

Charrettes 101:
Dynamic
Planning
for Community Change

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Building**Blocks**

A Practitioner's Guide to
Planning and Financing
Community Revitalization

This issue of *BuildingBlocks* focuses on a topic that remains at the heart of creating vital neighborhoods—community planning and design. As “smart growth” movements and New Urbanism principles reshape our ideas about successful communities, we must explore more inclusive, dynamic approaches to planning.

Traditionally, most planners kick off a community development project by holding a series of public meetings over several months. At each meeting, planners introduce different facets of the plans and solicit input. These gatherings offer residents and other stakeholders the opportunity to speak out and contribute to the project.

Unfortunately, these meetings tend to generate little community interest. Many people never see the announcements. Others can't attend because of scheduling conflicts. Still others skip the meetings because previous planners have ignored their input. Among the people who do attend, the most enthusiastic tend to be residents determined to block the project.

This lack of constructive participation often limits planners' ability to gather key information. In addition, the hearing-like format can deepen the wedge between the “experts”—developers, architects, zoning regulators—and the people a project is meant to serve.

According to authors Bill Lennertz and Aarin Lutzenhiser, a new type of planning process—a communitywide “charrette”—can circumvent such problems. A charrette is a four- to seven-day planning event that assembles an interdisciplinary team of all stakeholders to design and plan a project together. During the course of the charrette, planners, residents, business people, architects, environmental experts, policy makers, and others work together in brainstorm-

ing sessions and other exercises designed to air tensions, resolve differences, and generate consensus.

Throughout the charrette, participants work through specific planning problems. A design team then works around the clock to revise and update the plans. The “new” plans then become the focus for discussion among the participants.

All of this occurs within a highly compressed time frame. People passionately argue their points and generously share their knowledge and insights. By listening to participants debate the issues and defend their viewpoints, everyone learns more about the project's complexity, its likely impact on the community as a whole, and the balance of competing interests necessary for consensus.

Planners have used charrettes to tackle many kinds of projects—creating a master community plan, a single building plan, or a development planning process. All the events, however, use the same basic strategy. Planners involve stakeholders in an inclusive, dynamic process designed to ensure an ecologically, socially, and financially successful outcome.

As the Fannie Mae Foundation works to expand homeownership, we are committed to exploring ways to bring more voices into planning, building, and safeguarding our neighborhoods. Only when every voice is heard do we think our communities can truly flourish. We hope the charrette process will serve as a useful model for incorporating more perspectives in your planning initiatives.



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BuildingBlocks is published by the Fannie Mae Foundation. The Fannie Mae Foundation, through its publications and other programs, is committed to the full and fair exposition of issues related to affordable housing and community development. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors, the Fannie Mae Foundation, or its officers and directors.

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Charrettes 101: Dynamic Planning for Community Change

By Bill Lennertz and Aarin Lutzenhiser ◀

In 1997, Knoxville Community Development Corporation (KCDC) won a HOPE VI grant to replace College Homes, a rundown public housing project in Mechanicsville, Tennessee, with new mixed-income housing. KCDC envisioned a racially and economically diverse development with homes that blended well with the area's nearby historic neighborhoods. That vision included early 20th century-style houses, tree lined streets, and back alleys leading to residents' homes. Developers named the planned neighborhood Mechanicsville Commons.

But replacing the 320-unit, bunker-style housing project and creating Mechanicsville Commons would require more than the multimillion-dollar HOPE VI grant. Among other challenges, developers faced a huge legal hurdle: obtaining appropriate zoning. The city had not had alley zoning in 80 years, and existing laws required houses to be built fairly far from the street.



For many projects, a basic design issue like zoning can grind redevelopment to a halt. Without the right laws, it's impossible to build certain units, narrow streets, or add alleys. For developers using traditional planning techniques, getting all stakeholders on board and making sure the right kind of zoning gets implemented can take years.

In Knoxville, KCDC preempted such gridlock by holding a “charrette,” a multiday, communitywide planning meeting that includes as many viewpoints as possible in an accelerated design and planning process. By giv-

ing all stakeholders a voice from the start, designers can identify problems and work on solutions way before plans reach the approval stage.

