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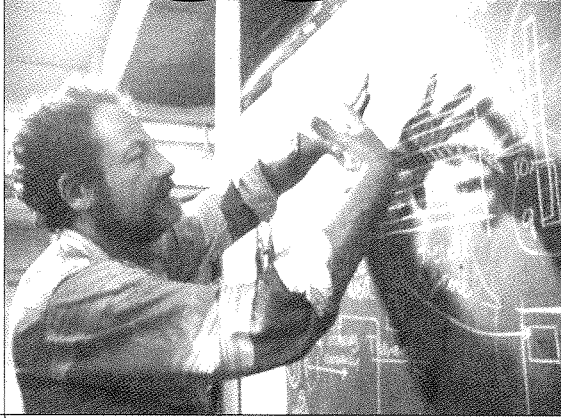
Peer reviewed

Lawrence Halprin

Randolph T. Hester, Jr.

Dee Mullen

Interview



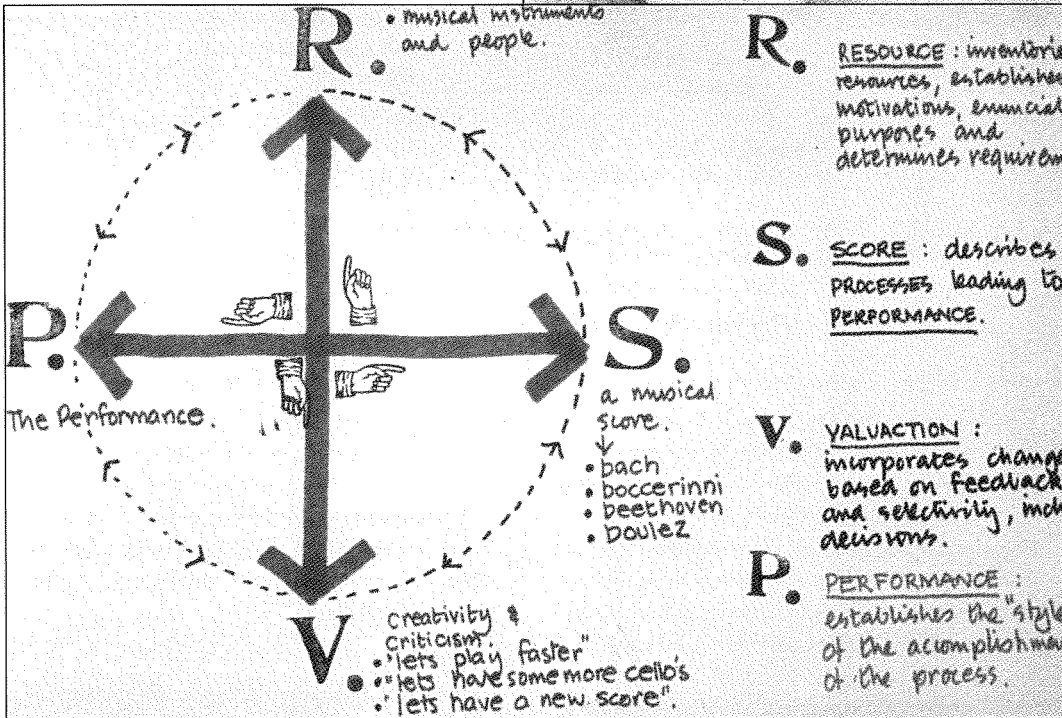
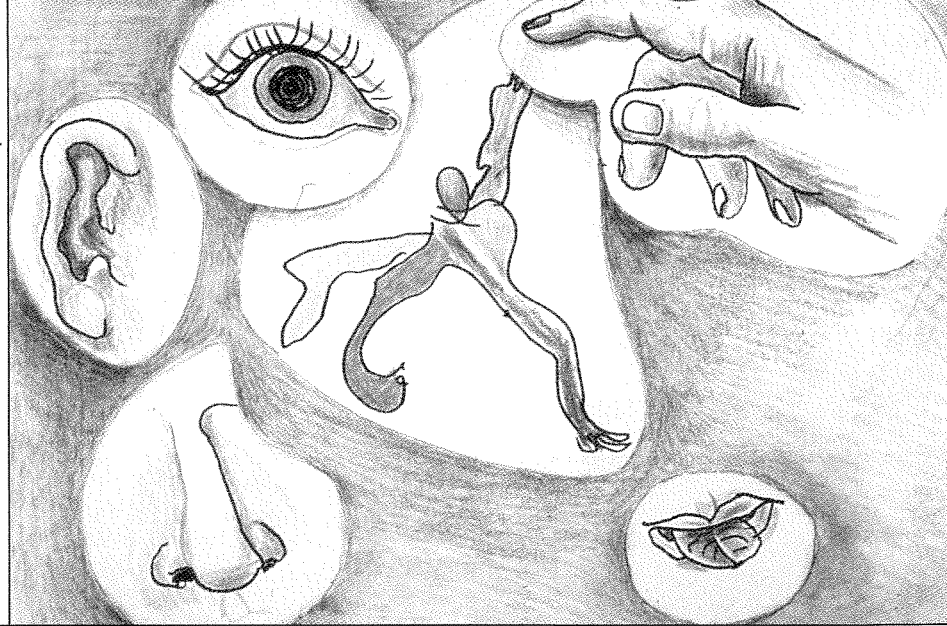
with Lawrence Halprin

