, and approach for the project. Based on the nature of the project and the intended audience, we then experimented with appropriate participatory design techniques and methods of engagement.

PHOTOVOICE AND “DESIGN AS SECOND LANGUAGE”

Maynard Avenue Green Street was one of the first focused projects we worked on. In this project, we used the “photovoice” technique to interview the local residents and stakeholders who were primarily older adults (Hou 2005). The technique provided an opportunity for the participants to convey to us what they considered welcoming and unwelcoming aspects of the neighborhood. We then translated the results into a streetscape design that was implemented in 2009. In 2005, we worked

on a new project to explore opportunities for creating more community open spaces to address increasing density. During the studio process, we were invited to work with Wilderness Inner-City Leadership Development (WILD), a neighborhood youth leadership program, to explore intergenerational uses of open space through a design workshop. Together with the youths (who also taught a weekly English as a second language class for older adults in the neighborhood), we developed a course lesson/design game called Design as Second Language (Hou 2013) (see figure 8.1). Through this game, older adults worked alongside high school students to design a park.

“DESIGN BUFFET” AND EVERYDAY ENGAGEMENT

In 2007, we were invited by the WILD coordinator to work with community stakeholders to develop the initial studies and concepts for renovating the International Children’s Park, which faced disrepair and



8.1 Using cut-out photos with bilingual labels, residents developed their design of a neighborhood park. *Source:* Jeffrey Hou.

public safety challenges. We worked again with youths to engage older adults who often accompanied their grandchildren to the park. This time around, we developed a new design game called Design Buffet to further leverage the everyday skills and knowledge of the community stakeholders, young and old (Hou 2013). In 2008, in a project to plan for the expansion of Hing Hay Park, we infused participatory design activities with an ongoing free meal program so that the residents could participate within their comfort zones, together with their peers. In other projects, including Street Carts Studio (2010) and Park Here (2012), students interviewed and sometimes shadowed storeowners to better understand their everyday business activities. In almost all projects, we used a community open house format to present our design proposals to the community so they could join us at their convenience and engage with the designers directly.

Through these forms of engagement, which were new to the community at the time, we were able to develop more informed concepts for park and streetscape design based on inputs from the community stakeholders. Today, even without our direct involvement in many community initiatives, these methods of engagement have continued. Community engagement activities in the CID are now often combined with community events, including festivals and alley parties. Design projects frequently involve multiple and more focused gatherings with targeted audiences in addition to the required public meetings. A wider range of activities is designed for direct and active engagement with the community stakeholders. These practices, performed by community organizations, sometimes in collaboration with professional firms, represent the capacity outcomes in community participation.

CAPACITY TO ORGANIZE

Developing more engaging methods of participation was not the sole focus of our work. From my earlier work in environmental activism, I learned that organizational capacity was just as important as the participatory processes (Kinoshita and Hou 2001). With this understanding, we tried whenever we could to partner with and even build organizations in the community. Over the years, we have worked with at least a dozen partners on projects in the CID. They ranged from community

development corporations to government agencies. Some have even become longtime collaborators.

After the successful collaboration in 2005, we started regularly working with the WILD program. Building on the outcome of the workshop to activate a park, the youths adopted a project to organize a pilot night market in the CID. Starting with a survey to gauge the support from local businesses, followed by an analysis of possible neighborhood sites, and a visit to the Richmond Night Market (the largest summer night market in the region), the youths successfully organized a pilot night market in Hing Hay Park in summer 2006 (Hou 2010, 2011) (see figure 8.2). The responsibility of sustaining the event fell on the local business chamber the following year. Since then, the annual event has grown exponentially in size and popularity, bringing thousands of visitors to the district every year. Besides the longevity of the event, many of the youths have also stayed involved in the district either as volunteers or as full-time staff working for community organizations after they have completed college. Several WILD staff and interns have further become important organizers in the community.



8.2 Programmed activities at the pilot CID night market in 2006 featuring games for children and adults. Source: Jeffrey Hou.

