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How community engagement drives more equitable outcomes in the design process - Gray Dougherty

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New projects and buildings have wide-ranging effects on surrounding communities, ecosystems, and businesses. They impact the physical and mental well-being of individuals, the equitable distribution of economic resources, and future business opportunities. When a developer doesn't seek out meaningful community input, they risk alienating neighborhoods and locals, while also missing a great opportunity to enrich the design impact of their project. One of the best ways developers can help their design team incorporate equity into their projects is through an active, receptive community engagement process. By listening to the needs of the individuals and groups that will be impacted by the project, directly and indirectly, those needs can be turned into opportunities.

Structuring Community Engagement to Broaden Reach and Focus Input

To effectively engage with the community, architects, designers, and contractors must think about different and unique ways to interact with community members. This could involve sending out surveys, hosting focus groups, or visiting local communities in-person. The goal is to reach the broadest possible audience for meaningful input. Designers should be aware of the power dynamics at play and ensure that the process is not tokenistic or dismissive of community voices. The most obvious strategy of a town hall meeting or community presentation may not actually be the most equitable. These can over-amplify the loudest voices in the room and are biased toward those community members with the network to learn about these events and the ability to attend them. Structuring an engagement process should begin with establishing a representative group of community leaders and designing the process in collaboration with those leaders. For one recent project, this meant pivoting from an in-person community meeting to a multi-lingual YouTube video that could be viewed by anyone on a phone on their own schedule, with an opportunity for comment. Genuine engagement requires transparency, active listening, and a willingness to adapt the design based on community feedback.

Incorporating Community Input into the Design Process and Concept

Community feedback must be effectively analyzed, reported back, and have a demonstrable impact on the design. Designers should identify common aspirations, themes, and strategies with the analysis shaping the design concept and ensuring it reflects the community's needs and values. This will build trust in the process and will result in an eventual project that the community feels ownership of, promotes, and protects in the future.

The revised designs, inclusive of local voices and community leaders, should be presented to community members in a format that facilitates understanding and engagement. This could be through visual presentations, interactive workshops, or clear and concise documentation. Effective, clear communication is essential to ensure community members can provide purposeful input and feel informed and empowered throughout the design process. While formal agreements are not always necessary, trust and ongoing collaboration are vital.

Fostering Relationships for Sustainable Community Development

Maintaining communication with the community post-project completion is equally important. This can involve addressing any unforeseen challenges and seeking feedback on the project's outcomes. By staying engaged, developers can ensure that the project continues to meet the expectations and needs of the community, even after its completion.

To create a sustainable community development, developers and their design teams must consider how their projects contribute to the long-term well-being of the community. This could involve designing spaces that promote social interaction, incorporating green infrastructure to support environmental sustainability, or providing amenities that cater to diverse community needs. By integrating community infrastructure into the initial design, developers can ensure that the project remains relevant and beneficial for years to come.

Community engagement is often seen as a necessary evil by developers to obtain project approval. However, by actively involving community members and stakeholders, developers can create projects that address their needs, aspirations, and values. Through effective community engagement, designers can broaden their reach, focus input, and uncover new design opportunities. Moreover, fostering community relationships and maintaining ongoing communication leads to sustainable, functional, and equitable projects that enrich the lives of all community members and create project ownership that will translate into long-term sustainability. When developers and designers embrace an inclusive approach, they are ultimately creating spaces that empower and uplift communities for generations to come.

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