RANDY HESTER:

The stereotype of participation is that the designer is just a technician and that there's a will of people, which is expressed through a workshop. A lot of designers and planners don't bring their own agenda to a workshop, they simply facilitate.

LAWRENCE HALPRIN:

I'm afraid that participation has gotten a bad name because if not done well it can hurt rather than help. It gets to the point where some workshops simply argue about things and don't get anywhere at all. Or participants say, "All we've run into is people telling us what to do or that we can't do what we want to do."



Above and below: Halprin's workshops encourage people to discover through their own experiences, using all their senses, and to think holistically. Left: Diagram of Halprin's RSVP Cycle.

Photos and graphics: The Office of Lawrence Halprin

Workshops for me are a way to reveal deep seated needs and desires about people's lives. When these are revealed they then need to go on and creatively accomplish a way to execute what people desire to have done. In that sense they are action oriented. But they start with a search for enrichment.

HESTER:

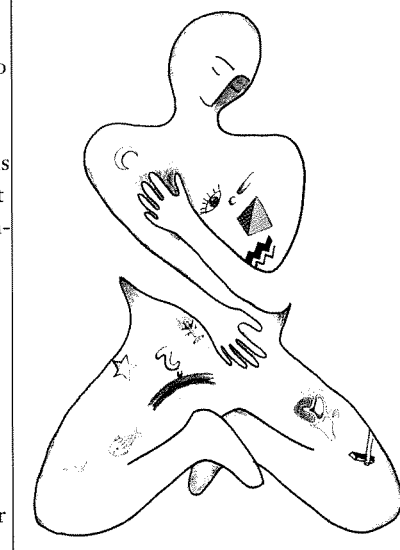
It's clear that the stereotypical way is not the way you operate.

HALPRIN:

The basis of our workshop is a sensory-emotional experience process, which uses all of the senses. The workshops are based on the idea of experience, interaction and communication, not just talking. They become more profound because the approach knocks out the usual seminar or lecturing

process that gets in the way of most creativity, because it informs people rather than allow them to discover through personal experience. The RSVP cycle represents a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach, not a specialized one. The R, of course, is "resources." The S is "scores." The V is a term that I coined, "value action." It's a sharing and an evaluation that lead to an action of some kind. And P is "performance."

"Resources" are subjective and objective. The objective ones everybody knows about, like the location of the workshop, the economic base, the physical conditions. But when you get down to it, these are far less important than the subjective resources people's expectations, their feelings, their hang-ups, their attitudes, their hidden agendas.