At the Mechanicsville Commons charrette—conducted by the Pittsburgh-based firm Urban Design Associates—housing and zoning officials, residents of the Mechanicsville neighborhood, potential new residents of Mechanicsville Commons, residents from College Homes, business leaders, and other participants became the co-creators of the neighborhood plan.

That collective authorship included the basis for a new zoning ordinance. By involving the city's planning commission early on, the charrette gave local officials the information they needed to create the "Traditional Neighborhood District." The ordinance allowed for alleys, smaller streets, sidewalks, and other details that fit with nearby neighborhoods built in the early 1900s. It also established guidelines for future building.

Today, quiet back alleys are one of the features that make Mechanicsville Commons a nice place to live. The network of small streets and old-style houses gives the neighborhood a quaint, historic feel.

Would your community development project benefit from the charrette process? Not necessarily. If the project focuses on a single development issue—such as the least expensive way to improve neighborhood sidewalks—a charrette initiative is probably not the way to go. But if your project aims for wholesale community change—like how to add sidewalks that bring neighbors together and connect to other neighborhoods at a fair cost—then a charrette may be just what you're looking for (see page 10, Planning and Financing a Charrette).

For projects focused on community change, charrettes can be used to create a wide range of plans, including master plans within a city's comprehensive plan, town center plans, transit-oriented development plans, affordable housing development plans, wide-scale redevelopment projects, and plans for new developments in a community. The charrette process can also be adapted to a range of projects—from constructing an individual building to redesigning an entire neighborhood.

Why "Charrette"?

The term "charrette" is derived from a French word meaning "cart." At the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, the world's top architectural school in the

19th century, proctors circulated with carts to collect final plans. Students would jump on the cart with their work, frantically polishing their drawings up to the last minute.

In the mid-1980s, in a nod to the creative activity of the architecture students, community development planners adopted the name to describe an interactive, multiday community planning session. A charrette assembles an interdisciplinary team—typically consisting of planners, citizens, city officials, architects, landscape architects, transportation engineers, parks and recreation officials, and other stakeholders—to create a design and implementation plan.

One strategy of the charrette is time compression. For four to seven days, participants work together in brainstorming sessions, sketching workshops, and other exercises through a series of feedback loops. Meetings take place both day and night, with participants coming together as a group at set times or breaking off into small working groups. Behind the

"Charrette," from a French word meaning "cart," harks back to 19th century France. At the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, proctors wheeled through school grounds to collect architecture students' final drawings. Illustration source unknown.



scenes, the core design team works continuously. The entire community, however, does not need to take several days off to participate. Most stakeholders attend scheduled meetings.

The charrette process can be adapted to fit different projects, but all charrette initiatives use the same basic strategy: Planners involve as many stakeholders as early as possible in a set of short, intensive design meetings. In these collaborative, hands-on sessions, participants help planners root out potential problems, identify and debate solutions, and create a buildable plan. The charrette process compresses planning into a matter of days and brings all the stakeholders—and all the issues—into one room. In the face of so much information, expertise, and expectation, it's hard for developers, designers, and community participants not to pitch in and create a workable plan.

A Dynamic Alternative to Conventional Planning Processes

The charrette process brings speed and public trust to planning initiatives. When using conventional processes, planners typically involve the public by holding a series of single-evening meetings spaced a month or two apart. At that pace, the process of creating a public vision and designing a suitable plan usually takes six months to a year. As the process drags on, different people often attend different meetings, forcing planners to spend more and more time explaining the project's purpose and challenges.

Planning and executing a charrette can also take months, but the most important part of the project—the planning of the basic design—happens quickly.

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The Mark of a Good Charrette

The term “charrette” is overused and often misused. Although it refers specifically to a comprehensive, intensive development plan to transform a neighborhood, some people use the word to refer to a single debate or Saturday afternoon meeting over the fate of a neighborhood. The following nine strategies distinguish a charrette from other planning processes.

1. Charrette participants work collaboratively.

Having contributed to the planning, participants are in a position both to understand and support a project’s rationale.

2. The team designs cross-functionally.

Multidisciplinary teams work concurrently to build a feasible solution to community development problems from the start. Simultaneous brainstorming and negotiation during a charrette can

change minds and encourage unexpected concepts or solutions.

