

Design Charrettes

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**“In the long history of humankind ...,
those who learned to collaborate and improvise
most effectively have prevailed.”**

- Charles Darwin

The design charrette, a mainstay of École des Beaux-Arts education that fell out of favor with the rise of Modernism, has enjoyed a revival in both the academy and the profession in recent decades.

What is a design charrette? There are varying definitions and a range of types, and different purposes and goals. One of my favorite descriptions is that a charrette is *the best way to get the most creative proposals for the most challenging problems from the most accomplished designers in the shortest period of time*. A more succinct definition is *an illustrated brainstorm*. There are two basic types: ones in which multiple teams each develop a different scheme for the same project/site; the others in which a single team collaborates to develop different aspects or areas within the same project/site. Academic charrettes run by architecture and planning schools tend to be the first type or a hybrid of the two types, while professional practice favors the second type.

This essay will focus on the two dozen academic charrettes that I organized in as many years, first as Architecture Chair at the University of Washington and then as the dean at the University of Michigan. In these two cases, the term charrette came to mean a four-day, intensive design workshop that brings together three or four teams to generate and present different visions for a particular site. Typically, each team was led by one or two distinguished visiting professionals (architect, urban designer, landscape architect, or urban planner), one or two local design professionals, and a design faculty member or two. They co-lead a team of 10 to 15 graduate students from architecture, urban design, urban planning, or landscape architecture programs in one or more universities. Occasionally, they were supplemented with business, law, and public policy students. Most teams tended to operate like temporary offices with the professionals and faculty members acting as design partners and the students as the design and production team, although the roles were fluid and other collaborative modes were used.

Over the last decade, the University of Michigan design charrette hosted over 30 faculty from various schools and colleges within the University and from other local universities, some 80 local design professionals and consultants, 60 visiting professionals and academics from around the country and world, and over 600 students.

There were also visiting students from the architecture schools at Detroit Mercy, Wayne State, Lawrence Technological University, Miami, Morgan State, Harvard, and Pennsylvania, as well as from Detroit's Cass Technical High School. Depending on the site and program, there sometimes were stakeholder and local citizen volunteers that became active team members.

The charrette process began with a morning-long bus and/or walking tour of the site and environs, led by local residents and professionals. After lunch, there was an afternoon of briefings by community leaders, landowners, government officials, and business leaders, as well as financial and technical consultants. These speakers were a vital part of the charrette and were carefully chosen based on the problems and opportunities suggested by the project or site. There were as many as a dozen 5 to 15 minute presentations, and sometimes a longer keynote talk. Urban historians, commercial experts, real estate developers, and public artists have also participated in various consulting and speaking capacities. In some cases, residents of the area became working team members, but they were more typically consultants or observers (due to the extensive time and technical needs in a charrette).

Following the briefings, the teams work independently for the following three days – in the same or adjacent space in an atmosphere of friendly and open competition. First, they discussed and distilled the information provided during the briefings and from any relevant data or literature made available or found on the web. (In some cases, students prepared by doing preliminary research and analyses before the charrette.) The teams collaboratively brainstormed ideas based on what they perceived to be the needs and opportunities of the site itself, as well as advice and information offered by experts, residents, stakeholders and consultants. There was no written program or problem statement. It was up to each team to decide the highest and best use of the site. In the early stages, the teams engaged in no-holds-barred discussions as they considered and tested ideas from any and all of its members. Initially, no idea was too radical, too obvious, or too extraneous. Many design and planning concepts quickly proliferated in a stage that was fertile and imaginative.



Figure 1 (above) – The mix and interaction of design professionals, faculty, and students is vibrant, creative, and productive. The chemistry produces ideas and designs of varying merit, but always compelling and profound ones that conventional, linear consulting studies would rarely if ever generate.
Photo: Doug Kelbaugh

As acceptable ideas were generated, team leaders often sorted themselves and the students into sub-teams for additional research and for development of options, which were periodically presented to other members of the team in pin-ups. About halfway through the process, usually toward the end of the second day, options were winnowed down and an overall strategy emerged by consensus. If no clear consensus emerged in time, team leaders often formulated a strategy based on prevailing ideas for execution by the team. Then the mode changed, often dramatically, from expansive brainstorming to a more disciplined focus on the production of drawings, images, and text. The second half of the charrette was usually a feverish team effort. It was a race, sometimes exhilarating and sometimes panicky, to the deadline to effectively illustrate the creative explosion of ideas in the first half. However, important or defining ideas sometimes came later in the process, making the scramble all the more intense.