In 2008, with an environmental justice grant from the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority (SCIDpda) (a community-based public development authority founded in 1975) launched a community design and resource center called the IDEA Space.¹ Focusing on business assistance, design, public safety, and real estate development, the center's mission complemented SCIDpda's role as a property developer and manager. Over the years, IDEA Space has become one of our most important partners in the neighborhood. Through IDEA Space, we were able to expand the range of projects and involvement in the community, with the staff responsible for coordinating outreach activities, maintaining regular communication with community stakeholders, and applying for grants to support and implement ideas that emerged from the community process. In its first five years of operation, IDEA Space leveraged over \$3 million in investments in neighborhood improvement, engaged over two thousand volunteers, and assisted, served, and/or partnered with over 225 businesses and property owners in CID. It has been instrumental in managing many neighborhood projects, ranging from storefront improvements and alleyway activations to park renovation and expansion. Although the personnel at IDEA Space have turned over through the years, many of them continue to serve in other neighborhood organizations and as staff and allies in city departments.

Newly formed friends' groups have also been important to successful project implementation. The Friends of International Children's Park (FICP) was the first such organization established in the neighborhood to lead the renovation of the park after many years of neglect. FICP was instrumental in running a grassroots campaign and received multiple rounds of Neighborhood Matching Funds from the city to support community outreach and site design. Based on the outcomes of community engagement, the campaign succeeded in getting the project listed in the Parks and Green Spaces Levy, approved by Seattle voters in 2008 to provide funding for park development in underserved neighborhoods. FICP played a critical role in the design process through a design subcommittee composed of both professionals and community stakeholders. Throughout the process, the group also engaged in further fundraising

and outreach. After the construction was completed, members of FICP continued their involvement through programming of regular activities and events in the park. The successful renovation of the International Children's Park provided a precedent for forming another friends group, the Friends of Hing Hay Park, to support the park's expansion, a project with even greater complexity involving many more community groups.

The sustaining power of the CID Night Market, the accomplishments of IDEA Space, and the successful operation of the Friends of International Children's Park and the Friends of Hing Hay Park represent the capacity outcomes in community organizing and the expanded organizational capacity within the neighborhood.

CAPACITY TO COLLABORATE

In 2002, when our work first started, the CID community was deeply divided on many issues. There were disagreements over the district's name, with the Chinese community preferring Chinatown while some considered International District to be more inclusive. Disagreements also existed on issues ranging from housing to local economic development, with community development corporations considering affordable housing as a priority while many in the business community favored market-rate development. Community stakeholders or representatives would typically join a meeting more to defend their interests than to engage in dialogue. The agenda of community meetings, already limited in their ability to engage the stakeholders, often got derailed by persistent disagreements over issues unrelated to a project.

As mentioned before, working on projects with limited scope and focus was one way to overcome the divisions. The focused scope of projects helped keep the number and range of stakeholders manageable and their attention engaged with the issues at hand. For Maynard Avenue Green Street, the stakeholders were mainly the nearby residents and adjacent property owners. The International Children's Park also had a clear scope, with public safety and expanding opportunities for children's play as the main focus. Before 2002, the focus of the community development corporations in the district was on housing development. Taking on new

park and streetscape projects enabled the lead organizations to develop experience and expertise working on projects in the public realm that required negotiating with more diverse stakeholders and interests.

In 2013, with the help of IDEA Space staff, the neighborhood took on one of the most complex public space projects to date—the expansion of Hing Hay Park. Located in the physical heart of Chinatown and the district, the park, with its Chinese-style pavilion (donated by Taipei city government in 1975), has become a symbol of the district and serves as the site for many festivals and events, including the annual Lunar New Year Festival. Because of its location and Chinese name, many in the Chinese community consider it a Chinatown park. However, before the park was created in the 1970s, the property was the site of restaurants and clubs popular with diverse community members, including early Filipino immigrants. As such, how the park could reflect the neighborhood's rich cultural identities became a design challenge. Public safety was another major issue as residents and stakeholders were concerned that the expanded park would invite more unwanted behaviors and transient populations to the neighborhood, which was already a challenge.

To facilitate community engagement in the design process for the park, a friends' group was formed with representatives from different community organizations, including those representing the Chinese and Filipino communities. I was nominated to serve as the group's cochair alongside a respected elder from the Chinese community. After years of working together on several other projects and serving on the same committees, many group members knew each other. Some even had personal ties across ethnic lines. The time spent over the years through many difficult situations seemed to have helped. Specifically, many seemed to accept that despite the differences of opinions, it was important to be involved to move the project forward. Working with the community, the design team developed a design with a terraced landform as a unifying landscape feature shared by all the Asian cultures in the neighborhood. While some Chinese community members insisted on the park being a Chinatown park, they also agreed that the park should welcome everyone. Through regular meetings, the friends' groups worked with the design team to resolve issues of safety, programming, and cultural representation.