3. Charrettes use design to achieve a shared vision and create holistic solutions.

Design is a powerful tool for establishing a shared vision. Drawings help illustrate the complexity of the problem and can be used to resolve conflict by proposing previously unexplored solutions.

4. Designers work on the big picture and the details.

Lasting agreement is based on a fully informed dialogue. Until you get into the details, you can’t be sure that you have agreement.

5. The constrained work schedule facilitates resolution.

Compressing the planning time frame to less than a week encourages creative problem solving, accelerates decision making, and reduces nonconstructive negotiation tactics.

6. The team communicates in short feedback loops.

Regular stakeholder input and reviews quickly build trust in the process and foster true understanding and support of the product.

7. The charrette lasts for at least four to seven consecutive days.

Four days is required to accommodate three feedback loops, scheduled at least a day apart. Three loops are the minimum required to facilitate a change in participants’ perceptions and positions. Only simple projects with little controversy should be attempted in four days. More complicated projects typically take seven days.

8. The charrette is held on site.

Working on site fosters understanding by participants of local values and traditions and provides necessary access to stakeholders and information.

9. The charrette produces a buildable plan.

The success of a community’s work to plan and build together hinges on codes, regulating plans, and the like. Plans that sit on the shelf contribute to citizen apathy.

Source: “NCI Charrette Start-Up Kit: Key Tools for Getting Smart Growth Built,” CD-ROM, ©2003.



Charrette participants brainstorm on the position of neighborhood houses. Photo courtesy of Dover Kohl & Partners.

The Stakeholder Analysis

A charrette involves the public by including a diverse group of stakeholders. Successful outreach to and engagement of stakeholders is key to a successful charrette. The question is, who should attend?

Begin by listing the viewpoints that must be represented to ensure a diverse, cross-functional process. In a team meeting, identify people representing these

viewpoints, and then identify them by affiliation. Briefly describe what a “win” would mean to each of them and the level of engagement required for holistic, diverse feedback.

One way to create this list is to draw a table with columns for the following topics: Viewpoint, Person, Affiliation, Issues, Win, Outreach Strategy, and Public Participation.

Stakeholders should include final decision makers, all people who will be affected by the outcome, people who have the power to help the project, and people who can block a decision. Potential obstructionists must be engaged early in the process. Often these individuals become the project’s biggest supporters.

Viewpoint	Person	Affiliation	Issues	Win	Outreach Strategy	Public Participation
Neighborhood leader	Sonia Doe	Neighborhood Association	Recent development has degraded neighborhood	Maintain safety and neighborhood character	Personal meeting	Discrete neighborhood meeting, public meetings

Source: “NCI Charrette Start-Up Kit: Key Tools for Getting Smart Growth Built,” CD-ROM, ©2003

Why Involve the Public in the Design Process? Three Golden Rules

Rule #1: End users add valuable content and information based on knowledge and personal experience. Public involvement, if done effectively, can improve the outcome of the project.

Rule #2: Charrettes are a positive way to channel public interest that can otherwise manifest itself as uninformed opposition and protest. Participation in

the planning and design of a project gives people the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their daily lives.

Rule #3: When people are involved early in the design and creation of the plan they are more likely to support the results. A well-run, inclusive process can improve outcomes.



Throughout the event, participants generate a multitude of drawings, diagrams, maps, and checklists for designers to use in building plans. Photo courtesy of LCA Town Planning and Architecture.

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Participants' work is rewarded with swift results, creating a sense of communitywide accomplishment. As design plans evolve, excited citizens and business leaders stop each other on the street to discuss what's coming to the neighborhood or rehash what they accomplished.

In addition to boosting creativity, this interactive alternative to the usual show-and-tell can overcome community resistance to new development. In many communities, traditional processes have not resulted in designs that reflect the public's input. Even when developers have a good rationale for ruling against certain suggestions, leaving the public out of the decision-making process fans distrust and resentment. People tend to be on guard, anticipating a project that will make things worse rather than better. And without reason to feel enthusiastic or hopeful about affecting a project's outcome, people often stop attending planning meetings or only show up to block crucial decisions.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of conventional planning processes is shortsightedness. Single meetings tend to address discrete aspects of a project. For example, the department of transportation will design its part without considering how residents will walk to surrounding neighborhoods or without assessing business owners'



needs. By contrast, charrettes bring together all relevant disciplines to create a plan that balances transportation, land use, economic considerations, and environmental issues.