Figure 2 (right) – Four teams work in friendly competition for four days in a well-equipped common space to generate their visions of what is the highest and best use for a consequently site in the community, in this case downtown Detroit.

Photo: Doug Kelbaugh

The workshop culminated with a public event that included a posted exhibit of the work, a reception, and a digital presentation by each team – all at a prominent venue within or near the study area. The general public, stakeholders, business and institutional leaders, government officials, and the media were notified by printed and email invitations, as well as word of mouth. The crowd ranged from 200-400 people and the media coverage usually included local TV stations and newspapers. Shortly after the charrette, CDs containing the presentations (originally color slides, later PowerPoint) from both the initial briefings and the team presentations were distributed to key people and parties. At the end of the semester, a 32-64-page book detailing the design proposals was published and hundreds of complimentary copies distributed to a larger audience. More than just a chronicle and archive of the event, the books were meant to help catalyze implementation of proposed concepts and designs.¹

The visiting professionals were a virtual who's who of contemporary urban design. They have included academic/professional leaders such as, in no particular order, Alex Krieger, Anne Winston Spirn, Rich Haag, Laurie Olin, Anne Vernez-Moudon, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Peter Calthorpe, Harrison Fraker, Michael Dennis, Toni Griffin, Linda Jewel, Andres Duany, Michael Pyatok, David Sellers, Walter Hood, Dan Solomon, Joseph Esherick, Ellen Dunham-Jones, Ken Greenberg, Gary Hack, Henning Larsen, Mary-Ann Ray, Michael Speaks, Stefanos Polyzoides, Elizabeth Moule, Rahul Mehrotra, and many other distinguished designers and planners.



¹Although I had previously participated in several design charrettes, the origin of the University of Washington series was quite accidental. When appointed the chair of the architecture department there in 1985, I wanted to invite a distinguished visiting professor for a semester, but lacking the funds, found that three or four top designers would come for five days at lower cost (especially if the guests knew and respected each other). Little did I know that this first design workshop would grow over the next quarter century into the largest annual design charrette in the country. Including subsequent charrettes at the University of Michigan, I organized and/or participated in over 30 of them. Several thousand students, faculty, guest professionals, and consultants participated and a total of some 10,000 people attended the public presentations at the end of these events. And a score of booklets were published and distributed.

The charrettes typically dealt with an urban design issue, project, or site of civic importance. Several variants emerged: ones to test and illustrate new public policies or design ideas on real sites; ones to respond to requests for help from community/civic organizations or government agencies; and ones to explore a particularly glaring problem or promising opportunity offered by a specific site.² Most charrettes were hybrids, for example testing a new idea on an empty or under-utilized site. They consistently advanced creative solutions on real sites for real clients and users, as opposed to being a theoretical or academic exercise for the sake of the students (although the pedagogic benefits can be very rich). The level of feasibility varied from project to project and from team to team, and whether the time horizon of the proposal was ten, twenty or more years. Some proposed designs were unrealistically ambitious or visionary, but most proposals tended to seek the middle ground, the sweet spot between an inspiring vision and a workable proposal.³

Befitting the public university, these charrettes always worked with public agencies, organizations, or institutions and resisted requests from the private sector. It became clear over time that these compressed, adrenaline-driven brainstorming sessions are more appropriate to large, open sites that lend themselves to the major surgery of big concepts and broad-brush schemes. Charrette results should be seen as more illustrative than definitive, and only one step, preferably early, in the longer planning and development process. They consistently generated more imaginative ideas and proposals than conventional, linear design consulting would likely have produced. The chemistry of collaboration within teams and competition between teams engendered remarkable levels of thinking and production and, seemingly without fail, produced unique and compelling proposals.