The four components of RSVP

RSVP Cycles are broken into four clearly defined components:

RESOURCES

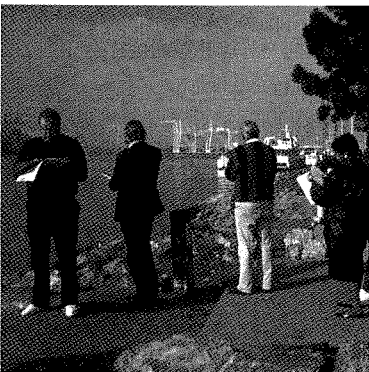
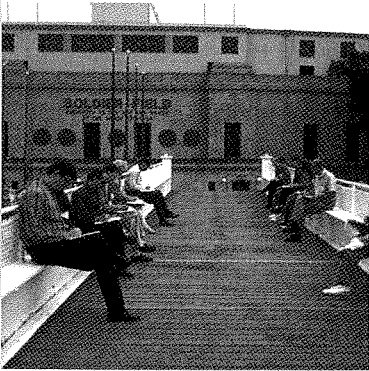
SCORES

VALUATION
and
PERFORMANCE

For further readings, see Laurence Halprin, *The RSVP Cycle: Creative Processes in the Human Environment* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1989)

RESOURCES

Objective	↔	Subjective
<p>existing physical conditions landscape of the area geology, geography, soil types, water topology, aquifers, fauna & flora population, ethnic makeup, social configurations, cultural/religious patterns economic base work habits & patterns shelter networks, transport, communications... location of workshop workshop participants.</p>		<p>Expectations objectives Feelings Hang-ups & biases attitudes Life styles fantasies & dreams hidden agendas drives, ambitions, Ego trips Hopes & fears inhibitions energy</p>



Top: Chicago Lakeshore Drive workshop awareness walk, November, 1990.

Above left: Diagram of the "Resources" stage of the RSVP cycle.

Above: Oakland workshop awareness walk, July, 1994.

When you start with a project or a design, both kinds of resources are operating. Most people spend their time worrying about the objective form, but that isn't really what counts. In workshops where you're working with communities or there is an issue to resolve, the main reason people don't agree is they have different opinions, different relationships, different takes, particularly different life experiences. So we start off with an "awareness walk," which gets people on a common ground. We urge them to have certain common experiences during the walk or tour, but we don't tell them what the common experiences ought to be.

HESTER:

This is the most widely copied of all the things you introduced. But firms that do participation now may not do it with the same objective.

HALPRIN:

That's right. It's easy to copy the form. But I don't know whether people understand the reason for doing awareness walks, which is to build a common language of experience.

HESTER:

I think people do. I think people have learned that, for example, if you get a group of people together,

they all disagree because they haven't experienced the place. They have an abstract preconceived attitude about it. "Oh, it's riddled with crime," or, "No self-respecting people would go there." And after you've gotten them to have that common language, they are more in agreement because they've experienced the real place.

HALPRIN:

What is not understood is that scores are the core of what we do, of how we conduct workshops. Score is a term I use to generate an activity. It is based on the musical analogy of a composer putting notes down on a piece of paper to be handed to a musician to play. The aggregation of notes is called a score, if you extend that to an opera the score also can include other elements like words, costume, activities on stage, etc.

The elements of the score are location, time, space, people, activities and other things, too. Everybody has a different way of writing a score. In an environmental workshop, most people would say "Describe it," or "What does it look like, what is it made of?" But we ask, "What are your feelings about it?" "Make a sketch of the environment.



←
TIME-LENGTH SCORES (MUSIC & ACTION)

Left: Musical score from La Traviata.

