

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

American Institute of Architects, Committee on Design -- Observations on Collaborations  
[Forum]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35n7f6j2>

### Journal

Places, 13(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

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### Publication Date

2000-07-01

Peer reviewed

## Observations on Collaborations

*Collaboration: 1) The act of performing work or labor together 2) The act of cooperating with the enemy*

What would possess about fifty architects from around the country, of varying ages and from different types of firms, to hole up for an entire spring day in a windowless room at the University of Cincinnati architecture school? A design challenge, of course. But more than that was involved; it was also a challenge of collaborating with people whose ideas and style may differ greatly from one's own.

Why test the idea of collaborations? Architects have always worked with other disciplines. But as more complicated projects have come along, requiring expertise from different disciplines, and as new voices are demanding to be heard, the process of design itself has changed.

The American Institute of Architects Committee on Design used its recent visit to Cincinnati to organize a charrette that generated ideas for the city's Downtown Gateway program—which celebrates civic history, provides visitor orientation and helps create a unique urban identity. Participants were asked to do this under an interesting set of conditions that tested different ideas for working collaboratively. They worked as part of assigned teams and used a schedule that segmented the day into modules based on milestones. With the pressure of time, it was felt, specific milestones would help organize the teams towards a final product. Further, the effort would take place under the watchful eyes of observers. The goal was to pull people out of their traditional way of working and thinking to provide them with a better understanding of how one method of working collaboratively works.

**Team Formation** At registration, participants received a cartoon illustrating a round table at which various characters were seated. Each character had a role: leader, devil's advocate, imagineer, philosopher, pragmatist, story teller, seconder and advocate for the common man. Participants were asked to check the role(s) they felt best suited their professional persona. The charrette planning team took this information and created ten teams of five people, based not only

on their experience and skills, but also on personality characteristics that might influence the roles people assume in a group—hoping for a reasonable balance of personalities on each team.

In addition, each team included an observer who would watch the interactions and convene two discussions about the process (not the product), reporting on what he or she observed and urging team members to discuss what they were experiencing. The planning team assigned students from the University of Cincinnati and Ball State University to play this role; they could be relied on to be neutral, objective and active listeners, while being least intrusive.

**The Kick-off** The morning of the charrette began with remarks from the planning team. This included a brief overview of the relationship between art and architecture, a review of different ways in which artists and architects have collaborated on recent projects, a description of a program in which architects, students and communities collaborated on socially relevant projects, and a discussion of the darker side of team work—the resistance and competition between team members that make working together a challenge.

The planning team then reviewed the charrette schedule, described the role of the student observers and presented guidelines to help focus participants on the tasks, improve communications and encourage collaborative design. Each team was asked to assign functional roles to its members: scribe (to record the interests, ideas and goals), timekeeper (to help track and monitor the scheduled work intervals) and spokesperson (to make the final presentation). Finally, a representative from the city manager's office described the Gateway program and presented the design challenge of creating a major entrance to the city from a six-lane highway with an intersecting bridge that connects Ohio and Kentucky.

**Beginning the Work** Teams varied in how they responded to the guidelines. In most cases, introductions were made, but only a few groups actually assigned the roles that had been identified. Leadership was taken up informally in some cases, not at all in others. A few groups designated a leadership position



The Committee on Design's 1999 program began with a three-day meeting this spring in Cincinnati and continues this fall with a meeting in Los Angeles. For information about these and other upcoming AIA programs, contact AIA at 800-242-3837.

The AIA Committee on Design charrette planning team comprised: Frances Halsband, FAIA, committee chair; Ralph Steinglass, FAIA; Anthony Costello, AIA, and Wendy Feuer



Left: Workspace in atrium of Cincinnati's College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning

Below: Stages in the collaborative process

(1) Working on proposals

(2) Ralph Steinglass, FAIA, in discussion with student observers

(3) Preparing for presentation

and tried to follow the consensus-building approach described during the opening remarks. Initial team brainstorming covered a wide range of issues, from concern about local conditions to broader urban concerns. Most teams took the trouble to develop goals, though some required prodding from facilitators to do so. One team rebelled and refused to follow any of the suggestions. Teams struggled with the tension of having to deal with multiple egos, which resulted in some flare-ups, some heated exchanges and even withdrawal for those who preferred to avoid conflict.

Student observers noted various behaviors during the initial brainstorming period:

- not listening to each other's ideas
- controlling the outcome by keeping secret notes
- taking physical possession of the drawings
- using drawing instruments to vehemently emphasize critical points
- splitting off into sub-groups.

**Observations at the First Break** Some teams had to be reminded, or even coaxed, to stop work during the first scheduled break at which the student observers were to provide feedback on the process. Most of the teams listened to what their observers had to say for a few moments, but a few resisted even that and continued to work. It became apparent that it would be difficult for the observer to stay in role because of the pressure to get involved in the activity, or even act as a mediator.