The Charrette Event

The charrette process begins with the project sponsor—usually a community development corporation, city planning agency, or developer—assembling a project team. The project team oversees the communitywide event and puts the plans resulting from the charrette sessions into final form. In addition to the sponsor, the team typically consists of one or more professional charrette facilitators and a cross-disciplinary group of professionals representing the project's various facets.



Charrettes Are Increasingly Popular

Although architecture firms have used the concept of intense, facilitated planning since the 1960s, until recently few community planners had a clue what a charrette entailed.

Today, the word is so in vogue that inner-city community activists have complained about being “charretted out,” even though they might never have participated in one. Or they are so intimidated by the idea that they call it a “charade.” To steer clear of any negative connotations among the uneducated, some planners avoid using the name altogether for initiatives built on charrette principles.

But charrettes are gaining in popularity, despite the confusion over the name, and their success record has spawned a small, specialized industry of charrette facilitators among planning and architec-

ture firms. The firms’ clients range from private builders of master-planned communities and town centers to municipal planning departments dealing with the revitalization of distressed neighborhoods.

The American Planning Association (APA) does not keep statistics on the frequency of charrette use by planners, but increasing numbers of citations in publications and appearances on conference agendas are indicators of a growing industry, according to Peter Hawley, APA’s outreach coordinator.

No two charrettes are alike, although they share several underlying values, including their participatory nature; their short, intensive time frames; and the abundant use of maps, graphics, and place-related tools as opposed to policy documents, according to Ron Thomas, executive director of the

Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission. The Commission covers Chicago and six surrounding counties. To Thomas, “a charrette is as much a set of values as it is a methodology.”

Thomas calls it “community planning in a fishbowl” in which all activity is visible and integrated among all sectors.

Because a charrette educates participants about the complexities of issues and guides them to find workable solutions, “There is a tremendous amount of peer pressure to be designers and not just critics,” says Steve Price of UrbanAdvantage in Berkeley, California, who has participated in many charrettes by doing photo-reimaging or computer enhancements on photos of existing conditions.

Price describes the process as humbling and enlightening to participants as the

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For Mechanicsville Commons, the project team started by establishing a steering committee of 58 people representing various viewpoints, including elected officials, public agencies, local residents, church groups, colleges, financial institutions, and the real estate industry. The project team also aggressively reached out to other individuals interested in the project and its outcome.

The time needed to plan and complete the charrette also reflects the project’s scope. Complex projects, such as the Mechanicsville Commons redesign, generally take about seven months from start to finish. Simpler projects, such as

adding a single building to a park, can be completed in a couple of months. The actual charrette usually lasts four to seven days.

What happens when the time comes for the charrette? How the event unfolds day by day varies, but in almost all cases, the design team begins by establishing a working studio on or near the site, complete with drafting equipment, supplies, computers, copiers, and fax machines. The studio serves as the charrette headquarters. Project teams have set up charrette studios in empty Main Street storefronts, community centers, high schools, and armories. In Mechanicsville, the charrette took

place at the community meeting space in the College Homes public housing project. Being near the site makes it easy to survey and access the site.

The first day of the charrette might feature a tour of the site or structure, followed by a team meeting and smaller meetings with key individuals. Early on, the project team might also hold a public, hands-on workshop where participants work with a design leader in small groups to describe and draw the project as they imagine it. A representative from each group presents the group’s best ideas. This process allows participants to learn from each other’s work and

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complexities emerge and ideas are sown together. “There is a much greater appreciation among the entire community for what the entire process entails,” Price says.

The finale of most good charrettes is a sermon-like unfolding of the designs that have emerged, encapsulating all the passion that went into the plan. The experience tells a story about the community and the people who live there. Seeing their ideas in a slide presentation and chronicled in drawings gets participants excited about the changes to come.

One of the nation’s leading charrette facilitators, Victor Dover of Dover, Kohl & Partners in South Miami, refers to charrettes as a “cross between a modern design studio and a town meeting with a dash of teamwork from an old-fashioned barn raising mixed in.”

discover shared themes. For example, during the Mechanicsville Commons charrette, participants worried about traffic patterns and noise resulting from plans to widen a busy road. To eliminate these concerns, planners developed a park between the new houses and the road. The park also provided a spot for two churches that needed rebuilding. All shared themes become guiding principles for future planning stages.