Below: Score from Chicago Lakeshore Drive workshop.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCORE

DRESS SCORE

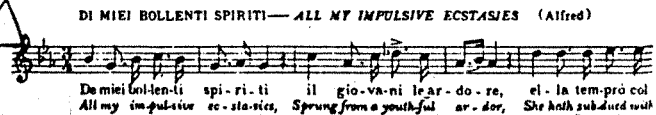
ACTIVITY SCORE

DIALOG SCORE

MUSIC SCORE

FINO OF THE FIRST ACT.
ACT II.
SCENA I—A country house near Paris. A salon on the ground floor. At the back, facing the audience, a fireplace, over which is a looking-glass. A clock hangs between two glass doors, which are closed. There are also two side doors, each with a seat and writing materials.
(Alfred enters, in sporting costume)
Alfred.
Out from her presence, for me there's no enjoyment.
(Falls down his gun.)
Three months have flown already
Since my beloved Violetta
So kindly left for me her riches, admirers,
And all the haunts of pleasure,
Where she had been accustomed
To homage from all hearts, for charms transcendent.
Yet now contented in this retreat, so quiet,
She forgets all for me. Here, near my loved one,
New life springs within me:
From the trials of love restored and strengthened,
Ah! in my present rapture past sorrows are forgotten

FINE DELL ATTO PRIMO
ATTO II.
SCENA I—Casa di Campagna presso Parigi. Salotto terreno. Nel fondo, in faccia agli spettatori, è un camino, sopra il quale uno specchio ed un orologio, fra due porte coperte da cristalli, che mettono ad un giardino. Al primo piano due altre porte, una di fronte all'altra. Sedie, tavole, quadri, libri, e accenditori per scrivere.
(Alfredo entra, in costume da caccia)
Alfredo
Lunge da lei per me non v'ha dilette!
(Depone il fucile.)
Volaron già tre lune
Dacché la mia Violetta
Agi per me lascio, dovizie, onori.
E le pompose feste,
Ove agli omaggi avvezza,
Vedeo schiavo ciascun di sua bellezza—
E dal soffio d'amor rigenerato
Solo esiste per me—qui presso a lei
Io rinascor mi sento,
E dal soffio d' amor rigenerato
Scordo ne' gaudj suoi tutto il passato.



Note your feelings about how it should be used." We score every single workshop all the way through. If anything influences people in this process most, it's how you write the score.

HESTER:

My sense is that when I write a score, it is leading people to some likely observations that may lead them to a conclusion. That is, I have some idea of what I think the outcome should be, or a direction. I might, on a scored walk, get people to stop where there is impossible traffic congestion, or where there is a beginning of a little park, and they would say it's obvious we should extend this greenery.

HALPRIN:

I face the same thing. I'll use a recent project as an example. The rest room looks terrible. There are twenty people standing outside all the time. And it's in the wrong place. Here is the most spectacular view in the world, right? and a rest room is stage center. So, naturally, my feeling is that it should be moved. Not only that, there's so much traffic and so many cars and busses parked around.

I don't have to say to people that this has to be taken out. I have to get them there so they will themselves understand, unless they disagree, that this is terrible. When we went there, we put them in a position where they would observe this park and this clutter. We used words like, "How does this make you feel?" We didn't say, "Take it out."

S5

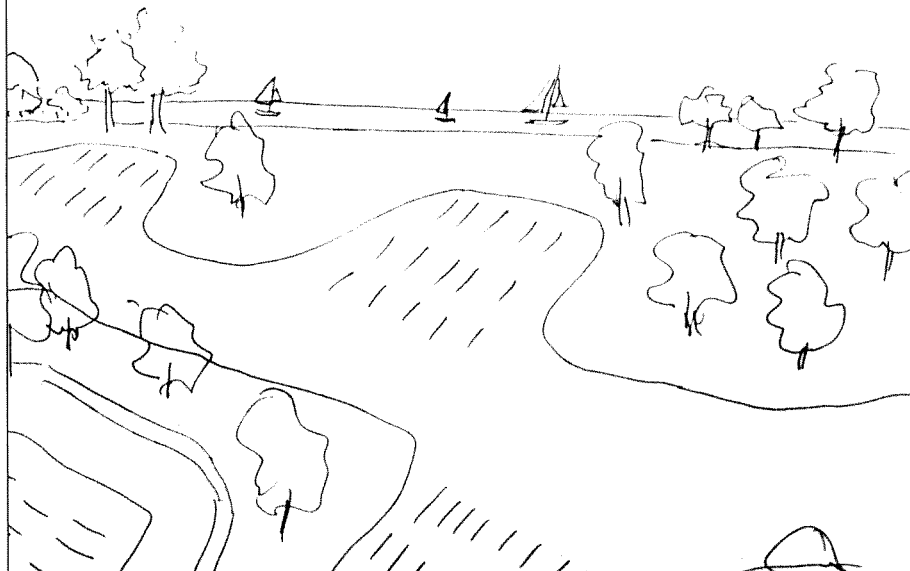
around you. What activities are occurring around you?