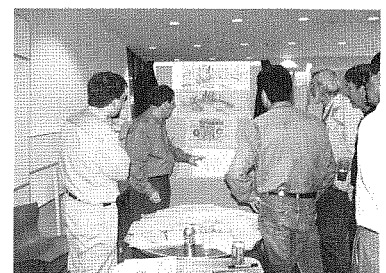
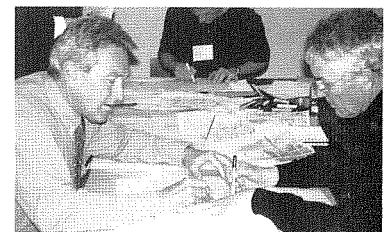
The planning team decided to meet with the observers to learn in more detail about how the teams were working, provide them with support in carrying out their roles and get feedback on their experience.

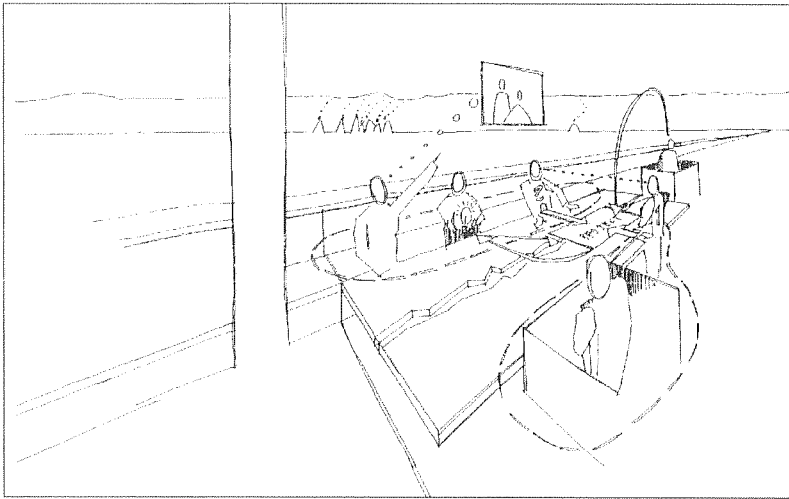
This generated an unanticipated dynamic among planning team members, student observers and participants; participants became curious about what the students and planning team were saying.

Following are verbal sketches of the first part of the charrette as reported by the observers:

- no organization or delegating of tasks,
- no leader emerged, until the last five minutes before the process break,
- spent a half hour on introductions; several participants showed signs of being authoritative; student acting as facilitator,
- started drawing first thing, then realized they had no leadership or direction,
- there were no introductions, only the woman on the team reached out to everyone,
- the mission statement was ignored; suddenly the team realized one member was from Cincinnati,
- putting up the drawing helped focus their energy,
- there was no leader, and the scribe took notes for himself, a secret scribe, and
- went around the table with introductions, picked roles, including assigning formal leader; two others played leadership roles as well, despite this, there were no (overt) clashes.

**The Final Stretch** As the day wore on, the atmosphere changed from tentative collaborative efforts to a more productive presentation mode. Roles were delegated to individuals or to small groups. Someone took advantage of the library to research Cincinnati's history; some groups began to work together testing ideas; others began to work seriously on drawings in groups or in pairs.





The discussion around pin-ups and other presentation materials was animated. Sometimes one person took on a leadership role; in other groups the leadership was more fluid, shifting back and forth, depending on the issue being discussed. It was decision-making time. There was pushing and pulling, circling around, spinning off, breaking up, walking away. Teams were struggling to find common ground, but running out of time. By 3 p.m., nearly all the teams were moving towards a presentation mode. All except one team appeared to be working collaboratively. This team, unable to resolve differences, had split and different people eventually presented three schemes without a common theme.

As 4 p.m. approached, the scheduled time for the second observation break, teams were working feverishly. Resistance to breaking was high. The planning team walked from table to table reminding teams to stop and listen for a few minutes. Half the groups finally did pause and listen to their observers' feedback; they wanted to know "how we're doing."

**Presentations** At 6 p.m. teams set up their presentations in the building's main atrium space. Cincinnati's economic development director, the representative from the city manager's office and a local planner who was also a professor at the architecture school were present to listen and respond.

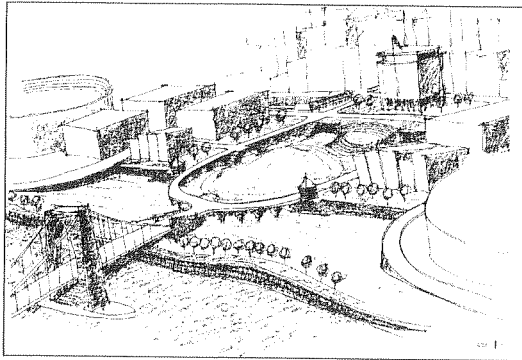
Each team was asked to make three points about its proposals. It was difficult to keep the presenters to three points, but the groups became self-regulating, with participants humorously calling out when presentations went on too long. The ideas and recommendations ranged from the imaginatively pragmatic (such as detailing the lighting and street furniture and respecting most of the planning criteria) to bolder schemes that partially or totally ignored such criteria,

focusing instead on concepts that challenged the city to come up with bigger ideas that addressed the need to link the downtown with the river in substance, not just symbolic form.