Throughout, like cooks in a busy kitchen, the design team works on adapting ideas from meetings with city officials, residents, developers, and interested citizens. The revised plans periodically go before charrette

Dover says a charrette can be the “breakthrough event that helps overcome inertia and creates a meaningful master plan.”

One of his recent clients concurs. “We went through a three-year process and had probably 150 community meetings on development up and down this three-mile corridor. And in four months, with the energy and focus from the charrette, we’ve won approval for the most significant changes to the Arlington County code in I don’t know how long,” says Timothy H. Lynch, executive director of the Columbia Pike Revitalization in Arlington, Virginia, which held its charrette last September.

Arlington County selected the South Miami firm after receiving bids from five firms that responded to its request-for-proposals. Lynch credits the week-long, \$250,000 taxpayer-funded project that

participants for review; new input then gets fed to designers. This cycle of design and review continues over the course of the charrette, creating an energetic, productive atmosphere. Designers often work far into the night beside interested citizens, engaged in spirited debates about the pros and cons of various alternatives. The studio stays open to the public at all times, so people can wander in and out, comment on the design plans, and get updates. Because the charrette schedules both day and evening sessions, it often catches people who slip through the cracks

Charrette participants map out a new road. Photo courtesy of the National Charrette Institute.

included a charrette with clarifying the development vision of the ramshackle, neglected commercial strip known as “the Pike” that runs past the Pentagon. It resulted in a complete rezoning of the area and approval of denser commercial and residential development. “We had fumbled around in trying to articulate this vision for years,” Lynch says.

His only regret is not spending an extra \$50,000 to \$100,000 to get additional economic and transit studies done beforehand. The county is doing them now, at greater expense.

“I learned two lessons from this process,” says Lynch. “Get the best people you can find and be willing to spend the money to do it right.”

Note: This sidebar was prepared by Cate Toups, a former senior fellow at the Fannie Mae Foundation.



during other planning processes. As the project develops, word gets out to those who may not have heard, and more people start showing up.

On the final day of the charrette, the design team presents all elements of the project, including master plans, building designs, economic and transportation impacts and strategies, and an implementation action plan. After the charrette, as designers make the plans final, it's important that they involve critical stakeholders in testing the outcome against market, financial, physical, and political benchmarks. Planners typically hold a final public review, sometimes in one or two evenings. These follow-up sessions allow people who missed the charrette to contribute. The project team revises and submits a final plan to the local housing authority (or other appropriate agency) for approval.

Planning and Financing a Charrette

Organizations interested in holding a charrette should familiarize themselves with charrette principles and methods. A small group of charrette specialists have sprung up around the country, and a number of Web sites offer information on planning and holding these events. Once an organization has familiarized itself with charrette methods, it should approach other parties involved in the project and ask them to participate. Firms specializing in running charrettes or in charrette training can help get things started.

The cost of the charrette event itself varies greatly, depending on the location, complexity of the issues, the size of staff, and the number of days planned for the charrette. It's important to note that the charrette is only the centerpiece of a larger planning process. The preparation also carries some costs, though the budget too



will depend on the complexity of the project. On balance, total project costs tend to be on a par with those for conventional processes.

For organizations with cost constraints, various sources can help finance a charrette. Organizations have relied on public planning budgets, on philanthropic organizations making grants to “smart-growth” projects, or on private developer and public planning sources combined. A sponsoring organization can lower costs by using staff and volunteers as charrette team members and using available economic and transportation data. Some projects can also save money by tapping the wisdom of local professionals or consulting local agency archives in lieu of collecting original data.

Despite the investment involved, the charrette process can save planners time and money. In Knoxville, for example, the Mechanicsville Commons charrette made approval times and engineering schedules shorter. At the same time, the public

got a plan built on features it valued most; the process allowed people to express their views in a balanced, respectful forum; and the success of the redesign helped reestablish people's trust in local government. Most notably, the neighborhood got an attractive new addition of single-family homes, a great improvement over the stark housing project originally built there.