(Continued)

Traffic north & south on the drive, men working at a yellow truck, people parking a car, green bus going by on Waldron, flag blowing over Soldier Field, men unrolling fencing, gulls flying, activity in lot by harbor. Feel like traffic is surrounding me, vehicles moving constantly on all sides, continuous roar of vehicles.

• Imagine what you would like to see here in the future and include a view of the skyline. Use both words and drawings.

more green - grass, shrubs, flowers trees - buffer from traffic
Better view of lake. More attractive approach to Soldier Field or McCormick Pl.



they have a common language. They've exercised their own creativity, not only personally but in small groups. They've had a chance to express themselves and be listened to. This point of course is absolutely vital, that is for people to feel they are really being listened to. And then, what is there to be contentious about? Maybe somebody doesn't quite agree with somebody else, but now they understand why they did this and why someone else did something else.

HESTER:

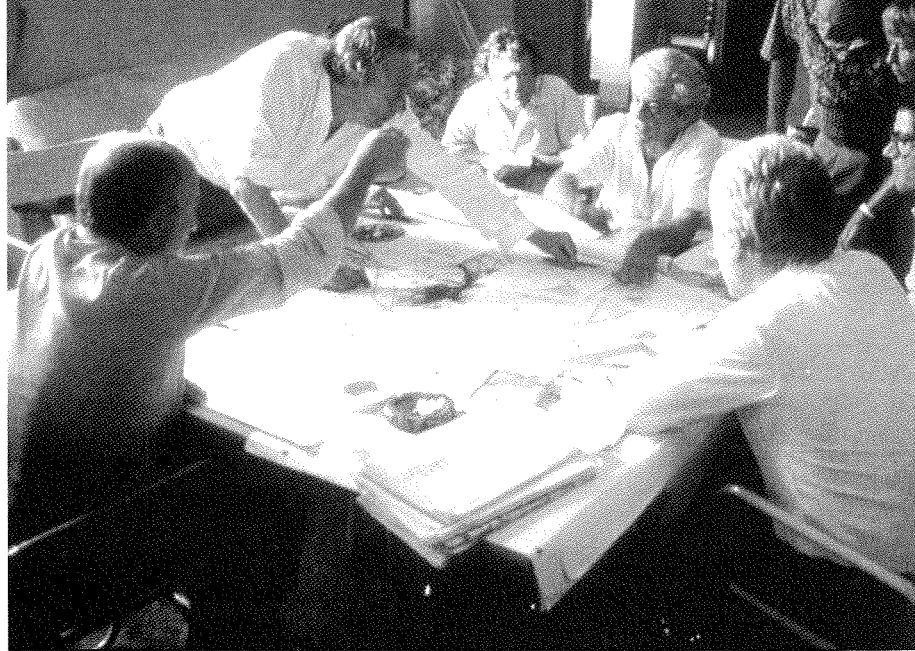
How is conflict mediation different from your collaborative design approach? Are there instances in which one is more relevant than the other?

HALPRIN:

As a workshop leader, I would say why don't you tell me what you think first.

HESTER:

My sense is, frequently, it means getting people to come together and divide up the pie. Now, they even train Forest Service personnel to do conflict resolution, like with the spotted owl and the timber industry.