Each charrette produced considerable local buzz and publicity. There were usually follow-up presentations to community groups and stakeholders, and the charrettes were often published and aired in the local print and electronic media. Sometimes they precipitated the commissioning of further studies or built projects or both. The charrettes consistently generated *visions* for the public

and provided palpable imagery and imaginative ideas for public discussion, digestion and dissemination, as well as adoption by the community and eventual implementation. In any case, they elevated the level of public consciousness in a positive and provocative way that seemed to be widely understood and appreciated. There was always the danger of raising expectations too high within the community and the public at large, and caution and discretion had to be used in the presentation, publication, and dissemination of the results.

The charrettes ran the gamut of sites and programs. They suggested development where there was a hole in the urban fabric, where there were poorly utilized and under-populated areas, or where empty land offered entirely new and exciting opportunities. The 1988 charrette on a greenfield site along an existing rail line south of Seattle resulted in *The Pedestrian Pocket Book*, a national best seller in urban design and architecture. The small book helped jumpstart Transit Oriented Development (TOD), which has since become a well-known and influential strategy for planning and development in general and for New Urbanism in particular.

These annual events attempted to fill in some of the holes and to bring attention to overlooked opportunities and undernourished possibilities throughout the metropolitan area. The sites and programs were typically chosen in consultation with funders, civic leaders and the community, although the availability of funds or sponsors sometimes influenced the selection of a particular site or project to be studied. The selection criteria varied from time to time, but some were less negotiable. The charrette had to deal with a timely problem of significant enough size and scope to warrant the use of the many participants and resources; the location and topic had to make sense in social, environmental, and planning terms; and the sponsors or clients had to be not-for-profit and, in some cases, willing to help fund and/or fundraise for the event. If a charrette answered an urgent need or seized a ripe opportunity, so much the better. And, if it was likely to influence the course or trigger actual development, better yet. Outside funding was always needed, because university funds were perennially insufficient or non-existent. In

²The UW charrettes were sited in the Seattle region, although two were in Italy and one in India. The sites in the majority of the charrettes were relatively open and underused areas. They ranged from ten acres to five hundred acres – large and open enough to exercise the full range of the design talent and experience gathered, and small enough to be handled in four or five days. Sites with more nuanced and smaller scale issues, such as ones in the midst of a mature neighborhood or built out district were generally avoided to keep demolition and displacement of people and businesses to a minimum. These sites were usually better approached with semester-long design studios or as research projects, which are more patient, agile, and suited to the careful assessment and microsurgery often needed.

³Because they were primarily or completely underwritten by third party sponsors and essentially gifts to the public, teams were not beholden to or unduly influenced by political pressure. This design freedom and autonomy was conducive to a healthy and open-minded visioning process.

the early years, willing sponsors and funders were harder to find than in later years, when interested communities and agencies sometimes asked and even competed to be selected.

When I moved in 1998 to the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, I quickly introduced the annual charrette and it soon took root in Detroit and in the college during the decade of my deanship. Eight of the ten charrettes focused on large, relatively empty or under-developed sites in the central city, especially ones that needed, or would benefit from, redevelopment in the near future. In a large city with a small planning and development department, the UM charrette became what some citizens described as the most important annual event in the public discourse on the future of the city. For the Detroit workshops, the student and faculty participants relocated 45 miles from the campus in Ann Arbor to downtown Detroit for the duration of the workshop. The college has since opened a community design center in midtown Detroit, which provides *pro bono* or low-cost community design services, offers architecture classes to high school students, and may host future design workshops and charrettes.



Figure 3 – The University of Michigan's Taubman College organized ten charrettes between 1988 and 2008. Eight of them focused on various sites in central Detroit, including the seven shown here.

There can be external and internal problems and challenges. As noted, charrettes can raise the community's expectations too high; they can propose unrealistic, extravagant and infeasible schemes; some student participants may find them disorganized and unevenly paced; other students feel their ideas are under-appreciated or overlooked altogether;⁴ they can cause some students to miss classes on campus, annoying their instructors; they

consume considerable staff time and resources to mount which some faculty resented; and, if poorly-conceived or executed, a charrette can produce more heat than light. Also, some students were annoyed that participation was required if they enrolled in certain design studios. On the other hand, many volunteered and were eager to participate, even as a curricular overload. Ironically, the UM charrettes were often appreciated and valued more outside than inside the school. Indeed, as noted earlier, some groups and organizations requested, even fought, to have charrettes in their communities.