8.3 The expanded Hing Hay Park features an iconic gateway inspired by Asian paper-cutting and folding traditions welcoming visitors into the park. *Source:* Jeffrey Hou.

The expanded park opened in the summer of 2017, and a grand celebration was held in early 2018 after the large gateway was installed (figure 8.3). In the same year, SCIDpda received a small Neighborhood Matching Fund grant to conduct a post-occupancy evaluation study for both the International Children's Park and the Hing Hay Park. Surveys found very favorable perceptions toward the two parks by respondents (64 percent very favorable and 27 percent somewhat favorable for International Children's Park; 64 percent very favorable and 33 percent somewhat favorable for Hing Hay Park) (Hou 2019). Although some community members still dislike the modern aesthetic of the gateway, others have embraced it as a new neighborhood landmark. More significantly, the friends group continued to work on a signage project with help from IDEA Space staff. This time, however, rather than debating over the park's sole identity, members agreed to highlight all the languages representing the neighborhood's diverse cultural groups. The result was lantern-shaped signage that projected an image with the park's name in all the languages

spoken in the district. The successful completion of the iconic park and the multicultural signage presented a significant milestone in the community. The process also demonstrated the capacity outcomes in the area of collaboration.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND JUST URBAN DESIGN

Despite its broad application from community development and climate change to health and education, relatively little has been written on community capacity-building in urban design. For urban design to address disparities and injustice in society and the built environment, it is not enough to focus on the physical design and the built environment alone. We must also address the disparities in terms of power and capacity that have hindered underserved and historically marginalized communities in their ability to engage more meaningfully and effectively in the planning and design processes. This includes the ability to identify and define the issues on their own terms, recognize and utilize their knowledge and skills, and mobilize the resources needed to address the issues and challenges. As seen in the case of Seattle CID, urban design (i.e., the design of spaces in the urban public realm) offers a wide range of opportunities to leverage community assets and build capacity in local communities. By building on skills and knowledge that already exist in the community, urban design can be a powerful way of recognizing the agency and assets of the community. Through the engagement process, community organizers and stakeholders can also develop the experience, confidence, knowledge, and organizational networks needed to launch and sustain their initiatives.

This chapter provides a snapshot of our two-decade work in Seattle's CID, focusing on community capacity building. Through the work of many organizations and individuals in the community, the district's conditions have greatly improved over the years. The once boarded-up buildings, empty lots, and surface parking have since been transformed into affordable and market-rate apartment buildings for new and longtime residents. Newly expanded and renovated parks have replaced underutilized open spaces providing residents with better access to social activities, nature, and opportunities for games and exercises. They also attract

visitors and customers to the neighborhood. Starting with preserving the housing stock in the 1970s and the improvement of public realms over the past two decades, the transformation of Seattle's CID offers lessons for other similar communities. Specifically, it shows how community capacity-building could be a key to success and how the capacities to participate, organize, and collaborate could work in tandem with one another.

With the recent wave of violent attacks and racial biases against Asian Americans in US cities during the pandemic, it is even more important to revisit and recognize the roots of the historical disparities and disenfranchisement facing the communities. Building community capacity presents a key to addressing such structural disparities. In the case of Seattle CID, community capacity is also a key to addressing other emerging challenges on the horizon. Like many other inner-city ethnic neighborhoods, CID is experiencing forces of development and gentrification. While the local community development corporations and traditional family associations continue to own a significant portion of the district's properties, newly built and proposed hotels and residential towers could still disrupt the community's physical and social fabric. The rising rents and property taxes already present growing burdens for property owners and businesses. Dealing with these challenges will require the community to wield its capacities in participating, collaborating, and organizing. Already, community organizations have exercised their capacity through organized protests and engagement in the mandated review process, as well as participating in the citywide deliberation on affordable housing. These are also lessons for other communities and urban design professionals. What takes place in urban design can impact not just how built environments are shaped today but also the ability of communities to cope with future challenges that affect their social and economic well-being. By helping to build greater community capacity, urban designers can begin to address the fundamental disparities in our society and make urban design a tool for lasting justice and resilience.

NOTE

1. The name was capitalized as a play on the partial acronym of the district name, Chinatown International District.

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