

Open Neighborhood

"Re-Visioning Kelley's Corner"



Above: using edible legos to attract kids and their parents at Oktobefest street fair in Fall 2009
Above right: Entering Acton in Second Life

Celebrating Community Creativity, this project let residents explore their own ideas for redesigning the Kelley's Corner intersection using computer technology (the program Second Life) and hands-on creative art techniques.

Awards - Gold Star from Massachusetts Cultural Council

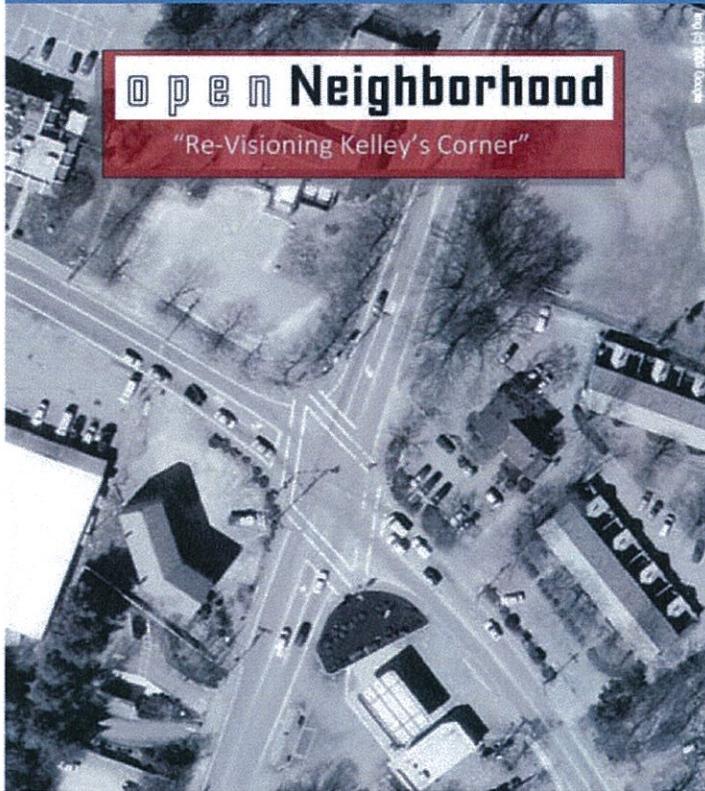
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Re-visioning event in Acton Town Hall, Nov. 2009, an open exploration:



Sample plans created (above):



What would you like to see at Kelley's Corner? Come create it!

WHEN: Sat, Nov. 14, 10AM – 4 PM Rm 204, Acton Town Hall
or **online @: www.open-neighborhood.org**

KEY FINDINGS:

Residents have strong and interesting ideas about the built environment and how to improve it no matter their age and generally are interested in sharing them.

Computer technology, in this case, a Second-Life virtual-reality program, is effective in drawing in the public, particularly teenagers and adults.

Allowing people to individually design their own concept plans using simple colorful art materials can highlight desired changes easily.

Many plans suggested a hope for the area to be greener, have a pedestrian-focus and serve recreational, civic and commercial needs, marking the intersection as an important entry point and gathering place for the community.

Figure 12: Street view of new Kelley's Corner.



Conclusion

Visualization tools are emerging among different practices in public participation, and one of their major advantages over traditional methods is that visualization processes and presents complex data more accessibly for the public to understand.

This experiment in Kelley's Corner shows that the quality of participants' overall experience does not vary depending on whether they had analog or digital experiences. Instead, the carnival atmosphere generated by both digital and analog sources, along with photography exhibits, and environmental education displays resulted in widespread approbation of the public process. It is worth noting that the Massachusetts Cultural Council was equally impressed with the public process created in this experiment, as we were recognized along with the Town of Acton and the Discovery Museum with a Gold Star award for Community Cultural Programming.

While the experiment was widely successful, some important limitations are worth noting. The difficulty and inability of the digital tool to produce certain neighborhood characteristics made it hard for the public to provide input with respect to those aspects, e.g. road modifications and surface water features. This shows the necessity to realize the limitations of technologies used in digital visualization tools and the importance to offer both analog and digital activities to participants ensure collection of a wide range of input. Future projects should more deliberately build in compensation for the weaknesses of each approach. While many insights were gained through an open, transparent planning process, planning officials did not learn why residents made certain design and land use decisions. Future exercises should explicitly ask residents to explain their plans and such explanation could then be collated and analyzed by planners.

Because the analog activities were presented largely as open canvasses, while the digital tool includes built virtual models, participants are likely to provide input in a way that they are most comfortable. Thus, planners, when designing public participation activities, should provide multiple tools to capture a wide range of public input.

Although the difference between the analog and digital experiences was studied in this report through both surveys and visual analysis, only end-results and end-products of both experiences were assessed and investigated. For example, one of the major advantages of digital visualization tools, their power in interpreting and presenting complex data, was not examined and studied. Future research could be done on how to evaluate analog and digital visualization tools comprehensively. For example, to evaluate the level of empowerment, Corbett (2005) constructed a framework of four catalysts: information, process, skill, and tools. Similar framework to evaluate analog and digital experiences could be proposed to incorporate different stages of people's experience.

Future generations will be much more familiar with information technologies and tend to get more excited about using digital visualization tools. It is thus expected that digital visualization tools will play a more and more important role in public participation (Pettit 2008, p.15). Thus, we recommend future research could introduce age levels into comparison and investigate the relationship between public input and respective contributors' age level.

Many of the core-values that emerged from the Post-It note responses and the visual analysis of plans reveal a desire for an environment that encourages a sense of community. The requests for public gathering spaces, for keeping the Bowladrome, and for additional parks and recreational amenities directly relate to a desire for community spaces open for community use. Less directly, the request for "pedestrian friendly" development may also reveal a desire for stronger community. A pedestrian friendly Kelley's Corner would encourage residents to walk, and thus to mingle on the sidewalks. When in their cars, individuals go about their days in their own little bubbles, but when walking, individuals are significantly more likely to interact with others. Discussing a sense of community, Chavis and Wandersman (1990) writes, "The relationship between a sense of community and community competence (its problem-solving ability) through collective effort is reciprocal" (p. 57). Interestingly, Acton's community participation in the planning process reveals a desire for a greater sense of community. According to Chavis and Wandersman (1990), this would, in turn, create a community that is better able to participate in further community planning competently. This has the potential to set in motion a positive cycle that would create a stronger and more capable community that wants to participate in and successfully works for its own development.