

Nick Wates does it again



The Community Planning Handbook: How People Can Shape their Cities, Towns and Villages in any Part of the World

Compiled and edited by Nick Wates
Earthscan Publications Ltd, London,
2000, ISBN 1 85383 654 0, PB, 232pp.,
index, £14.95

When Nick Wates first mooted this book I thought that the scope and complexity of the subject would be too much for a single publication, and that it would be too dependent on the contributions of those who were busy pioneering the new approaches and methods. I have, however, been proved wrong. This is a comprehensive work written and illustrated in an easily accessible style. It is essential reading for all those involved in working with communities to shape their environment.

The handbook provides an overview of the wide range of methods of community planning and architecture that have been pioneered in different countries over the last two decades. It illustrates new ways in which people can interact, new types of events, organisations, services, and support frameworks. This is done in a very simple 'how to do it' style with clear graphics and an appealing layout.

The introduction sets the context and rationale for involving community, contains tips on how to get started, and gives a useful illustration on how to read the later page formats, with their large amount of information.

Wates warns that communities differ, and he emphasises flexibility and adaptation when using the handbook. He does say, however, that although the methods 'can each be effective in their own right... it is when they are combined together creatively that community planning becomes a truly powerful force for positive and

sustainable change'. He attempts to illustrate this in the 'scenarios' section of the book. He also advises that 'planning a provisional overall strategy is a useful discipline so that everyone understands the context in which the chosen methods are being used and the purpose of each stage'. Thus he avoids the accusation that the book and the methods can be used as a quick-fix solution to participation.

He explains how to plan a strategy by using the handbook. It would, however, have been very helpful if he had linked this with the participation matrix on page 10, showing the different levels of participation. The practice of community planning is underpinned with a very good section on general principles 'which apply to most settlements and any community'. These should be read first by all who are embarking upon community participation.

The 'methods' section sets out, each on a double-page spread, a selection of methods for helping people to get involved in physical planning and design. The clear layout allows for a large amount of very helpful information to be provided – the method, its main uses and strengths, its main characteristics, sample formats such as timetables and procedures, checklists, suggestions for physical arrangements, images from case studies and sample documents, helpful hints, costs, quotes, and sign posts where further information and detail can be found.

My main criticism of this section is that some of the 'methods' described are actually structures and organisations

supporting community planning, such as architecture centres, development trusts, community design centres and planning aid. This could be confusing to the reader, as these are permanent organisations set up to facilitate a number of community planning projects. A separate section on support structures and organisations would have been more applicable.

The 'scenarios' section sets out a selection of examples, including planning and designing a community centre, a housing development, an inner city regeneration, a shanty settlement upgrading, a town centre upgrading, and a village revival. Each illustrates a possible strategy for a particular development situation. Alongside a description of the scenario is a sequence, brief description, and rough timing of activities, together with signposting of further information, methods, publications, and contact organisations.

In this section Wates has avoided the usual descriptive, anecdotal case study presentation in favour of a more analytical and strategic overview. It would have been useful, however, to have been given some indication of the projects upon which the scenario was based, if only to assure the reader that this was not a theoretical exercise. It would also have been helpful if the scenarios had been cross-referenced to the participation matrix set out in the introduction, to highlight the different levels of participation by the community.

For example, the 'planning study and new neighbourhood' involves the community in a consultation exercise, compared with the 'shanty town upgrading', where residents gradually upgrade their houses, and with the village revival', where a village community takes steps to protect the traditional character and develop new facilities. It would also have been helpful to indicate that the scenarios are as

much concerned with the development programme or product as the process. The process is contained in the 'community planning strategy'.

The 'formats' section includes a good strategy planner which illustrates a plan for an overall community planning strategy and incorporates a variety of methods. This is extremely useful and could have been given more prominence earlier in the book. The sample formats for an 'action planning event planner' and 'evaluation form' could be usefully adapted by the reader for a variety of activities, as could the numerous helpful checklists.

The 'glossary' section of common and not-so-common terms and concepts is simply explained. It also includes reference to other methods not covered elsewhere, with good cross-references to sources of further information. The large 'contacts' section and bibliography provide quick access to further information and support.

The Community Planning Handbook will help all those concerned with shaping the environment to get started quickly, learn from others' experience and undertake community planning with understanding and sensitivity.

Nick Wates has done it again. Let's hope that this book has as much impact as his book *Community Architecture* – so that within the next decade the principles, methods, and strategies and structures set out become common practice in all planning offices and architectural practices. I trust that those already at the cutting edge of community participation respond to his invitation to give feedback, re-invest their experience, and inform future editions of the handbook so that it becomes a living instrument. ■

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