Novoli workshop.

HALPRIN:

It's a compromise.

HESTER:

Somewhere, recently, I read that you don't like compromise.

HALPRIN:

Compromise means the outcome is not as good as anyone wants it to be. No, I don't like it. The trouble, of course, is that the spotted owl is not the *real* issue. The owl is being used as a manipulated device to save what should be saved. You have to get at the core of the real issue and develop something that will work and be creative. I don't know how I would approach that particular case, but a workshop would be a completely different way of working at it.

HESTER:

So it's not a compromise in your workshop?

HALPRIN:

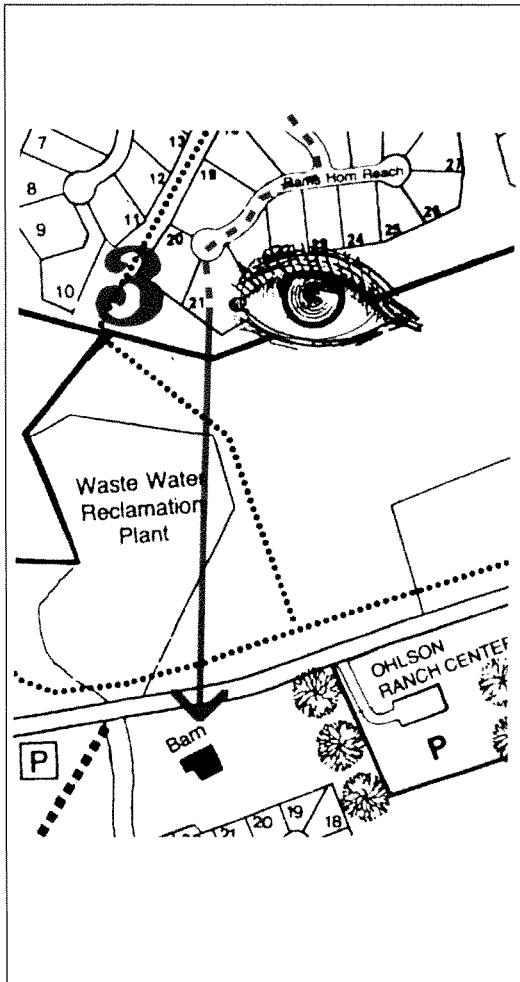
It's not a compromise at all. What you do is come to a creative consensus based on the situation, having worked through (in the awareness walks and other parts of the workshops) all the issues that people have confronted. Then based on the consensus, we design something that is wonderful for the situation.

HESTER:

What about situations in which you are fairly certain that something needs to be done, but the consensus is not to do it, or that it's a low priority?

HALPRIN:

We always have a resolution workshop at the end where we report back to people. If there are things



that still need to be resolved, or some things that I think ought to be resolved, we bring them up again.

Sometimes in a summary, I will say "Now, not very many people mentioned it and so I'd like to see if I have your agreement to add this to the list that I'll be working with."

If someone on this project had said, well, "It's very important to keep this parking," I would have felt that's wrong. I would have said, "Let's look at this more carefully and see what the implications are of keeping the parking where it is and what other possibilities there are. Often, in fact usually, other participants in the workshop make that kind of point. You're not passive in that sense during the workshop. And you're not saying, well, "Gee, this is a terrible idea. I think it's awful." All you really have to do is get people to see what this looks like in reality on the ground.

Sometimes we'll want to emphasize something because it doesn't feel right, or change the score to

ask people to look at it more carefully because of the implications of what they are doing.

DEE MULLEN:

We'll interject a new score.

HALPRIN:

And maybe a completely separate workshop at which we look at a particularly important and unresolved issue.

HESTER:

Have you ever gone through a workshop and had an outcome with which you really disagreed?

HALPRIN:

No. I try to keep, as much as possible, a passive attitude at the beginning and don't come up with all kinds of solutions that I have to defend that are then violated by the workshop. But what I won't do is, I won't take a point of view that forces the workshop to come up with a predetermined conclusion. I do not use workshops to manipulate people's thinking.