About the Authors

Bill Lennertz is executive director of the nonprofit National Charrette Institute (NCI) and a former partner of LCA Town Planning and Architecture, which he formed with NCI cofounder Steve Coyle. Lennertz has directed more than 150 charrettes in communities across the United States. Before starting his own architecture firm, Lennertz was director of the Duany & Plater-Zyberk Boston office from 1986 to 1991. A registered architect with a master's of architecture in urban design from Harvard, he has written and taught extensively on community planning.

Aarin Lutzenhiser, cofounder of NCI, is the institute's director of operations. She is responsible for planning and coordinating NCI programs and courses. A coauthor of the NCI Dynamic Planning and charrette training curriculum, she is closely involved with course preparation and training delivery. She also oversees NCI's operations and research and development efforts for new projects and programs. Lutzenhiser is a meeting facilitator; has training in group consensus building and decision-making processes; and works with clients on meeting planning, preparation, and setup. Formerly with LCA Town Planning and Architecture, Lutzenhiser has a bachelor's degree from Reed College in Portland.



A facilitator gets the discussion started at the Mechanicsville charrette. Photo courtesy of Urban Design Associates.

Resources

Contact information for organizations specializing in charrettes and community planning:

Charrettecenter.com.

This online compendium of information for charrettes is a central element of the community-based urban design process. It is a useful Web site to visit to keep in touch with events, resources, and innovations in the collaborative planning field.

Congress for the New Urbanism.

The Web site for the San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that provides educational support to architects, developers, planners, and others involved in the creation of urban spaces on implementation of New Urbanist principles. <http://www.cnu.org>.

KnowledgePlex.®

This interactive Web forum provides a wide range of information about the affordable housing and community development fields. <http://www.knowledgeplex.org>.

Local Government Commission.

The Local Government Commission is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that provides educational resources, technical assistance, and networking opportunities to local elected officials and other community leaders involved in creating livable and participatory communities. <http://www.lgc.org>.

The National Charrette Institute (NCI). NCI is a nonprofit educational institution that provides training and facilitation to conduct effective charrettes. The Institute recently released the "NCI Charrette Start-Up Kit," a CD-ROM that provides a comprehensive overview of the charrette process. Contact: National Charrette Institute, 3439 NE Sandy Blvd. #349, Portland, OR 97232. Phone: (503) 233-8486. Fax: (503) 233-1811; E-mail: info@charretteinstitute.org; Web site: <http://www.nationalcharretteinstitute.org>.

The Neighborhood Charrette Handbook: Visualizing Your Neighborhood's Future—Developed.

This handbook, by Dr. James A. Segedy and Bradley E. Johnson of the American Institute of Certified Planners, provides information about neighborhood charrettes—what a charrette may accomplish, the three phases of the charrette process, and the possible outcomes of a charrette. In addition, it outlines the key steps for running a neighborhood charrette workshop. An online version of the handbook can be found at <http://www.louisville.edu/org/sun/planning/char.html>.

PlaceMatters.com.

This national organization was established to support communities involved in place-based collaborative planning. The organization focuses on vision-centered place-based planning, civic engagement, and tools for community design and decision making. Contact: Ken Snyder, Executive Director, PlaceMatters.Com, 1009 Grant Street, Room No. 203, Denver, CO 80203; Phone: (303) 964-0903; Fax: (253) 369-6393. E-mail: Info@Placematters.com. Web site: <http://www.placematters.com>.

Smart Growth America.

This Web site features a coalition of nearly 100 advocacy organizations involved in issues related to metropolitan expansion and its impact on environment, quality of life, and economic sustainability. <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org>.

The Town Paper.

The Town Paper is a quarterly publication of news and features focused on enhancing the public's involvement in the neighborhood development process. It includes news on public planning processes, profiles of neighborhood and people involved in the field, and design aspects of neighborhood development. The paper also provides a customized version for neighborhoods at a price to help them conduct and disseminate information about their charrette processes. The custom edition includes the content of the regular *Town Paper* along with two customized pages in the center spread. The front page highlights the name of the neighborhood or organization requesting it above the masthead. <http://www.tndtownpaper.com>.

The Sea Side Institute.

This Florida-based nonprofit organization organizes a wide range of forums and conferences on architecture, planning and urban affairs. <http://theseasideinstitute.org>.



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