For these and other reasons, charrettes must be well planned and well organized, sometimes needing three- to six-months lead time needed for recruiting guests and the many other preparations. Charrettes can also be costly. The budgets for the UW charrettes in Seattle were typically \$10,000 or \$15,000. The UM charrettes in Detroit were larger and typically had a budget of \$50,000 or more, plus significant in-kind contributions from DTE, the regional utility company that generously provided space, equipment, and food.⁵ One of the major differences was that in the Detroit events all the students and out-of-town professionals, who numbered 60 or more, were provided hotel lodging and meals for four or five days and nights. Also, the cost and need for computing and printing equipment steadily increased over the years, as production switched from handcraft to machine. Generally, funds were successfully raised from the university president and/or provost, local donors, corporations, foundations, and agencies. The City of Detroit, which was financially challenged, was never asked for any financial or in-kind contributions. Although expensive to mount for an academic institution, it can be argued that their market value was considerably greater. Indeed, to conduct a similar event entirely with paid professionals and staff would cost several hundred thousand dollars.

The charrette can be a highly effective technique to enlarge the gene pool of ideas for a project or site – ideas that can later be modified, tempered, amalgamated, implemented, or discarded. It can also be a highly effective and engaging way to help stakeholders – community residents, municipal officials, government agencies, institutions, and developers – to develop a sense of shared ownership and common vision essential to moving projects forward. In short, charrettes were successful in jumpstarting new development; consolidating diverse projects; gathering data and input; expanding public consciousness and imagination, and publicizing ideas and visions.

⁴Urban Design and Planning students were generally less bothered by the challenges and constraints of team work. Architecture students, more accustomed to individual self-expression and solo invention, tended to bristle more at having to subordinate or ignore their proposed ideas and designs. On balance, this collaborative exercise was good preparation for professional practice.



Figure 4 – The Detroit charrettes attracted a great deal of attention among citizens, community leaders, local officials, and developers. Here Michigan’s senior Senator Carl Levin is briefed by visiting professional/academic Lance Brown, watched by Roy Strickland, Director of Taubman College’s Urban Design program, and the author.
Photo: Ken Arbogast-Wilson

Lastly, despite their challenges and shortcomings, the charrettes were an academic success. Uniquely, the charrette embodied, in a single event, the University’s tripartite mission of *teaching, research, and service*. It’s a rich opportunity to *teach* students invaluable lessons in design

and planning, as well as in working closely and under common pressure with top local and visiting practitioners and visiting academics. It also provided them a chance to interact with their own instructors on a more protracted and personal basis.⁶ And it was good practice for students in the challenges and benefits of collaborative teamwork, which some of the students had rarely, if ever, experienced in their design studio work. Many of the professionals also claimed to benefit from the experience and, despite the modest honoraria, some ask to be invited back. Charrettes can also be a form of *research* in that they explore and test prevailing and new methodologies, as well as proposed solutions to particular problems and opportunities. A *community service*, they were offered *pro bono* to the public, supported by corporations, foundations, individual donors, and thousands of hours of student and faculty sweat equity. Charrettes can provide a transparent public process and visible event with which the University can partner with the community to envision and discuss its future. On top of pursuing the triple University mission, they are also interdisciplinary, an increasingly important and meaningful imperative in higher education. They can nurture and cross-fertilize academic life and the educational experience by bringing together a diverse mix of people and ideas to address important common issues. For all these reasons and if done properly, they can be a good investment of financial and human resources on behalf of the community and make compelling sense as an integral, even required, part of design and planning education.

⁵Sometimes local restaurants and food stores provided free meals and refreshments during the event.

⁶Indeed, there can be friendly socializing among faculty, professionals, and students around shared meals and going out at the end of the workday/night.



Louisville, Kentucky Photo: Peter Clemo