HESTER:

You really do learn from the workshop?

HALPRIN:

If I don't, then it's not a good workshop from my point of view.

HESTER:

I urge students to do participatory design because, for me, the most critical aspect is that it teaches them about working with other people. It teaches them about their own human ability. It reinforces democracy. But I think that there are few people who are able to use participation to produce extraordinary projects.

HALPRIN:

Participatory workshops are important for anybody to do. But there's a difference between the workshop and the final design. In a workshop we are not having group design. We're dealing with concepts, philosophy, attitudes, points of view. That's where a lot of this goes wrong, because any facilitator may get as far as this and then, if he's a lousy designer, it doesn't turn out well.

HESTER:

I think this is a serious problem. Participation now is contracted out just like hiring an engineer or an architect or whatever. And it's frequently completely separate.

HALPRIN:

The planning field has lost a lot of power and acceptance because planners are mostly people

Novoli workshop, Florence, April 1988.



who don't know how to design. They show people ideas and then it turns out to be completely different after some designer takes it over and does a poor job designing it. That's why we don't want to act as consultants. There's a lot of work between a general concept and what it looks like at the end.

HESTER:

So you want to do the project from participation all the way through the design.

HALPRIN:

I could never do a workshop and turn the design over to somebody else. I can imagine working with an architect whom I admire as part of a workshop, then carrying out the design together. But working with the design is a very important part of this process.

HESTER:

If participatory workshops are such a good thing, and other people want to do it, why isn't more of it good?

HALPRIN:

There is an issue of talent and training that nobody is willing to raise. An awful lot of people who go into facilitation aren't terribly well trained or able to extend the workshop from concept to reality.

HESTER:

To do the kinds of workshops you do requires a complexity of thinking, a capacity for different modes of thinking, and more ability than most people have. I'm not saying talent, but maybe that's the word for it.

HALPRIN:

If the workshop involves a design, then you either have to have talent as a designer or somebody else participate with you in the workshops, somebody to whom you can turn this over to and motivate from then on.

Talent infuses both. Running a good workshop and understanding all the elements that have to go into it and having the ability to bring the best out of people and so forth, is a talent. Setting up a workshop, designing the scores, running the summaries all require a lot of ability and training. Designing is also a talent. The two are separate talents, and they can be meshed. If the process is going to lead to a design, you need to link the two talents up. Bear in mind that workshops demand knowledges that are called upon continuously — psychology, active listening, empathy with others, score writing.



HESTER:

Well, if you think about an artist, and you think about a person who leads workshops, those require very different sets of skills and place different sets of demands on a person. That's the combination that is unusual to find.

Sea Ranch design workshop, January, 1983.

HALPRIN:

You can train someone to be a good workshop leader if they are an artist or designer and want to subject themselves to learning that. And some facilitators can design.

HESTER:

But they are different. For an artist, there can be a huge risk in opening up the process to all these other people. Professionals are also threatened; a transportation engineer is threatened by a workshop in which citizens are actually questioning traffic standards.

HALPRIN:

Also, a workshop is very difficult for professionals in other fields because they tend to want to take over. If somebody raises an issue, they say, "Well, we know that," and so forth. We always make the point that there are no experts. We're not asking you for your expertise. We're asking for your participation. As in a democracy, expressing opinions are not based on expertise but on human desires, programs, attitudes and intentions.

MULLEN:

We don't let them divulge all their information. We'll ask them at the beginning, as part of the discussion of resources, to present what we need to link up with, to discuss what's going on. Then, if a question comes up in the workshop, maybe we'll ask them to change hats and explain.

HESTER:

What about all the citizen participation today that really is blocking good stuff from happening? What would you do about it?

HALPRIN:

I would advocate this process. I'd insist that people come with an open mind, that they understand they will go through this process and abide by it. The guy who's preventing things usually won't participate in a workshop. Those activists and NIMBY's try to destroy situations by not participating.