**Lessons Learned** The workshop was not intended as a scientific test. It was meant to allow participants to observe themselves, as well as be observed, in a structured process. The following observations were culled from the planning team and student observers' discussions and notes:

- A team needs people not only from different disciplines, but also with different personalities, to work collaboratively. It is not surprising that the team with four imagineers had the most difficulty developing a common scheme.
- At times flexibility in roles, such as changing leaders at different stages of design development, can be beneficial to the creative process.
- Imposing a rigid schedule may have had a negative effect, causing teams to truncate the conceptual phase of the design and make decisions prematurely.
- Requiring teams to come up with a mission statement helped them to focus more effectively on a common approach.
- Successful collaboration is not something that necessarily happens by accident. Those teams that subsumed the product to the process—that is, they consciously followed the guidelines for effective communications (most importantly, active listening)—came up with a product that was equal if not superior to those groups that acted more independently.

Collaboration may not be for everyone and may not be the right process in all situations. The fear that designing by committee results in watered-down solutions is very real. However, as we saw in Cincinnati, getting the right group together, and working with set guidelines, can be invigorating and produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.



## Charrette Schedule

11:25–11:55 a.m. Introduction of team participants; includes brief descriptions by each of their background, unique strengths, and interests.

11:55 a.m.–12:30 p.m. Development of team's Mission Statement; based on a brainstorming session, listing of three major goals/objectives for the Gateway program, three goals related to the process and three goals related to the products. (A standard format

sheet was provided for each team on a flip chart, with instructions to post it near each team's table.)

12:30–1:45 p.m. Working Lunch. Conceptual design: teams, either together, or in sub-groups, or individually, explore conceptual approaches.

1:45–2 p.m. Process Review/Report #1. Each student observer shares field notes and then engages the team in discussion.

2–2:15 p.m. Work plan. Teams plan their work for the rest of the day, including periods for finalizing a conceptual approach, developing the design, and deciding on task assignments.

2:15–4 :30 p.m. Design Development; Teams do the work as planned above.

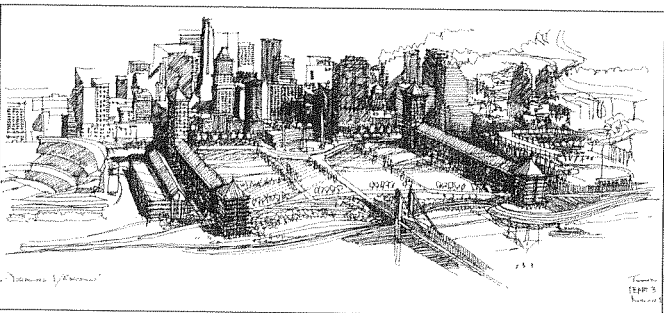
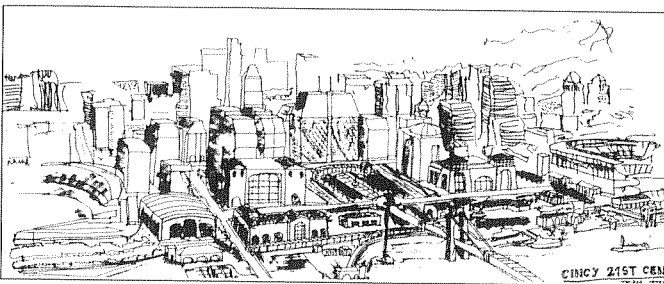
4:30–4:45 p.m. Process Review/Report #2. Student observers share field notes.

4:45–5 p.m. Presentation Planning. Teams make plan for final presentation.

4:50–5:50 p.m. Presentation Preparation. Teams proceed with final prep for presentation, including oral presentation rehearsal, finalizing executive summary, and preparing presentation drawings.

5:50–6 p.m. Studio clean-up, set-up for presentation.

6–7:20 p.m. Presentations to other teams and government representatives from the City of Cincinnati.



It is impossible to know if any of the ideas that came out of the charrette will be adopted by the City of Cincinnati. This, perhaps, is less important than the lessons that participants may have learned and brought back to their practice, influencing not only who participates in the design process but also how the work is actually done.

*Wendy Feuer is a New York City-based consultant who manages public art, urban design and planning projects.*

*Ralph Steinglass, FAIA, is founder and principal of Teambuilders, Inc., an organizational development firm in New York City.*

Opposite page: **Conceptual diagram of interaction among team members, drawn by a student observer.**

Graphic: **Todd Wendell**

Left: **Proposals for Cincinnati's Gateway**