HESTER:

You avoid that confrontation by creating a situation that diffuses it and turns it into a creative act. That's been your approach and it's very different than other people who have done participation.

HALPRIN:

I suppose there are times that confrontation has got to happen if people won't get together. But the more people that can be brought into this elective process of creativity, the more you can make it visible to people that this is joyful and that it results in adding a wonderful quality to people's lives, then more things could get resolved in a good way. But you can't force people into it. You know, the odd thing is that on a personality basis, I'm not really suited to do this, to doing participation.

HESTER:

Why not?

HALPRIN:

Like any designer, I want to take a pencil and design the thing. I don't like to be seen as a do-gooder, soft-hearted, sweet man because I'm not any of that. But I learned the hard way. Taking part in workshops is a remarkable process.

I first started on the RSVP cycles as a design tool. Not so much for myself, but for my wife, Anna. It happened because she went to Stockholm to do a performance. We got there and she had some people helping her from the outside who need to learn how to do it. She said I can't explain to these people what they should do. I had been working on scoring, so I said I'd run a score for them, and it worked. They could follow the score.

Then, I decided for fun one summer to do some workshops with students from different disciplines, starting with sculpting, painting and architecture. That was incredibly creative from my point of view. We weren't solving any problems. We were just doing creative things, and the experience was wonderful.

Following that summer's creativity workshop, which was titled "Experiments in Environment," I was in Texas developing a downtown master plan. Nothing I proposed seemed to work. The mayor, city council, developers and others who had commissioned the study resisted any real change to their city. I perceived they had problems which did not seem to them to need improvement or change.

At an elegant dinner that night I proposed we all enter into a workshop together to advance our planning effort. For some reason they agreed to try it and fortunately it was a resounding success. I remember some of the scores from that summer. I started with an awareness walk downtown. It was a very hot day, well over 104 degrees in the shade. Instead of driving around in their air conditioned cars they had to walk. Instead of eating lunch in an elegant restaurant they ate in a cubby hole that was hot and uncomfortable.

When the day was over they came back dog tired and demanded air conditioned buses, better transit, cooling fountains and trees. Their real life experience showed them what they needed to do.

HESTER:

Most of us who came into participation from civil rights came in from very different concerns. It was about empowerment, about activism. If you hadn't been doing participation already, it would have been much more difficult for us to convince cities to use it to address issues of justice and injustice. But we came at participation from a different angle, and I think that is why, in the end, that you, Larry, still get extraordinary pieces of landscape or city built that touches people's hearts, and the rest of us are still out here going over the next social issue or whatever.

HALPRIN:

It probably is, and I hadn't thought about it that way.

HESTER:

You saw participation as clearly a tool to improve design. I saw it as a tool to get in civil rights agendas. And the students today, many of the students today, see participation as a way of getting a job.



HALPRIN:

Yes. I think that's true. It concerns me because I can see what it means, what I do is very different. They're not wanting the same thing. They simply want to have some town meetings.

HESTER:

That's what is most distressing about the state of participation today. Because NEPA and other legislation requires citizen participation and gives people the right to use it to sue, eighty percent of the citizen participation in this country today is blocking actions.

HALPRIN:

That's right. It's engendering terrorism, a form of environmental and NIMBY terrorism.

HESTER:

It is really counter to getting creative solutions.

HALPRIN:

I agree. True participation is a process which takes issues of some complexity where there are different points of view. Within this kind of real-life situation our workshops allow people to understand, to experience, to carefully listen to each other and then allow them to creatively develop solutions

which are positive, perhaps different than anyone has thought of, and thus arrive together at a consensus of what and how to do what they have decided needs to be done. We constantly hear from workshop participants that in addition to solving what seemed like insurmountable problems the workshop process has changed their lives. It has opened them up to different and new methods of creativity — it has enriched their lives. Participating can be a joyful process!

Yosemite workshop, July, 1997. Photo: Jesse Stoudl